

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

Book 15

Lord Efran and
the Snobbles

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

“It wasn’t a lie,” Efran said.

He and Minka were sitting on a large blanket beside Cavern Lake while one-year-old Joshua (as of today, January 1st, 8155) was standing at Efran’s back, holding on to his shoulder. The baby was trying to gin up the courage to step over to Mama’s shoulder, just inches away.

Irrespective of the calendar, the weather on the Abbey Lands was always warmer during winter and cooler during summer than that of Westford, a mere half-hour’s ride north, because the Lands received the moderating effects of the Sea. So neither Joshua nor his parents had on outerwear for this excursion.

Minka turned her blue eyes to her husband, waiting for more on that statement, and he said, “Alberon just didn’t know that Webbe had been named Surchatain, and, spoke too hastily. But there really wasn’t an intent to deceive in what he said.”

She observed, “Perhaps. But the Provision for a Wronged Human kicked in, and he started losing power at once.” This article of Faerie Law decreed that any faerie caught in a lie would lose half his power.

“That’s what I can’t figure out,” Efran said, shaking his head.

She leaned back against the trunk of the faerie tree. Efran glanced up to unseen faeries. “Please don’t decorate her hair anymore. It’s fine as it is.”

“As you command, King Efran,” faerie voices whispered back, and he closed his eyes in strained patience.

Ignoring that issue, Minka speculated, “Then, once I invoked the Provision, it could have been triggered by other lies. It was a lie for him to create an illusion of me in the stone cavern in Adele’s place, and one that caused you great distress.”

“Yes, *that* was a lie,” Efran agreed.

“And practically everything he told us about Adele when he offered to take her as Queene to ‘help’ us was a lie,” she said.

“Very much so,” Efran said. “It wasn’t to help us; it was his first step in getting both of you into his realm. And I still don’t understand whether she was actually changed into faerie or not. Alberon said she was, and that restoring her to human was impossible, but that’s exactly what happened when he lost half his power.”

“Speaking of which, it was a lie and a transgression for him to take me as Queene against my will, and against yours, on the basis of this obscure little rule that since we allowed them to call me ‘Queene,’ that implied my acceptance of being transformed into one. If he were really subject to you as he said he was, then the Law of Roman would have disallowed that ‘agreement’ on its face, as neither of us had any idea of such a thing,” she said.

“You’ve been paying attention in Law class,” Efran said in admiration. Joshua attempted to take a step toward her and fell flat on his front. He was thinking about crying when Efran picked him up to sit him between them, and he captured a copper and green faerie tree leaf in his pudgy hand.

“Of course I’ve been paying attention,” she said smugly, “when I remember to go,” she added, troubled.

Efran stretched out on his back beside her, an arm around her hips. “So, after he had accumulated a number of lies, the Faerie Council or whoever simply waited for someone to invoke the Provision. Is that right?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

“Will you ask Kele?” he asked.

She raised her brows in mild astonishment. “You’re King of Faerie; you can ask any of them to explain it to you.”

He hedged, “I don’t like to invoke the office. I feel like a usurper.” She rolled her eyes at him, and he said, “All right, then. Someone please explain who determined that Alberon was in violation of the Provision for a Wronged Human.”

At once Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin appeared standing on Efran’s knees, which he had raised when he lay down on his back. Joshua squealed; Minka looked over smiling, and Efran looked down his front at the pair, each on a knee. Sir Ditson, wearing a near-perfect replica of Justinian’s white suit with deep green satin waistcoat, said, “We are so pleased and excited, King Efran, to address your question about the disposition of former King Alberon’s case. Are we not, Nutbin?”

Sir Nutbin’s tail bristled out to twice its width in his excitement, and he had to remove his monocle to clean it of fog. “We are, indeed, dear Ditson! And to have served good King Efran even before he attained royalty in our realm is a high honor. Therefore, we feel particularly well-suited and, indeed, elevated to address your question before interference from any other foreign entities!” Nutbin’s umbrage at a previous such incursion into their area of responsibilities almost caused him to pop a button on his vest.

“Now, Nutbin, as grieved as we were at even such an exalted personage as the illustrious and beautiful Ruler of the Toledoth intervening in King Efran’s request regarding his sister, it behooves us to maintain the dignity required in his presence. Does it not, my dear friend?” Ditson pleaded.

“Once again, you have recalled me to my duty and sanity, dear friend Ditson,” Nutbin said, despite the fierce twitching of his tail. “So, without further ado, let us address the King’s question of who visited judgment upon former King Alberon for his egregious violations of the Provision for a Wronged Human—”

Minka caught him at just the right instant to ask, “There was more than one violation?”

“Oh, dear me, yes!” Ditson exclaimed, withdrawing a roll of parchment from his waistcoat pocket. This he shook out to unroll down Efran’s thigh, across his abdomen, and into the very lap of the one-year-old. Joshua picked up a portion of the parchment to stuff into his mouth while his father ineffectively swiped a hand across his back and his mother watched the faeries in delight.

“Minka—” Efran said, sitting up, which caused Sirs Ditson and Nutbin to topple from their perches (which they were not actually standing upon, but projecting verisimilitude of human limitations in the presence of humans was important to them).

Dislodging the soggy bit of roll from Joshua’s mouth, Minka said, “Suppose we just concentrate on Efran’s question: Who found Alberon guilty and caused him to lose half his power?”

“Oh,” Ditson said, sounding deflated as he straightened his white top hat and recalled to his hand the ash walking stick with the silver knob—both accessories studiously copied from Lord Justinian’s wardrobe. “I fear the answer may be disappointing, Queene Minka, but—Faerie Law was instituted with the creation of Faerie at the beginning of time, and imbued with power in and of itself to hold us accountable to its precepts.”

Efran and Minka studied each other. “So, as your king, am I under Faerie Law?” he asked Ditson.

“As king, certainly,” Ditson said.

“As human, certainly not,” Nutbin said at the same time. And they looked at each other in surprise.

Efran said carefully, “Let me suggest that I abdicate as your king so that you may select another who is qualified to rule you under Faerie Law. I only require that, as Alberon assured me, whoever is King of Faerie on my Lands shall be bound to obey Roman’s Law and answerable to me if he transgresses.”

“Oh, that is a most magnanimous gesture on your part, King Efran,” Nutbin effused.

“A most noble and sensible action, good King Efran,” Ditson agreed.

Efran nodded. “Then I appoint you, Sirs Ditson and Nutbin, and Kele with you, to head a committee of your choosing to select a fully eligible Faerie King.”

“Or Queene,” Minka said.

“Or Queene,” Efran agreed. “Please just keep me apprised; I’m anxious to hear your selection as soon as possible.”

Ditson and Nutbin turned to each other again. “This is incredibly exciting,” Nutbin said.

“Unprecedented,” Ditson said.

“I would say that it ranks as high as Asking Permission on the list of Exciting Developments. Would you say so, Ditson?” Nutbin asked, his tail bristling widely again.

“Right up there at the top of the list of most Innovative Innovations ever,” Ditson proclaimed.

“Shall we proceed, then, dear Ditson?” Nutbin asked.

“At this very instant, worthy Nutbin,” Ditson replied, and they vanished.

In the stillness of their departure, Minka turned her large eyes to her husband. “I used to love you for your body. Now I have to love you for your brilliance.”

Efran peered anxiously at her. “Why can’t it be both? I’m due another Christmas present, you know. We have a calendar in our quarters now.” Minka fell over laughing while Joshua contentedly chewed on the bit of faerie scroll left behind.

As a mild January rain began to fall, they stood, Efran picking up Joshua (who was too heavy for Minka to carry anymore). The bit of scroll leapt out of his mouth with the distraction and ran for safety to the faerie tree.

Efran put Joshua in his sling, holding him on one arm to mount the horse patiently standing by, shaking raindrops from his ears. Efran looked over at Minka, who was already in Rose's saddle. She had remembered to take the blanket, and now held it somewhat folded over the pommel. Laying Joshua lengthwise on his left arm, Efran led her in a gentle lope toward Main. Joshua, cocooned in the sling, rolled toward Efran's stomach and went to sleep.

The construction crews around the new inn and the chapel ignored the light rain, but ladies suddenly appeared on urgent errands, wearing their smart new cloaks from Elvey's. Efran glanced aside at them, smiling, as he and Minka mounted the switchback to the fortress.

They gave up their horses in the courtyard and hustled into the foyer, Eustace holding the door open with a salute. Before Minka could turn into their quarters, Efran grabbed her for a quick kiss. "You can't do your chickening in the rain; come to the workroom," he urged.

"I have to change. You do, too," she murmured.

He thought about the possible activities introduced by the necessity of taking off wet clothes, but Joshua squirmed in the sling, so he said, "Later," taking the baby on down to the nursery.

From there, he ascended the stairs at a trot, turning down the second-floor corridor to the workroom. When he appeared at the door, Estes and DeWitt looked up from their ledgers and worksheets. "Ah. Did you have a nice outing?" DeWitt asked, looking down at his work again.

"Yes," Efran said. "No Leviathans; minimal faerie incursions. But I think I've talked them into picking another king." He threw himself down to his chair in satisfaction, leaning back to look up at the branches of the faerie tree. He noted uneasily how it was continuing to spread, and wondered if they'd be crowded out of this room.

Faeries peeked out from the branches here and there to greet him: "Hail, King Efran." He briefly closed his eyes in irritation, unwillingly sympathizing with Adele to hear the constant hailing.

Meanwhile, Estes was saying, "Good for you. We've just received messengers from Trina. She wants the clothes she left here and her divorce decree from Reinagle."

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Chapter 2

Efran laughed, "As Minka predicted. Well, the clothes disappeared with Adele, thank God, and the decree . . . is still at Ryal's, I believe. But what is happening in Eurus with Webbe the Destructor ruling? And Reinagle as his butler?" he asked in amused interest.

DeWitt looked at him over his spectacles. "The messengers don't know or refuse to say; all they're interested in is what they were sent for. So your appointment of Justinian as Lord Officer on our behalf in Eurus is looking like a stroke of brilliance."

Efran squinted. "That's the second time today I've been accused of brilliance. Now I'm afraid. Regardless, I'm

going to be no help to Trina; she's now Follriott's problem. Again, thank God. Where are her messengers? Croft's?"

Estes was shaking his head as DeWitt said, "Croft's has been at capacity for weeks. Firmin has opened several small rooms off his tea room; he's building on as well."

"They're at Firmin's," Efran clarified, and DeWitt nodded. "Ryal has a spare room he'll be opening, then," Efran predicted; Estes snorted.

"Oh, that reminds me," Estes said. "We have a peach specialist coming down from Eurus tomorrow afternoon; he'll stay at Firmin's tomorrow night and then come up here the following morning, the third. We need him to look at our peach trees to see why they're not producing much. Garrett's anxious to find out what the problem is, and this nobleman—ah, Lord Amesbury—is a widely consulted authority."

Head still back on his chair, Efran said, "Amesbury on the third. All right, let's deal with Trina's messengers today." He whistled, and the young Polonti sentry ran into the room to salute in joy. "Yes, Captain?"

Efran sat up and even Estes glanced at the youngster's exuberance. Half-smiling, Efran asked, "What's your name?"

"Eymor, Captain, and I am alive," he said.

"What happened? Goulven?" Efran asked.

"No sir! I had heard of you in Eledith, and was walking down here to you, but I didn't know it was so very far, and so cold, with nothing to eat. So I lay down somewhere north of the lake on the Great River to die, but Ino picked me up, and carried me a long way, and dropped me down outside a house. I went to the door, but no one answered, so I went in. And there was food and clothes and boots, so I stayed there a few days, and then set out south on the road, and came here within a half day. And the men at the gates looked at my shoulders, then Captain Melchior put me in this uniform and told me what to do, and I am here." His face glowed in happy disbelief.

The three men were silent a moment, then Efran looked at Estes. "Ino . . . ?"

"A . . . storm?" Estes translated dubiously.

"Yes, she is beautiful and strong, and does great things, sometimes greatly terrible," Eymor said earnestly.

The men considered this, then Efran said, "Well, I am glad you made it to us, Eymor. This is the Steward Estes and the Administrator DeWitt."

Eymor correctly saluted them. "Steward. Administrator."

"Now, do you know where the Notary Lord Ryal's shop is?" Efran asked.

"Yes, sir!" Eymor said.

"Good," Efran said. "Go ask him to give you Trina's petition of divorce. Take that to her messengers at Firmin's. Then tell them they must go to Elvey's shop about her clothes. If you have any difficulties, any soldier will help you. Then come back and tell me what happened."

“Yes, Captain,” Eymor said, then waited.

“You are dismissed,” Efran said, smiling. The boy turned to run out, and Efran called, “Don’t run down the stairs!”

Eymor returned to salute again. “Yes, Captain,” he said, and walked away.

Efran turned to his administrators in mild disbelief. “He listened.”

“It’s a miracle,” DeWitt observed.

“A storm,” Estes murmured.

“Isn’t *Ino* a tribe of the Fastnesses?” Efran asked.

Estes slowly shook his head. DeWitt said, “He made it a great long way from Eledith just to get within view of Willowring Lake on foot.”

“Yes,” Efran mused. “It took me the better part of a year to get from Eledith to Westford when I was about his age.” He was restlessly watching the door for Minka. But it would be a while longer before she came.

After changing into dry clothes, Minka had gone up onto the roof to see if she could find Kele. The light rain had stopped, and Minka was most interested to hear how they would go about selecting a new king or queene. So the first place she checked was the great faerie tree.

“Kele?” Minka called, walking around the tree, ducking under low branches. “Anyone? Where is everyone?” The faeries usually popped out at the appearance of a visitor.

Behind her, Minka heard, “Queene Minka.”

She turned, saying, “I am not queene.” Looking around, she saw only a man who bowed to her. As she did not recognize him, she was immediately on guard. “Who are you?”

When he raised up sadly, she saw elven ears and slanted eyes, and long dark hair combed back from a high forehead. He was slightly taller than she, slender, dressed in fashionable elvish clothes, not quite as foppish as Sir Ditson’s. But the signet he wore on his right hand was weighty, beautiful, and almost humming with power. “I am cut to the quick that you do not recognize me,” he said.

The voice she recognized. “Alberon,” she breathed. “Efran made it clear that you are to leave me alone.”

“Well, he never exactly stated such, dear Minka, except that I cannot ‘mess with’ your hair,” he said humorously. “I only wish a moment of your time.” He was looking at her steadfastly, and Minka instinctively knew she was teetering on the edge of a trap.

“Kele, help me,” she said, tearing her eyes away from his—that it was difficult was a warning. Alberon at half-power was still very strong.

Kele did not answer; no one did. “Come, dear Minka, take my hand.” He reached out to her, piercing her with his gaze.

She resisted with all her strength, but watched her hand begin to rise. “Help me,” she said shakily. “Anyone—Go—GGG—” Her throat clamped up as Alberon clenched a fist when she tried to call on God her Maker.

The rooftop breeze, always present to some degree, kicked up a bit, and Minka felt it push her back from him a little. He stepped toward her, reaching out again, and there was a sudden violent gust. Minka was driven against the faerie tree, which clutched her protectively in its branches.

With that, the sky grew dark; Alberon wheeled to shoot his right hand upward, crying a word of power. When the wind immediately stilled, he turned back in satisfaction, straightening his elvish waistcoat. Minka, in the grip of the tree, was staring in terror—but not at him.

The sky behind him began filling with sweeping, dark gray clouds that looked like long hair swirling in water, and in the midst of them was a face as pale as the mid-winter sun, with deep blue-black eyes that glinted lightning. Gray-black clouds extended out from the hair like a vast cloak that covered the sky.

While Minka watched, trembling, light gray finger-like wisps emerged from the dark cloak to reach down and pluck Alberon off the rooftop. The wisps carried him away, shrieking in anger and fear. Then the dark clouds closed around him, and Minka crumpled to her knees.

At once faeries surrounded her to lift her. “Queene Minka, are you awake?” “We could not intervene, dear Queene; he is yet stronger than any of us.” “But a stronger has taken him in hand.”

Confused by the tumult, Minka pulled away. “I must find Efran,” she gasped, then said, “Kele!”

In the workroom, Efran was on his way to summon a sentry when the sky grew dark. This room, normally well-lit by the large eastern window, grew so murky that DeWitt went to light more candles from the day candle that was always burning. “It’s good you came in when you did,” he muttered to Efran.

But Efran was looking out the window at the swirling black clouds, which Estes came over to see. “What is that?” Efran breathed.

Estes muttered, “It’s not like any storm cloud I’ve ever—” He broke off as they watched the grayish white fingers reach out of sight above them.

Efran wrenched the window open to lean out perilously far and look up, Estes grabbing his belt. But they both heard the shriek and watched the cloudy mass rapidly withdraw to the north. In seconds the sky was clear again.

“Minka,” Efran whispered. He was darting toward the door when she appeared at it, pale but calm. He gaped at her for an instant, then grabbed her up. “You were on the roof. What happened?”

She blinked several times, then replied, “Alberon.” Efran’s face tightened. She collected herself, then described how he had attempted to lure her. “I—couldn’t get away. He was—still is—too powerful. But then this—this—”

The young Polonti Eymor exploded into the room. Saluting, he said, “Captain, did you see her? Ino was right over the fortress! Did you see?”

Efran regarded him. “The Lady Minka did.” Turning back to her, he asked again, “What happened?”

She studied the boy for a moment, then said, “Alberon still has more power than any of the other faeries, so he

came to take me again. The—the wind kicked up, but he said words against it, and it stilled. But then, the clouds reached out and took him away—far away, it looked like. I asked Kele where they had taken him, and what he could do now. She said she didn't know."

Eymor said, "It was Ino, Lady Minka. She is terrible, but, for good."

"The clouds?" Efran asked.

Eymor's face was thoughtful. "Sometimes as clouds, sometimes as wind, sometimes as rain and lightning. She submits only to Ka Mea, and creates havoc, but saves as well."

"Who is Ka Mea?" Efran asked.

"Maker of All," Eymor said.

"I see," Efran said, though he didn't, and he was still holding Minka. "So, Eymor, did you have a report for me?"

"Yes, Captain," he said, reverting to correct form. "I gave the Lady Trina's messengers the paper from the notary, and told them to go to Elvey's for dresses. They huffed at me, but went."

"Very good, Eymor," Efran said, and Minka smiled at him. He added, "If you—find out anything more about Ino, or see her again, let me know, please."

"Yes, Captain," he said, and waited for Efran's dismissal before leaving at a brisk walk.

Minka turned to Efran. "He's adorable. But so young!"

"Yes. Many of the new ones are," Efran murmured. Then he said, "Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin, I would have a word with you, please."

After a few heartbeats, the two appeared on the table under the faerie tree as if they'd just run down three flights of stairs. "At your service, King Efran!" Ditson exclaimed, then had to pause to reposition his top hat.

"Delighted to serve you, King Efran. And how may we be of service?" Nutbin asked, scrounging in his vest pocket for his monocle.

"Did I interrupt something?" Efran asked. Estes and DeWitt were not even attempting to work for watching them.

Ditson and Nutbin glanced at each other, then Ditson said, "Only the great hubbub among the Abbey faeries at the summary dispatch of former King Alberon, King Efran."

"Where is he?" Efran asked.

"As nearly as we can pinpoint, he was dropped near Hornbound," Ditson said as Nutbin nodded fiercely.

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Chapter 3

“Hornbound! That’s—beyond the Fastnesses!” Efran said.

“Indeed it is, quite the distance,” Ditson said.

“A vast distance, even by faerie standards,” Nutbin added.

“So the storm that carried him off was supernatural,” Efran said. “I understand that some Polonti call it ‘Ino.’ What is the faerie name for it?”

Nutbin and Ditson looked at each other again. “King Efran, we have regrettably not been introduced to the storm in question,” Ditson said carefully.

“Does Alberon still retain power?” Efran asked.

They looked at him blankly, either unknowing or afraid to answer. Efran suspected the latter: “Then he is still the most powerful being in my realm, and may return at any time to harass us.”

Seized with sudden inspiration, Minka gasped, “He told me another lie today! He said you had never told him to leave me alone, but I was standing right with you at the children’s garden when you shouted at him by name to leave me alone! I demand satisfaction under the Provision for a Wronged Human again!”

Everyone in the room started at a ghostly howl of anger that echoed to them across a great distance. Ditson cried, “It has been granted you, Queene Minka! What power he retained has been halved again!”

“Wait!” she cried. “There was another lie. He told me he only wished a moment of my time, when he clearly intended to take me away. I demand *further* satisfaction under the Provision for a Wronged Human!”

“*Nooooooo!*” Alberon’s enraged voice, reduced to a mere whisper in the air, shrieked and then died away.

“Again.” Nutbin and Ditson looked at each other. “Well, he’ll be fortunate to be able to boil water after this,” Ditson said, straightening his waistcoat in vindication.

“Indeed, good Ditson, you are entirely correct. And no one shall fear him now.” Nutbin cleaned his monocle with a vengeance.

Efran briefly regarded his wife, then asked the faeries, “How long will it take you to decide on a new king or queene?”

“Oh, dear, King Efran,” Ditson said, the very portrait of weariness. “Who can say? There are a thousand points of order which must be clarified before candidates can be drawn up, and then—”

“How have your kings been appointed in the past?” Efran asked.

“In the past . . . ?” Nutbin and Ditson stared at each other, attempting to recollect something from eons ago. Nutbin then hesitantly offered, “Surely it was determined by who had the most resonant voice or witty comebacks.”

“Surely, good Nutbin,” Ditson agreed.

Patiently, Efran asked, “Who among the fortress faeries is most powerful?”

They studied him. Ditson asked, “Do you mean raw power, as in creating large disruptions, or the good sense not to create large disruptions?”

“Both, with an emphasis on the latter,” Efran said slowly.

“Oh, well,” Ditson said, twirling his silver-topped cane. “That would be Optat, I believe.”

Nutbin’s tail began twitching violently. “My dear Ditson, you have such an amazing sense of irony. Optat is a well-dressed scoundrel.”

Ditson’s silver knob inadvertently dropped out of a twirl to land on his hat, denting it. “My dear friend Nutbin! How you can possibly tag him a scoundrel—”

“He made off with the cache of walnuts which the Giggleswick/Scratchy Bottom group was saving for our Rhinog Range holiday, worthy Ditson,” Nutbin said, almost choking on indignation.

“Oh, but dear Nutbin, how could he have known that a hundred walnuts scarcely covered with dirt belonged to anyone?” Ditson cried.

“Because of the sign we posted in great letters a foot tall over it, Ditson!” Nutbin shouted.

“He doesn’t read Squirrel, Nutbin!” Ditson exclaimed.

“He might question why there’s a sign over a stash of walnuts if he weren’t an idiot!” Nutbin cried.

And before Efran could intervene, the two broke out in fisticuffs. “Gentlemen!” Efran said in astonishment, but they were flailing at each other with determined yet completely ineffective blows.

Minka said, “I nominate Kele to be your Queene.”

Panting and disheveled, the two combatants froze. “Kele. What a marvelous suggestion, Queene Minka,” Nutbin said, his monocle swinging on the chain attached to his plaid vest pocket.

“She has such marvelous style,” Ditson said, straightening his suit jacket.

“And she did introduce us to the revolutionary concept of Asking Permission,” Nutbin recalled.

“Oh, my dear Nutbin, I feel like an ogre. Forgive me, my dear friend,” Ditson said with the appearance of almost genuine tears.

“No, dear Ditson! I was entirely in the wrong to lose my temper over nuts,” Nutbin choked out.

As they fell upon each other with sobs of remorse, Efran leaned over them and said, “I am appointing Kele to be Queene of Abbey Land Faerie as of this moment. Please go make it known.”

Ditson cried, “We’re delighted to accomplish this, King Efran!”

“*Lord Efran,*” he corrected Ditson.

“As you say, Lord Efran! Won’t this be an amazing surprise for Kele?” Nutbin cried.

“*Queene Kele,*” Minka clarified.

“Yes, yes,” Ditson exulted, and the two vanished.

Exhausted, Efran slumped into his chair, pulling Minka down with him. DeWitt blinked at them. “That was the most—” Lost for words, he looked over to Estes.

Estes offered, “The most—amazing? Revolutionary? Disruptive scene we’ve ever witnessed?”

“All true, dear Estes,” DeWitt said, and they both returned to work while Minka laughed into Efran’s shirt.

He inhaled a great breath of relief. “Rising and falling,” Minka murmured.

Efran started to laugh, then whispered, “I have a moment. Let’s go downstairs.”

Eustace, on door duty, appeared at the doorway, saluting. “Captain, Lady Trina’s messengers wish a word with you.”

Efran looked over at him; Minka rose, preparatory to standing. He muttered, “How much blowback will it create for me to send them on their way without an audience?”

“Think of the entertainment you’d be missing,” Minka encouraged him.

He lifted her to stand, grousing, “I’m coming.” Eustace departed with a salute and Efran took her hand. On the way out, he murmured, “After your hacking Alberon to his knees, again, I had best take you to any interview.” She grinned, holding his hand.

As they entered the foyer, Efran briefly studied the two uniformed messengers. “I am Lord Efran. What do you want?”

“Lord Efran.” The lead messenger bowed. “Lady Trina would like possession of the clothes she bought at Elvey’s”—with money DeWitt reluctantly supplied.

Efran considered that. “Before we discuss clothes, I require information. First, did you receive Lady Trina’s notarized Petition of Divorce?”

“Yes, Lord Efran.”

“Good. Now, who is ruling Eurur?” Efran asked.

The lead messenger inhaled reluctantly, then said, “Surchatain Webbe.”

“All right. Where is Reinagle?” Efran asked.

“He is at the palace in a different capacity, Lord Efran.”

Efran accepted that. “Where is Bowring?”

“Lord Bowring is recuperating at Lord Folliott’s house in Eurus,” the messenger said.

Efran said, “Good; I’m glad to hear it. So I will tell you that we have no clothes belonging to Lady Trina here. If she—”

“Oh!” Minka inadvertently interrupted. “But we do, I believe. If you’ll wait a moment, I’ll run get it.” She flew to their quarters for the key to the vacant third-floor room and then ran to the stairs.

After watching her go, Efran turned back to the sentries. “While we wait, you can tell me: who is Grand Councilor in Eurus?”

“That would be Vanidestine, Lord Efran,” he said heavily.

“And what proclamations has he or the Council issued?” Efran asked.

The man drew himself up to think while the other messenger regarded him. “That the Goulven plague is under control, and anyone who kills a supposed victim will be charged with murder.”

“Very good,” Efran said in surprise. “What else?”

“That the reduction in taxes authorized by former Surchatain Quilicus will be kept in place.”

“Better and better,” Efran said. “And?”

“That the mysterious trees which first cropped up at Lord Oslac’s house are to be eradicated however possible, and the man who devises means to do so will receive a reward of one hundred royals,” the messenger said gravely.

“The trees . . .” Efran murmured, then remembered that Grand Councilor Cholmondeley’s advisor Oslac had noted the faerie trees on their visit here four months ago. When Minka had told him that the trees were planted by faeries upon the verbal permission given by landowners, Oslac had facetiously granted permission for a number of trees to be planted around his house. The faeries took him up on it, and the trees cropped up immediately. How they had managed to spread, Efran didn’t know.

At that time, Minka approached victoriously bearing a red gown. “Here. This is Trina’s.”

She extended it to the messenger, who took it hesitantly. “I understand that there were more articles. Lady Trina was specific about what she wanted returned.”

Minka said, “No, I’m sorry; there’s nothing else in the wardrobe. However, I know that she left parcels at Elvey’s, which Lady Elvey was anxious to deliver to her. So you need to check there.”

The second man looked at the lead messenger again, who exhaled, “So we were told. We will stop by there.”

“Very good, gentlemen. Good day,” Efran said, taking Minka’s arm to walk off.

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Chapter 4

Efran's dismissal of the messengers was the signal for Eustace to open the doors. "Thank you for stopping by, gentlemen. Good day."

The other door sentry straightened expectantly; the courtyard gate guards opened the gates expectantly, looking back to the fortress doors. With all the armed men watching attentively, Trina's messengers went out to reluctantly mount and depart down the switchback.

Meanwhile, in the corridor, Efran asked Minka, "How did you know that Adele didn't take the dress? Why wouldn't she?"

Minka snorted, "It's a costume, polished cotton, not silk or even satin. The gold and silver threads are only colored. Adele wouldn't want it, and I doubt Trina would, either."

"Well, it gave them something to take back to her," Efran laughed. Then he said, "Can you ask Kele something for me?"

Minka looked up to the ceiling. "Queene Kele, Efran has a question, if you're available."

Almost immediately, there was a shimmer in the air. Wearing a crown, Kele appeared before them. Despite the regal appearance, she was fluttery and flustered—and still only about 12 inches tall. "Oh, dear Lord Efran, I am honored beyond measure that you thought me worthy to rule the Abbey Land faerie!"

"Who else?" he half-laughed. "But yes, Queene Kele, I have a question. You may remember the EurAsian Oslac who invited faerie trees to his estate. Although he didn't mean it, they came. Now, are there faeries in those trees?"

"No, Lord Efran, they've not been invited. And I understand that the trees are spreading, looking for them," Kele said plaintively.

"Since the trees originated from our Lands, can I authorize faeries to live in them?" Efran asked.

"It's slightly irregular, but as permission has been granted all down the line, I don't see why not," Kele mused.

"Then will you convey to the trees and our faeries my permission to inhabit them? I would appreciate it if they would return from time to time with reports of what they see," Efran said. No longer King of Faerie, he didn't feel authorized to order them to report to him.

"Oh! Assignments as well as new habitations! That is most exciting!" Kele said.

"Also, they must secure permission from me before they interact with the EurAsians," Efran said.

"Of course, Lord Efran," Kele said, extending her glittering skirts in a curtsy.

“Thank you, Queene Kele,” he said, crinkling his eyes at her, and she tittered.

As Kele vanished, Minka looked up at Efran in hesitant wonder. “What have you done?”

“We’ll see,” he said, grinning.

Trina’s messengers departed the following morning, January 2nd. Efran did not know and did not want to know whether they got any satisfaction from Elvey or not; he was only certain that the Fortress would not be buying any more expensive clothes for stranded women. “Why do they keep showing up here?” he mused. “How did I get to be rescuer of unhappy wives?—except that they try to bring suit against me for Provision for a Wronged Husband whether it was me or not.”

Standing in the courtyard, he looked at the northwestern hillside, where about twenty men were practicing with the slings under Conte’s direction. Between that and the fact that the hillside was riddled with unseen weak spots, he could no longer scale the hill there. The hole that he had fallen through to face Alberon was marked with a wooden barricade.

So he looked to the northeastern hillside. It was definitely more solid, but also more hazardous with respect to nettles, briars, scorpions and snakes—in other words, a perfect hill for training.

As he was turning back inside to get Joshua, he met Minka coming out in her pants. “And where are you going?” he asked warily. *Something always happened* whenever she stepped out of the fortress.

“I want to go back to Flodie’s shop,” she said. Flodie’s Oddities and Articles of Worth, tucked in the northwestern corner of the Lands, carried interesting used goods. “You can come with me, or I’ll take bodyguards,” she offered.

He regarded her. “Let me go get Joshua. He must be standing at the nursery door, banging on it by now. Horses, please,” he tossed off at the gate sentry, who saluted. Then Efran bounded up the fortress steps.

He returned to the courtyard a few minutes later, having been delayed by the necessity of new wraps for Joshua. The baby was pleased to see not only Mama, but two soldiers waiting by their horses. Minka was already on Rose.

Connor and Koschat saluted Efran as he adjusted Joshua’s sling on his shoulder. “Captain,” Connor said, “permission to ride with you and the Lady to Flodie’s. We’d like to see what else she has, as well.” Connor had picked up a hutch for his wife on their last trip, and Koschat had found a genuine Polonti sling.

“Granted,” Efran said, mounting with one hand on the pommel and another on Joshua’s sling. “Why doesn’t Lyra come?” he asked Connor of his wife.

“She’s working, Captain—at Dix’s Plant Shop,” Connor said, turning his horse.

“Dix’s? How does she like it?” Efran asked.

“She loves it. They’re doing great business; she makes good pay and gets plants at a discount. Says Dix is a great boss,” Connor said. He shrugged at the wonder of it all—that Dix, a former courtesan of the late Surchatain Loizeaux, should be a shrewd businesswoman.

“I’m glad,” Efran said.

Minka murmured in mild envy, “I’d like to work. Now that Joshua has discovered his father, I have hardly anything to do anymore.”

Connor winced at his inadvertent blunder; Efran glanced down. Then he told her, “You have no idea how helpful it is to me that you’re available to do small jobs, like hack Alberon down.”

She looked up, laughing in gratitude. Connor said, “What? How?”

So as they walked the horses down to Flodie’s, Efran told Connor and Koschat how she had invoked the Provision for a Wronged Human against Alberon the day before yesterday, causing him to lose half his power, then how she had invoked it twice against him yesterday, each time losing half his power.

Connor said hesitantly, “So now he’s at—at—”

“One-eighth his original power,” Koschat said.

The others silently considered that, then Minka ventured, “How did you work that out?”

Koschat said, “Because two cubed is eight, Lady Minka.”

The others were silent again, then Efran laughed, “I’m going to check with my administrators to see who needs a mathematician. Stand by, Koschat.”

“Yes, Captain,” he said, smiling.

They arrived at Flodie’s in good humor, tying the horses to her rail before going inside. From his father’s back, Joshua looked around the shop in little interest, experiencing no vistas of the Lands nor sudden drops into dim caverns. So he just waited.

Efran caught sight of a bookshelf, and went right over to spend the entire time browsing it. Koschat and Connor went to the areas in which they had made their earlier finds. Minka wandered from section to section—clothing (not interested, not needed), housewares (the same), books (can’t concentrate), baby things (too painful), toys (the children had plenty, but—what?).

Minka stopped over the toys, seeing something move. There was something sitting in a basket that looked up at her with great brown eyes. It looked like a small dog, but with the mane, tail and fetlocks of a horse, and large ears that stood upright. The rest of the body was hairless—which in a funny way, reminded her of Efran.

“What are you?” she asked, kneeling to pet it. It closed its eyes at her caress, then awkwardly climbed out of the basket to crawl up on her lap. She picked it up to carry it to the counter. “What is this?” Minka asked Flodie.

“Oh, worthless dog, got himself lost. I fed him yesterday, which was a mistake; now he thinks I’m going to take care of him, and I haven’t got the time,” Flodie said.

“I see,” Minka said. The little boy sat up in her arms to put his front legs around her neck. She stroked his soft, bare skin. It was light brown, almost the color of Efran’s skin, and his belly was spotted. His hair was black with white streaks.

Connor came up to the counter with a pitcher and four matching cups. "I've become domesticated," he sighed.

Looking at what he placed on the counter, Minka said, "Oh, that's a beautiful set."

"I hope Lyra will like it. What have you found?" Handing over some silver pieces to Flodie, he glanced in amusement at the dog clinging to her neck.

"I'm not sure," Minka murmured.

Flodie wrapped Connor's pottery in paper to put in a canvas bag as Koschat and Efran came up to the counter. Koschat placed a handful of silver on the counter while raising a shield to show Connor, who gasped, "Is—?"

"Old Polonti shield made of picea wood," Koschat said. The battered disk was painted with a faded red symbol.

Connor took it to study it in wonder. "It's seen more than one battle. Heavy blows there, and there. But the wood's not split." Koschat nodded in agreement.

Looking over, Efran said, "The last one I saw like that was in Eledith. It belonged to the chief." He glanced at the dog that Minka held, and she began quaking. Since animals were not permitted in the fortress, she was afraid to ask for a worthless dog.

"What have you found?" she asked him quickly.

He lifted a book, for which he placed a royal on the counter. "Assar's *Life of King Alfred*, which Ares had translated from the Latin. I never imagined finding a copy." He opened the book to glance through it. And from then on, whatever pants he wore, he transferred the book to a back pocket, and pulled it out at any idle moment to read. It was like conversing with this great king of centuries ago. Not only did Efran learn much about him, but realized that Ares had modeled his rule on Alfred's.

Holding out a handful of silver to him, Flodie said, "Here's your change."

Efran looked up from the book, transferring it to his pocket at that time. "Keep it for the dog."

"Oh, she's doing me a favor to take it," Flodie protested.

"The book alone is worth ten royals to me," Efran countered.

As she attempted a rebuttal, Koschat said, "Madam, you must accept that the Captain overpays." Connor suppressed a snort. Flodie raised a hand in gracious defeat, withdrawing the silver.

"Are you ready to go?" Efran asked Minka. The dog, trembling for the large men crowded around him, held on tightly to her neck. Joshua looked down at him over Papa's shoulder, as it was the first interesting thing he'd seen today.

"I think so," Minka said, wiping her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered.

Efran nodded, turning his eyes away so that she wouldn't see them water. Minka wanted a baby.

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Chapter 5

Efran, Minka, Koschat and Connor rode back to the fortress leisurely with their purchases, though Connor stopped by his and Lyra's house to drop off the pottery. Koschat, on the other hand, rode with the shield on his arm, creating a sensation among the Polonti gate and door guards.

After giving up their horses, Minka and Efran paused in the courtyard. "Joshua and I are going to see how the northeastern side of the hill serves for climbing," he told her. He stroked the dog's head, who accepted it with closed eyes.

"Oh, dear." Minka looked at the bristling terrain. "Now you're the one making me worry over your adventures."

He shook his head dismissively, then watched her glance pensively toward the fortress. "You may take him wherever you like," he said.

"Thank you," she whispered, and he leaned down to nuzzle her.

While Efran took Joshua out of the gate to turn east on the hilltop, Minka carried her new pet into the fortress. Self-consciously, she stopped by the kitchen to ask for scraps for him, and was promptly given a bowl of chicken skins and another bowl for water.

These Minka took out to the back grounds, far out in the trees so they would not be in anyone's way. The dog was straining toward the chicken scraps, so she put him down with the bowl, which he emptied with a few quick snaps. And when he pooped, she gathered it with leaves and tossed it over the fence. Then she took the second bowl to fill from the gardeners' water bucket, and he stayed with her every step until she put it down for him to drink.

A few people paused in their work to smile or make comments, to which she eagerly replied. She was still tentative about having a dog. But no one seemed to object; those who noticed him were uniformly positive. So she walked with him, watching him cautiously explore at her side. Then he tired, pressing up against her legs to be held.

When she picked him up, and he snuggled down against her, she felt comforted, consoled. At that, she realized he'd need a name, which came at once: Nakam, of course.

Why that name? Why "of course"? It wasn't a word she remembered; she didn't even know what it meant. Then she realized it must be attached to something meaningful in her childhood that she had forgotten. When he rose from her arms, she put him down to let him pee. "Yes, do that out here, Nakam. What is a Nakam?" she murmured.

Thinking on this, she walked over to the bench under the great old walnut tree. Nakam followed right at her heels. When she sat, he stood with his forepaws on the bench, but it was too high for him to jump up. So she lifted him to her lap, and he curled up as though entitled to it. As she stroked him, her anxiety dissipated in his contentment. She finally decided it was all right to have him. "Whatever *Nakam* is, it's good," she realized.

On the eastern hillside, Efran was finding the climb down more challenging, thus more satisfying, than that on

the northwestern hillside. First, he had a wider field to choose a route, from directly north clear to the southeast and all the ground in between. Also, there were fewer caverns here, and they were certainly not so close to the surface. There was a steep drop on the east face of the Abbey hill (outside the fence), but about halfway down, the hillside began leveling out for over a mile, past Cavern Lake. But Efran stayed to the north-northeast hillside.

As he walked, he had to watch the ground for adders. They were easy to spot, with the distinctive black zig-zag, but if he got too close, they could strike above his boots. The scorpions he discounted, being too small to do much damage.

Joshua was getting much stronger in the neck, with his determination to hold his head up and look around. But he was teething fiercely, so today Efran had to pause to unbutton his shirt a ways and roll up the neck to give the boy something to sink his teeth into other than Papa's skin. They both enjoyed the view; they could see much of the Lands from here, almost all the way to the east branch of the Passage. He and Joshua could look over the new livestock pens and beyond those, the fields being tilled and planted.

On the descent, Efran paused frequently to observe the construction of the new inn, the chapel, Firmin's rooms, Croft's addition, and smaller structures on the plots. It was staggering to remember that 18 months ago, this area had been nothing but meadowlands on which the wolves hunted. He hoped they were thriving in the wilds north of Eviron, but this land was his, and he was thrilled to see it supporting families.

As he made his way down to the main east-west road and then turned to climb again, he thought about Minka. He was glad she had found the dog; he hoped it helped console her, for he did not know if he could ever give her a baby of her own.

Climbing back up was considerably more difficult, as Efran expected it to be. For here the scorpions came into play, given that he had to occasionally grasp rocks or outcroppings with which the arachnids blended splendidly. Also, the rocky ground tended to slide from under his feet, so that he was considering the need for spikes.

Speaking of which, on the ascent he passed the iron stakes that his men had driven into the hillside to accommodate the funeral pyre for the bodies of Loizeaux's men drowned when the Passage overflowed. That was over a year ago, he reflected. He had acquired Barr then, who had been one of the invaders, and one of the very few surviving Eurussians. In passing the stakes, Efran saw a few remaining bones.

Climbing, he caught sight of a walker coming up the switchback to his right. Efran paused to study him for a moment—he was not old, but walked with a stoop, using a stick. He wore a limp suit of a style that Efran had never seen before. His hat was a strange shape: floppy, but coming to a blunted, half-hearted point at the top. He was altogether different.

Shrugging, Efran returned his attention to the slippery slope and deceptive rocks. Joshua suddenly uttered, "Ungh!" and waved an arm. Efran looked down at the adder rearing beside his left foot, and hastily moved on.

"Did you spot it?" Efran asked, looking back over his shoulder, and Joshua pulled up a fresh fistful of shirt to chew on.

During the climb, Efran periodically noted that he and the walker on the switchback were somehow ascending at the same pace. This was decidedly strange: *Shouldn't I be going faster? Not on this slope. Shouldn't he be going faster? Not with a walking stick up the switchback.* Given the hazards at his feet, Efran concentrated on his own ascent. But the courtyard and door sentries were watching the odd race in interest, placing bets on who would arrive first.

When Efran reached the top of the hill and began crossing to the gates, he looked up to see the stooped gentleman approaching at the same time. The sentries had the gates standing open as Efran met the stranger there.

They studied each other, and he said, "I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands."

"Good afternoon, Lord Efran. I am Nakham. May I trouble you for a bite to eat?" He had a frank, benign face, and carried nothing but his stick.

It was highly unusual for a beggar to climb all the way up the switchback for a meal; all of the food vendors on the Lands (except the fishmonger Shurtleff) fed needy people from daily leftovers. "Come with me," Efran said, turning into the gates as the sentries saluted. "This is my son Joshua."

"Ah. A servant of the Lord and a man of courage and faith," Nakham said.

Efran looked at him quickly. "Yes, exactly."

Nakham nodded in understanding. "I was just talking to your Madgwick. A great helper to her husband, and to you, in fact."

Once again, Efran looked mildly startled. Delano had called his wife Madgwick "a praying woman," and she certainly was good at it. "Yes, she is."

Efran took him up the fortress steps through the open doors, pausing as Nakham ascended a little slower. At the top step, he bent down to place his walking stick on the left edge of the steps, where it would be out of the way but accessible when he needed it again. They went through the foyer and down the corridor, Efran veering off to look in his quarters. "Minka?" She was not there, so he led his guest to the dining hall.

Drawing up to the back table, Efran raised his face. "Dobell? A plate for our guest, please. Have a seat," he told Nakham, gesturing to the bench, and the man arranged himself to sit. "Tell Dobell what you want to drink; I need to find my wife."

"By all means," Nakham said.

Efran went down the corridor to drop Joshua off at the nursery for fresh wraps and a bottle, then proceeded to the back door to look out. Seeing Minka with her new pet on the bench, he paused, reluctant to order her in if she was enjoying herself. After hesitating, he withdrew to return to the dining hall.

Minka glanced up to see him turning away at the door, and thought he must not have seen her. So she rose with Nakam on her arm to go in. She paused at the door of the dining hall, seeing Efran sit beside someone at the back table. Unwilling to take Nakam in where food was being served, she took him on down to her and Efran's quarters to place him on the bed. "I'll be back shortly." He accepted this without question, circling in the bedcovers before curling down.

Minka closed the door and went back to the dining hall to sit beside Efran, the visitor on his other side. Efran looked up quickly. "Where is your dog?"

"Oh, I didn't want to bring him in here," she demurred.

"Well, Minka, this is—Nathan," Efran said hesitantly, obviously having forgotten his name.

“Hello. Welcome to the Abbey Fortress,” she said, and Nakham nodded in acknowledgment, his mouth full. She asked Efran, “Did you and Joshua climb the east face?”

“Yes, that’s when I saw our visitor coming up. Where are you from?” Efran asked him.

Swallowing, Nakham said, “Wantage, most recently, but I’m on my way to just about everywhere.”

Efran was silent a moment. Minka wasn’t really listening. He said tentatively, “I never heard of Wantage; where is it?”

“Oh, it’s just a hamlet between here and Prie Mer. You wouldn’t see it from the road; it’s unmarked,” Nakham said easily. “Excellent dinner; thank you very much.”

“You’re very welcome,” Efran said absently. “I’ve ridden to Prie Mer frequently, especially when I was in Westford. I thought I knew every side road. What other villages are around it?”

“Let me see.” Nakham wiped his mouth carefully on his napkin. “There’s Basing within a half mile, then Ashdown tucked in the valley behind it.”

“Basing. Ashdown,” Efran repeated in bewilderment. “Wait. Wantage.” He pulled his little book out of his back pocket to begin leafing through it. “Where Alfred the Great was born. Ashdown—where he won a major battle against the Danes. These—places aren’t even on the Southern Continent,” he protested.

“Oh, perhaps not. I get confused with all the places I’ve been. I thought you were Edward the Elder at first,” Nakham confessed. Efran blinked at him; Minka heard nothing of all this, contemplating the challenges of keeping the first dog in the fortress.

Nakham stood with a sigh of satisfaction. “After your kind generosity, I’ll be on my way, then. I’m hoping to catch the great comedy team of Nonesuch and Asmuch. You never know where they’ll turn up.” He walked out of the dining hall toward the foyer. Efran rose to follow him. Minka, startled, got up to follow Efran.

At the front door, Nakham shook Efran’s hand with, “You’re doing right well. Carry on.” He turned to leave Efran and Minka at the doorway. Neither of them noticed his walking stick still resting on the side of the steps.

As the courtyard guards opened the gates, everyone looked over at the great black clouds rolling down from the north. They looked disturbingly like the clouds that had snatched away Alberon. “Efran,” Minka gasped, grasping his arm. Nakham had begun down the switchback in unconcern.

“Nathan.” Efran ran forward to stop his guest. “You can’t travel today; there’s a storm on the way. Come back inside.”

“Well. If you insist,” Nakham said. Minka studied him, then.

“Yes, we’ll find you a room,” Efran said, persistently bewildered both by his guest and his own reluctance to let him leave. They all looked back at the roiling dark clouds. Efran told the gate guards, “Leave the gates unlocked and come in.”

“Yes, Captain,” one said without argument.

Outdoor work across the Lands came to a halt as residents scurried into shelter. With the dark clouds sealing out the light, Madea's kitchen crew served an early dinner. The archers, sparring and sling groups aborted practice; Marlett locked the chickens in their coops; the horses were put up early in the stables, so Tess and Ella came in early from training them. Tess watched anxiously as Loriot walked back down the switchback, unconcerned over the black clouds. She wished he didn't have to leave the hilltop at all.

Efran found the key to the vacant third-floor room and handed it to a sentry. "Escort our guest up to the third floor; he needn't be locked in, but get you a partner to stand watch at his door in case he needs something."

"Yes, Captain," the young sentry said. "If you will follow me, sir."

"That's good of you, Lord Efran," Nakham said, inclining his head. "Lady Minka." He acknowledged her with a slight bow. She didn't respond, still studying him. But he turned away to follow the young Polonti up the stairs.

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Chapter 6

"What's wrong?" Efran asked Minka.

"Nothing. I just thought I might know him," she said distractedly. "What's his name again?"

"Nathan," he said without conviction. It didn't sound quite right.

"Well, everyone's going in to dinner," she observed.

"I'll get Joshua," he said, turning away.

The fortress staff and hilltop soldiers ate amiably but quickly, for the most part: those who slept in the barracks or on plots below hurried to finish before the storm hit. The children didn't care, as they slept in rooms here in the fortress, but they were quick to clean the plates of those who left early, especially their desserts. Quennel didn't care, either; he'd stay as long as Ella let him. Tess was still worried about Loriot. Shortly thereafter, she left for her room at the stables as well.

Before going to bed, Efran stepped out into the courtyard to look at the sky. The expected deluge from such dark clouds had not come yet. But he saw torches burning brightly at the wall gates; Barr had put men on watch regardless of a possible thunderburst. So Efran called for guards at the courtyard gates as well, lit with lanterns.

While waiting for the gate sentries to come, he looked again at the thick, dark blanket overhead, seeing a watery moon peek out. He regarded the semblance of eyes and mouth, then paused at the realization that there should not be a full moon this week. Besides which, it was in the wrong place in the sky. Efran backed up to the fortress doors, and when the sentries came to stand watch, he quickly went in.

He entered his quarters to undress for bed, leaving his *Life of King Alfred* on the small table. Then he looked in the bedroom to see Minka curled up with her little dog. "He looks happy," Efran laughed. "I hope he won't mind if I get in between you."

“No, he’ll move,” she said sleepily. “Nakam is a good boy.”

“Nakham!” he said, recognizing the correct name of their visitor. “How did you know his name?”—referring to the man, of course.

“I don’t know,” she murmured sleepily. “I can’t remember where I heard it.”

“Well,” he said, brushing it off. He slid into bed in his breeches to wrap her up, and Nakam moved down to their feet.

Two stories above them, Nakham stepped out of his room to look at the young sentries on either side of the door sleeping on their feet. He smiled in understanding, then went down the quiet corridor to ascend the stairs to the crenelated walkway surrounding the upper fortress. From there, he found the stairs to the bell tower, the highest point of the fortress, newly repaired from Efran’s kicking a hole in the tower to escape Alberon’s trap.

Nakham walked around the faerie tree, observing with faint humor the little lights and chatter deep within its branches. Then he looked up to the dark, puffy clouds and the moonlike face peering out around the wispy edges of her cloak. “Well, Ino, what are you doing?”

He appeared to listen for a while, then said, “Is he a problem?” After another pause, he said, “Let me see what I can do. Now, are you really going to flood their newly planted fields and drown the newborn lambs? . . . No, I didn’t think so. . . . Yes, some of the men know of you. So consider that. . . . All right.” He turned to the stairway again as the sky gradually began to clear.

Nakham descended all stairs to the first floor, then stopped at the door of Efran and Minka’s quarters. He opened it quietly and went in, bypassing the hours candle that gave a little light in the outer room. Nakham went into the bedroom to look down on the sleeping couple.

Minka was pressed tightly against her husband’s side, her head on his shoulder and his arm draped down her back. The little dog raised up with a timid yap at Nakham’s intrusion. Efran lifted his head, whispering, “Shhh,” and reached down with his free hand to the hesitant watchdog. Nakam accepted a brief stroking of his head and moved to curl up on Efran’s stomach; he, in turn, lay back again to rest his chin on top of Minka’s head.

Nakham considered them silently for a while, then left their quarters. “No, I’d not recommend it,” he said heavily. “She’d die in childbirth, which would destroy him. Do you think she knows this? I think so, too, else she wouldn’t be looking for other ways to mother.”

From there, Nakham went out the great foyer doors to the courtyard, lit by lanterns beside the doors and the gates. (By a coincidental oversight that almost never happened, there were no door guards.) He walked over to regard the young sentries slumped against the gates in sleep. Nakham looked between them, then went to the one who was older by a few years. Nakham contemplated him for a few minutes, and the young Polonti’s face grew disturbed.

“What do you think? An intruder? Someone who shouldn’t be here?” Nakham asked quietly. The boy’s face altered to reflect concentration. “How will you recognize him?” Nakham asked.

Brows drawn down in concern, the boy hazily shook his head. “He’ll be riding in a hired carriage with a poor horse, won’t he? Why shouldn’t a noble have his own carriage and properly groomed animal?” Nakham posed. “No footman? The driver doesn’t grace his costume, does he? No, no, send him off without an audience.”

Still asleep, the boy's face settled in decisiveness. Nakham smiled, then remounted the steps to the great doors. As he slipped inside, easing the door closed, he issued a sharp, "*Pffffff!*"

The older boy, the one he had been talking to, startled awake, looking around. "Salk! Wake up!" he said quietly, but with authority. "*Salk!*"

"What?" The younger boy snapped awake.

"You were sleeping!" the older said in disgust.

"No I wasn't, Mathurin, I was just—resting my eyes," Salk said, blinking in the lantern light.

"Well, don't drop off again; I don't want to go on latrine duty with you!" Mathurin said in subdued outrage.

"Then talk to me," Salk said, exhaling.

"Did you ever have warning dreams, about something you need to watch out for?" Mathurin asked, and Salk looked at him.

Leaving them, Nakham went walking around the fortress and the grounds for the rest of the night, just looking. He particularly studied the peach trees, since Ino had moved aside from the moon—the real one.

At this time, a white mist, the barest vapor, seeped up from the cracks around a trap door in the floor of a closet in a first-floor storage room. The mist then traveled almost with volition to the library, also on the first floor. Sliding along the shelves, the mist stopped to surround one particular book. It brooded over this book for some time before drifting into the corridor and up the stairs to the closed door of the workroom.

Slipping underneath the door, the mist spread itself over the shelves of ledgers, folders, and volumes until it again encompassed one particular set, playing over it for only a moment before sliding away under the door.

The mist descended the stairs. Appearing aware of oncoming footsteps, it blew quickly into the storage room to slide under the closet door again. And Nakham, passing the door, paused to turn his head, sniffing as though smelling something unpleasant. Then he nodded in comprehension, moving on.

In the morning (January 3rd), Minka solicited breakfast for Nakam before even having it herself. She took him out to the back of the orchard as before, where he bounced like a ball around her legs, eliciting laughter from those watching. Then she put down the bowl of beef trimmings to his utter delight before giving him water. Since he drank almost all of it, she resolved to put a water dish somewhere out back accessible to him without getting in anyone's way. For the back grounds was a busy place.

As she was walking among the fruit trees, watching Nakam hunt squirrels and dig around interesting smells, she almost stumbled into their overnight guest, who was also walking and looking. "Oh! I'm sorry," she laughed. "I was so busy trying to make sure Nakam—" She broke off, looking at him. "That's your name, too, isn't it?"

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said, with a short bow. "I'm pleased to see you again."

"Again," she murmured, obviously trying to remember.

He gave her no assistance, merely looking around in lively interest. “You have a wonderful variety of peach trees here, Rubidoux, that I have found only on one other estate in the whole Southern Continent,” he noted. “In Eurus.”

“Yes, the peaches are wonderful, but Garrett wants to know why they’re not producing as they should,” she murmured. She meant for last year’s fruiting season, of course; right now their branches were bare, even on the hilltop.

“Oh, well, heading cuts encourage leaf growth at the expense of fruit, so it shouldn’t be done on established peach trees. Better to remove the whole branch. That will encourage more fruiting,” he said casually.

“Heading cuts encourage leaf growth at the expense of fruit,” she repeated. “And . . . you found Rubidoux on only one other estate, in Eurus . . . which must have been famous for its peaches.” A particularly jarring memory then emerged from her subconscious.

“Yes,” he said, gazing up at the bare branches.

“And the lord of that estate was so proud of his peaches that a little girl who was found to have picked one up off the ground and eaten it was beaten on her bottom by the lord himself,” she said, pale.

“Who would do such a thing to a little girl?” Nakham asked quietly.

“I know who,” she whispered. She bent to pick up Nakam and run with him into the fortress. “Who were they calling in to ask about the peach trees?” she asked herself anxiously.

At that time Mathurin, still on watch at the gates with Salk, was vehemently denying entry to a purported lord who arrived in a hired carriage with only a weaselly looking driver. “No! Denied! Turn this heap around!” Mathurin was shouting. Salk was looking on in silent fear.

Meanwhile, the enraged lord was bellowing, “I was invited, you dirty little imp! This is outrageous, that a monkey in a uniform should deny Lord Amesbury entrance anywhere!”

Efran and Garrett, the head gardener, came out then, pausing at the confrontation. “Lord Amesbury?” Efran asked guardedly. Mathurin shut his mouth, glaring at the lord.

“Yes, I am, and your little monkey won’t let me in!” the lord roared.

Efran’s eyes very nearly glazed. “I apologize; it was my oversight that the guards were not informed of your coming, Lord Amesbury. You may open the gates, Mathurin.”

This the boy did with set jaw and fiery eyes. Amesbury, on foot, stalked in while his hired carriage was driven in behind him. Glaring around him, the lord ordered, “Show me your problem and let’s get this over with. I’ve just doubled my fee for the inconvenience.”

Efran almost turned him out right then, but Garrett said, placating, “We do regret the misunderstanding, Lord Amesbury. Come in, please.”

As the three of them entered the foyer, Garrett told him, “We pruned after bearing season the first year, but had very little produce the year after, and hope that you can enlighten us. I am not greatly familiar with growing peaches myself, so—”

They paused as Minka ran into the foyer, holding Nakam. “You,” she breathed. “It is you.” Efran looked at her in alarm, then turned his eyes to the muttering, irritated peach expert.

Obviously not recognizing her status now nor who she had been nine years ago, the lord made as if to brush past her with a comment about children running amok. “One moment, Lord Amesbury,” Efran ordered.

“What now?” the lord groaned, turning.

Efran had whispered a question to Minka, and she was now explaining herself in trembling whispers to him alone. “What?” Efran exploded softly, and she continued to explain while Efran raised glassy eyes to the lord. “What is your fee?” Efran asked him in that toneless voice of doom. Minka had put Nakam down to hide herself in her husband.

“Ten royals,” Amesbury said stiffly.

Without looking at the young Polonti sentry at his side, Efran uttered, “Go get ten royals from Estes.”

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Chapter 7

“Yes, Captain,” the young Polonti said, trotting smartly up the stairs without running. The corridor was filled with a heavy silence at his departure.

In moments he returned with a small pouch which he extended to the Captain. Efran said, “Give it to him.” The boy turned to put the pouch at the lord’s vast stomach. He opened it to look in it, then Efran said, “Get out.”

“I won’t forget this rudeness,” Amesbury uttered.

“My wife hasn’t forgotten yours, either,” Efran breathed. Heads all down the corridor swiveled to the lord. Minka turned to face him then, and he looked at her dubiously. “Eymor, escort him out,” Efran instructed.

The adolescent in uniform stood correctly before the lord to extend a hand toward the doors. “This way, Lord Amesbury.” The staff and soldiers who had collected in the corridor then watched the perspiring man stalk out, and Mathurin got the satisfaction of his life to open the gates for him to leave in disgrace.

Minka hung on Efran while he held her, whispering, “I’m sorry.” Nakam sat right at her feet, almost on them.

“Not your fault. I—didn’t remember until—” she broke off, collecting herself.

Garrett exhaled. “Well, I’m terribly sorry for—whatever he did. I just wish we knew why the peach trees didn’t set fruit last season.”

Lifting her head, Minka said, “Oh, well, heading cuts encourage leaf growth at the expense of fruit, so you shouldn’t do it on established peach trees. If they must be pruned, it’s better to remove the whole branch. That will encourage more fruiting.”

Garrett gazed at her. "I didn't think of that."

She nodded complacently; the men looked at each other, and Efran quietly laughed. "We'll ask you first the next time we need expert advice." She smiled tentatively at him, then looked toward the back grounds thoughtfully.

As the sky had cleared without inflicting damage on the Lands, everyone returned to his duty. Mathurin and Salk were relieved at the end of their successful watch, and Garrett went out to inform his workers of the correct pruning technique on the peach trees.

While Efran went up to the workroom, Minka returned to the back grounds with Nakam. She looked around for the other Nakham, but did not see him right now. So she thought about the utter humiliation of having her dress pulled up in front of workers and other children to be beaten on her bottom with a riding whip. Unable to deal with the trauma as an eight-year-old, she had locked it away, remembering only that men were evil.

This had been reinforced in her later experiences, especially seeing Commander Wendt blinded. She had run from that room of horror to the river, where she had found unexpected salvation in tending the chickens. The henhouse had quickly become her private sanctum, her refuge.

So upon finding a strange man lying in it a few days later, she had studied him closely while he was safely asleep. But when he had begun stirring, she fled her sanctum. Then she had returned to blurt in fear and anger, "*Get out, you filthy Polonti!*"

She had told Efran that she'd said that out of embarrassment, after examining him while he was asleep. And, superficially, that was certainly part of it. But deeper was the fear: an evil man had invaded her sanctum.

His turning, so weak from the fever, to reply humorously to her insult, "*That's Captain Efran to you, girl!*" led to her discovery that some men were good, and kind, and giving.

"How did he ever come to me?" she murmured, watching Nakam tree a squirrel. It seemed like a great, cosmic mistake that a man like Efran would fall in love with a mouse. He was more suited to. . . . Minka raised her eyes in comprehension. He had been intended for Adele. He was meant to be Adele's lover, protector, husband.

She saw Nakham, then, leaning on the back fence to look out to the Sea. She walked up to him while Nakam trotted after her. "How did you know that Lord Amesbury would be coming?"

Nakham shrugged. "Lord Efran was talking with his administrators about it."

"But that doesn't explain how you knew what he did to me when I didn't even remember," she said, evaluating him.

"I was there; you just didn't see me," he said.

She accepted this, leaning on the fence beside him. As he seemed—supernaturally wise, she posed another question, the one uppermost in her thoughts right now: "Efran was meant for Adele, wasn't he?"

He did not seem surprised at the question. "*Meant* means nothing in the face of *chosen*."

"Who did the choosing?" she asked, shivering.

“All three of you. Adele chose to reject him, so he chose the one who loved him,” Nakham said with a smiling glance at her. “You clothe yourselves with your choices.”

“And she’s regretted that choice ever since. She keeps trying to change it,” Minka said.

Looking up to the benign blue sky, he said, “There comes a point when the luxury of choice has passed. The dress is now part of her and will never part from her.”

“Is there no redemption for her?” Minka asked.

“If she will look for it. But Efran will never be hers,” Nakham said.

Minka looked down at Nakam, who had slipped through the balusters to walk along the cliff. “Nakam,” she said, moving away from the fence, and he slipped right through back to her feet. She glanced at Nakham. “You’re not leaving, are you?”

“Not yet,” he said. She nodded, walking away.

Upstairs in the workroom, Efran, who had been reading his *Life of King Alfred*, found himself distracted by the fatness of the faerie tree growing up through the middle of the table. So he closed the book and said, “Queene Kele, may I have a word with you?”

Immediately she appeared on the table in front of him. “Yes, Lord Efran?”

“Just Efran,” he said.

“Then you may call me Kele,” she replied, shaking out her gossamer sleeves and straightening her crown. “The head wear is uncomfortable; I may ditch it,” she muttered. “Nonetheless, what may I do for you?”

He was watching her adjustments in amusement. “Kele, we’re happy to have the tree, but it’s spreading so much that I’m afraid it will crowd out my Steward and Administrator, who need this room to work in.”

“Oh, that’s no problem, dear Efran.” Turning to gesture to the thick trunk, she said, “Skinny up! You’re taking up too much room! Come now.” Like a fat man sucking in his gut, the tree then hefted its bulk upward, branches spreading more thickly along the ceiling and through it.

The tree shrugged downward as well, like the same fat man pushing down tight pants. The bulk then passed through the first floor down into the roots penetrating the cavern rock below. DeWitt and Estes paused in their work to watch the girth of the tree diminish by almost half.

“There, now,” Kele said. “If it gets to be a problem again in future, just remind it that trees grow *upward*.”

“Thank you, Kele,” Efran laughed. He opened the book again, and his administrators resumed their work.

On the back grounds, the children had just been released from class for a playtime break. As the nine of them—Toby, Noah, Ivy, Alcmund, Beischel, Chorro, Elwell, Hassie, and Jera—streamed onto the grounds, some went to their toy shed for sticks, balls, or hoops, and some went to the gardens. But Toby, Alcmund, and Hassie came over to talk to Minka and play with Nakam. This he welcomed, rearing up on his hind legs to bat at their hands with his forepaws or catch teasing fingers in his teeth.

“How is school?” Minka asked.

They shrugged; Toby noted, “I’m on the third reader.”

“Already? You can’t be!” Minka marveled.

Almund said, “I’m about to finish the second.”

And Hassie said, “Me, too. It’s not hard if you just do it.”

“Oh, I’m so proud of you. I’ll be sure to tell Efran,” Minka said.

“What is his name?” Hassie asked, stroking the dog’s silky hair.

“Nakam. It means something, only I can’t remember what,” Minka said, brows drawing down.

“Ripe grapes!” Elwell called from the back fence, so children darted from every direction to the massive grapevine threading through the back fence from the southwestern corner. It was ridiculous for it to be bearing in early January, but the Sea made every season balmy, so plants did as they liked—especially this one, which was a gift of Barthelemon from the barge.

And Minka took Nakam back into the fortress to find Efran.

At that time, Adele was ushered into the drawing room of a nobleman’s estate, Viotto, in Crescent Hollow. Two men stood to meet her. “Ugh, it’s so cold here. And snow! This is ridiculous,” she grouched.

The man directly in front of her laughed lightly. “Dear lady, it’s winter. All of us must wait till May for warm weather.”

“Well, then, I’m here,” she said, tossing off a luxurious wrap. “And was it your man who so rudely waylaid my carriage the moment we entered the city?”

“I apologize, my lady, but I was most anxious to meet you. I am Lord Showalter,” he said with a bow. As a servant put a brandy into her hand, she studied the lord: old, white-haired, fragile—but very well dressed. “Bring in the hors d’oeuvres now, please,” he murmured to the servant, who bowed.

Showalter returned to Adele to say, “I believe you are acquainted with my other guest, Lord Alberon.”

She looked at the second man quickly, then laughed, “Alberon! You look almost human. What did Efran do to you?”

“Just a disguise, so as not to draw undue attention, dear Adele,” he replied. The elven features were completely muted in his human appearance. And his signet ring was gone. All that he retained of what Minka had seen was the flowing black hair. “We should do something about the bags under your eyes,” he noted. She bared her teeth at him in the pretense of a smile.

“Here, friends, please be seated. We’ve much to discuss,” Showalter said, gesturing, and the three sat with their drinks. “Well,” Showalter began on a note of high good humor, “with ‘Webbe the Destructor’ having deposed

Reinagle as Surchatain of Eurus, we are free to concentrate on our objectives. We shall—”

“What?” Adele interrupted. “Reinagle? That—old man, that—worthless hanger-on was *Surchatain*?”

“Yes, dear,” Showalter laughed, “for a *very* brief time, and is now irrelevant to us. Adele, you and Alberon have a great deal in common, given your experiences with the Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, who is the subject of our meeting.”

“What do you want with him?” Adele had recovered to smile into her brandy.

“Let me pose that question to you first, dear,” Showalter said. “What do *you* want of him?”

“I want to break him into a thousand tiny pieces. I want to see him suffer, cry, and lie groveling at my feet,” she said softly.

“I see.” Showalter turned to his other guest. “You had some thoughts regarding the Abbey, Lord Alberon.”

“Yes,” Alberon said, placing his snifter on a small enameled table. “The Abbey Treasury is ridiculously easy to access. It’s up a stairway from a hidden room off the library. The key to open the door is usually kept on top of a book in that room. The guards are mostly children. The complacency is absurd.” He was grimacing in sardonic humor, stroking his chin with long fingernails.

“So,” Adele said, fixing Showalter with her blue eyes. “I want Efran; Alberon wants the Treasury. What do you want?”

“Power, my dear,” Showalter said. “There is power in their little hill of which the lord is only vaguely aware. I know how to appropriate it.”

Alberon studied Showalter. “That must be Toqev. And how did you discover this power?”

“Through great effort and sacrifice, my friend,” Showalter said with a smile. “As matters stand, none of us is sufficient alone to get what we want from the Abbey Fortress—but united, we will achieve our desires.”

“I envy your certainty,” Alberon said with a touch of bitterness.

Showalter stood to lovingly regard a bookshelf full of ancient volumes. “I have been researching the Abbey Fortress and hill for many years, dear friend,” Showalter said, caressing a book on Barthelemon. “Many, *many* years.”

Alberon laughed, “It was vacant for many years, friend. Why did you not simply walk in then?”

Showalter turned in mild exasperation. “Due to the tiny detail of a bequest and a charter, without which the power is inaccessible. I had to wait for this—hedonistic Polonti soldier to accidentally fall into legal ownership of the hill. It has been amazing to watch his ignorant, haphazard use of the greatest resource on the Continent. And he still doesn’t understand what he’s sitting on.” Showalter shook his head in mild wonder.

He looked down at his companions. “But the time has come, friends, to relieve him of this burden. We shall begin operations immediately.” He sat again, elbows on his knees, to confer with his new allies.

Nakham, still leaning on the fence overlooking the Sea, had his head raised as though listening. Then he smiled wryly, nodded, and walked back into the fortress. He climbed the stairs to the second floor and went down the corridor to the workroom. Estes, DeWitt, and Efran looked up; Minka self-consciously got off Efran's lap to check on Joshua under the table with the dog.

Nakham said, "Might I have a word with you, friends?"

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Chapter 8

"Yes, what can we do for you, Nakham?" Efran asked easily.

"Well, sir, I'm remembering some talk I heard on the road. People talk around me, you know; I'm of no account. But a very lovely blonde lady was talking with a rather slippery fellow with long black hair about your Treasury. Yeah, they seem to think they have a way into it, so you might admit them with caution," Nakham said.

Mildly startled, Efran said, "I see. Thank you for the warning."

"Well, then, I'll be on my way," Nakham replied.

"Don't leave!" Minka said anxiously.

"Child, haven't I always been on hand when you needed me?" he said with a lopsided smile. "But as I was about to tell the lord here, you'd be well-served to study the book on Barthelemon."

"The one that Ryal compiled?" Efran asked.

"Yes," Nakham said.

"I will do that," Efran said, with a heavy glance at Estes.

"Good. I'll be by again," Nakham said, turning out. No one saw him leave the fortress. No one noticed that his walking stick was still by the steps.

The group sat quietly for a few minutes. DeWitt finally said, "Is he genuine?"

Efran, elbows resting on the table, ran a hand through his hair and looked at Minka. "The first time you met him was at Amesbury's estate?"

"If you can call it that," she murmured. "After Amesbury had whipped me, and everyone laughed at me, I ran out into the road in front of an oncoming carriage. There was—it seemed like—a burst of wind that blew me out of the way of the horses, and I heard someone say, 'That won't make you feel better. Just wait and you'll see him whipped.' And then I saw wild orchids by the side of the road, and I walked along picking them until Father's man came to get me and Adele."

She looked at Efran. “Then after the Commander’s blinding, when I ran out to the river, I heard him say, ‘The chickens want out; they’re hungry.’ I didn’t even remember that there had been a voice until today.”

“How did you know his name?” Efran asked.

She squinted in thought, looking to the side. “He told me. He said, ‘I am Comfort’—as if it were a label. But it came out sounding like, ‘Nakkim.’” She raised her shoulders. “I’m fairly sure he spoke to me at other times, but, I can’t remember. And this is the first time I’ve seen him.”

Efran sat up, inhaling, to look at his administrators. DeWitt said, “Regardless who he is or how much of what he says is true, we need to start doing some things differently.”

“Yes.” Efran looked back to Minka. “Go get the key to the Treasury and *hide it*. Also, please bring me the book on Barthelemon.”

“Yes.” She stood, but he rose to stop her and kiss her forehead. She smiled at him, then went out.

Turning back to his administrators, he murmured, “I’m wondering what it will take to stop Adele.” Pondering this, Efran summoned Seagrave to put him in charge of all wall gate and courtyard gate sentries for the upcoming week. And Efran told him what to tell the sentries to do if Adele appeared at the gates, or anyone they suspected to be her. Also, he instructed Seagrave to start pairing experienced guards with the young ones—something that they all agreed should have been done to start with.

By the time Minka returned with the book, the administrators had settled on tightening other security measures, then Efran said, “All this is not going to prevent their attack, you know. I’m only hoping to buy time until we can figure out what to do.” And he replaced the *Life of King Alfred* in his back pocket.

“Right,” DeWitt conceded. But Estes paused upon remembering something.

Efran accepted the book that Minka held out to him before he pulled her back down to his lap. Nakam went back under the table to play with Joshua. Efran opened the book to look at the comprehensive title on the first page: *The Warnings of Barthelemon of Occitania and How They Were Used by Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, to Save the Fortress from the Destroyer on August the Fourth of the Year 8154 from the Creation of the World*. He had read parts of this book thoroughly just a month ago, when they were dealing with the Goulven crisis. Now, not knowing what he was looking for, he needed to read it all again. So he opened it to start at the beginning.

Estes went out to talk to one of the men while DeWitt went back to work. For the next hour there was relative quiet, the only noises being that of papers rustling, Joshua laughing, and Nakam snapping under the table. Minka, her head on Efran’s shoulder, watched his chest rise and fall while he held her on his left arm, holding the book with his right hand. She listened to the steady beat of his heart, wondering why she kept remembering these childhood wounds, and how many of them she had locked away. But Efran’s heartbeat was like balm just to hear.

As Estes reentered the workroom, Efran suddenly stood, dropping her to her feet. Estes and DeWitt watched as Efran read out loud: “‘Barthelemon also secured from the lord of the Fortress the name of the angel of the hill, which served the lord who knew his name. That name may not be repeated in these pages, for it is only revealed to the lord of the Fortress in his charter. And to secure the cooperation of the angel of the hill, the owner or owners of the Fortress and the charter must go into the hill to address the angel by name and request his assistance.’”

Efran looked up in shock. “I never remember seeing that at all.”

Estes said, “Let me get the charter.”

They waited silently while Estes went to his files. He searched for a minute before bringing out a parchment which he laid on the table to peruse quietly. Then he read: “The guardian of the hill is *El Togev*.” And he looked up at them. “I don’t remember that either.”

His face pale, Efran laid the book on the table, glancing around. Then he looked down at Minka. “You are co-owner. We must go down at once to address the angel.”

“Where? How?” she asked.

He wiped his sweating lip. “The weak spot—the hole I dropped down through—after we got out, the men put a barricade around it. We’ll have them lower us onto the shelf. Come, we need to do that immediately.”

“But—” She gestured to the table, under which Joshua and Nakam were play fighting.

Efran said, “Yes, put your little friend in our room; I’ll take Joshua to the nursery. He needs his bottle by now, anyway.”

So Minka turned out of the room with one baby while Efran took the other, then he summoned a half-dozen men with rope and torches to the northwestern hilltop, aglow with sunset. It was cool in the twilight, so Minka put on her new shawl from Flodie’s.

Efran met her in the courtyard and took her hand to lead her out the gates to where the men and lights were gathered around the barricade. Drawing up, Efran looked down in the dark hole, then said, “All right, drop a torch down.”

One of the men leaned over to do that, and they watched it land on the shelf about nine feet below. It rolled a few feet, but continued to burn. “Good,” Efran said. “Rope.” They handed him the coil, which he knotted into a loop on one end. This he tossed down into the hole until the loop hit the shelf. “Hold it,” he said, handing the rope to Stephanos.

Three men, anchored by Stephanos, gripped the rope while Efran slid off the edge, twining his foot around the rope as he lowered himself to the shelf. Looking around, he braced a hand on the wall to unwind the rope from around his lower leg. Then he looked up to say, “Pull it back up and lower the lady.”

While they were putting the loop on her foot, Efran moved the torch to burn in the shallow indentation of the wall which had been Adele’s alcove. There, it gave light without impeding his sight of what was in front of him. Following, he looked up, reaching for Minka’s legs as she was lowered. She leaned on him while he took the rope off her foot, then he looked up to say, “Stand by.”

“Yes, Captain.” “Yes, sir,” several voices replied. The rope was left dangling on the ledge.

Gripping Minka’s hand, Efran turned to the cavern expanse before them. “There’s no set wording, so just—repeat what I say in your own way,” he whispered, and she nodded.

Then he said aloud, “I am Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands by bequest and charter. I

implore the aid of El Toqev, who serves the God of heaven. We—desire your help, especially when we don't know we are in danger and we don't know what to do.”

When a long pause indicated that he was done, Minka said in a slightly quavering voice, “I am Minka, Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands by bequest and charter. I also ask the assistance of El Toqev to serve the God of heaven, especially when we don't deserve it.” They waited, holding hands tightly, to see if there would be any acknowledgment, or . . . rejection.

Then a gust arose in the cavern that pushed them back a step, almost extinguishing the torch. And a voice that made them tremble said, “*El Toqev, servant of the Great One, has heard the requests of the Lord and Lady Sovereigns of the Hill, and consents to their aid.*”

Efran gripped Minka tightly, and she buried herself in him. “Thank you,” he breathed. “We both thank you.”

The presence withdrew; the torch resumed its brightness, and the two humans stood breathing in each other's arms. “Captain?” someone called from above.

“Yes, we're done,” Efran called up. As he walked her back to the rope, he muttered, “I need to finish reading that book tonight. Why did it take me so long to read the whole thing?”

“We didn't know,” she whispered. “There's so much about this place we don't know.”

He bent to insert her foot into the loop, then looked up. “The lady is ready to come up.”

“Yes, sir!” Stephanos called down. Efran guided her lightly as she was drawn up, then watched the rope being lowered again for him.

Efran took the rope, then picked up the burning torch to toss it over the ledge. He waited for it to fall forty feet, so that the cavern went black again but for the circle of torchlight above his head. Raising his face, he said, “Hold it; I'm coming up.”

Jumping up to catch the rope high, he raised his knees to clamp it between his feet, then stood on the rope, bringing himself almost up to the opening. Doing that once more brought him out to sit on the edge of the hole, where he untangled his feet.

Standing, he said, “All right. Thank you, gentlemen. Knot this rope, please, and anchor it outside the hole in case I need to get down there again. Leave a torch burning here as well. Replace the barricade, then get you into dinner.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Efran took Minka's arm to walk her back to the courtyard.

Estes and DeWitt met him in the foyer. “Well?” DeWitt demanded.

“Yes,” Efran exhaled. “We made the request, and the angel responded, as you can tell by the fact that I am still shaking.”

“Amazing,” DeWitt whispered. “That's confirmation enough of Nakham's authenticity.”

Efran nodded and Minka squeezed his arm. Estes said, “Before you go to dinner, I need to show you and DeWitt an additional Treasury safeguard. You too, Minka. Connor helped me with it.”

“Lead on,” Efran said, then paused. “How many men know about the Treasury?”

“A dozen?” Estes said on their way to the library. “All men who came with me to support you when Adele attacked with Loizeaux’s thousands.”

“Good,” Efran breathed as Minka wiped her watering eyes.

“Now, then.” Estes turned into the library, closing the door after DeWitt, Efran and Minka. Here, lanterns were kept burning day and night for those who wanted to look around. But finding any particular book was difficult. “I thought of this a week ago, then forgot about it until Nakham’s warning today.” Estes walked over to the bookshelf that opened as a doorway to the hidden room.

Pointing to the scallop that triggered the door when pressed, Estes said, “See the tiny shim in the crevice? It prevents the scallop from depressing, which prevents the doorway from opening.” He demonstrated by pushing on the scallop, which remained firm. And the bookshelf stood still like all the others.

“Oh. Have I mistaken which one is the trigger?” Estes went on, mimicking a would-be thief. He pressed one scallop after another, all immovable. “Oh. Have I mistaken which shelf rotates?”

“Excellent,” Efran said as DeWitt nodded and Minka looked on in admiration. “The shim is practically invisible. I hope it can be removed,” Efran added.

“Yes, pried out with a blade. Connor tested it,” Estes said.

Efran chuckled, “So simple, so maddening. Very good. You two go on to dinner; we’ll be in shortly.”

“Yes, wives are waiting,” DeWitt said, smiling at Minka. She smiled full-heartedly back.

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Chapter 9

Alone in the library, Minka held Efran to murmur, “We were being defended before we ever knew there was a threat.”

“Yes, so it must be serious.” He paused. “Do you ever get the feeling that—something more is here?”

“Often,” she said.

He exhaled, nodding. “You go on to the dining hall before our table fills up; I’ll go get Joshua.”

“All right.” As she turned out of the library, she glanced back at him shaking his head.

“Books,” he was muttering. “Read the books.”

Despite the fact that the following day (January 4th) was Dominica, the Lord’s day, there was a fair amount of traffic going in and out of the Lands. Because the Goulven crisis had passed, the gate guards no longer demanded visitors to partially disrobe to be checked for bites. So it was quite easy for one invisible figure to slip past the wall gates alongside a cart.

He made his way on foot up Main, taking impish pleasure in startling horses by means of an invisible flick to their noses. But when one horse he had flicked kicked him upon passing, he stopped doing it, limping up the switchback.

At the courtyard gates he had to wait a long time for someone to approach for whom the gates would be opened. This disturbed Alberon somewhat, for his power was no longer sufficient to keep him concealed for however long he wished; he had only a matter of hours to get done what he needed to do.

But at last the miller drove his cart up with bags of wheat flour for the fortress kitchen, as he did daily. (Because the cart was so large, the miller found it easier to bring it up to the main gates instead of the kitchen gate.) Alberon went to stand directly behind the cart to follow it closely through the gates. That worked well until the stupid young guard drew the gates shut sharply upon the cart’s entrance, so that they slammed into Alberon’s backside. That was bad enough, but worse was the guard’s noticing the hindrance and solving it by slamming the gates harder, causing Alberon to cry out.

At this, the guard dropped to look under the cart, but Alberon had leapt into it to rebound off a bag of flour and run up to the open door of the fortress, inadvertently knocking aside a kitchen helper who had come out to unload the cart. Meanwhile, both gate guards were looking at the sudden imprint of soles on the topmost bag of flour, and the white footprints that led from the cart until fading several feet from the steps to the fortress doors.

Safely in the foyer, Alberon paused to catch his breath, then quietly made his way to the corridor. As he was passing the keep, a soldier standing at the lectern was reading, ““Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight; everything is uncovered and exposed before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”” [Heb. 4:13]

Alberon paid no attention to this until he chanced to look down and see his blue suit, indicating that he was suddenly visible. Almost panicking, he invoked the words of invisibility again as he ran out of the foyer into the corridor, causing the door sentry to blink in confusion. When Alberon looked down again to see himself cloaked, he breathed out in relief.

This endeavor was proving to be a shade more complicated than he had anticipated. At his full power it would have been child’s play, except that by Faerie Law he had been prevented from such actions as a resident of the Lands. This he resented. But no matter: on to the Treasury. He had brought a charmed sack in which to carry gold; the sack and everything in it would remain invisible as long as he was touching it. So he slipped past the open door of the library.

At this time, Seagrave was upstairs reporting to Efran, “—and the courtyard gate guards showed me footprints on a bag of flour in the miller’s cart, and white footprints leading away from the cart toward the doors. It really looks as though we have an invisible intruder, Captain.”

Efran glanced at DeWitt and Estes, who were listening attentively. All three were contemplating the fact that acting *at once* on the warning they had received turned out to be barely in time. Efran told Seagrave, “Post at

least one man at the door of the library. Leave it open, but have him block it.”

“Yes, Captain.” Seagrave saluted, then went down to replace Arne with another man on the back door in order to bring him to the library door, which he filled completely.

In the back of the library, Alberon did not notice the obstruction at the open door right away. He was deeply absorbed in the scallops decorating the left edge of a bookshelf in the shadowy corner. “I was sure it was the tenth from the top,” he murmured to himself. “I counted whenever they went in.” He finally resorted to carefully pressing every scallop along the left edge of the shelf, then along the right. Then he moved to do the same to the bookshelf next to it.

At length he glanced around in frustration, which is when he saw the great hulking soldier standing in the doorway, his back to the room’s interior. Alberon, to his credit, did not panic. “Idiots,” he murmured. “Large, stupid children.”

Turning back to the uncooperative bookshelf, Alberon thought, *Efran thinks to thwart me with a blocking spell on the door to the hidden room. Idiot.* Whereupon he raised a hand, gestured to encompass the bookshelf, closed his eyes, and uttered a word of power along with the command, “Open.” The bookshelf did minimally shift, which was all it could do, being blocked with a shim. This Alberon did not see for his eyes being closed.

His eyes sprang open, however, when all of the books on that shelf sprang out in obedience to the command and fell open upon the floor. Arne turned at the frantic flapping of pages, perceiving that—as he had been warned was possible—there was an invisible intruder within. So he puckered to begin whistling “Got No Time for Fools” as a warning and a summons.

In response, two young Polonti, Chilcott and Tomer, came abreast of him, but couldn’t see around his bulk. “What is it?” Chilcott asked, trying to see over his shoulder while Tomer got down on the floor to look through his legs.

“Watch,” Arne said.

“There! Books are moving!” Tomer said from the floor. He squeezed through Arne’s legs to begin sweeping through the room with arms outstretched. “Got something!” he cried, one hand flailing along with its invisible catch.

All at once a huge bear stood over the boy to roar, so that Arne and Chilcott began trying to squeeze into the room at the same time. Meanwhile, Tomer wheeled to seize the sword of Ares and hold it with both hands, eyes glinting, to face the bear. The beast paused as the other two finally broke out of the doorway, then it suddenly disappeared. The three looked stunned for a minute, until Chilcott fixed on a small body scampering to the door. “Mouse!” he cried.

The three of them rushed the door of the library. Since they couldn’t all exit at once, they stuck their heads out to see the mouse running up the corridor toward the foyer. Then it turned quickly at the influx of soldiers to begin skittering in the opposite direction toward the back door. “Mouse!” Chilcott cried. “Stop the mouse!”

The soldiers looked perplexed, but Nakam, at Minka’s feet as she emerged from her quarters, sprang to pursue the rodent. Soldiers all down the corridor stepped out of his way as he closed in on his prey. Chilcott and Arne spilled out of the doorway, but Tomer looked back into the library. Shortly, he came out with a large, empty sack of a strange weave. This he took upstairs to the Captain.

Nakam almost had his jaws on the mouse when a servant, unaware, came in the back door. The mouse slipped out around him, but the man, seeing only that the Lady's dog was about to run off, caught him. Nakam writhed and bit his hand, securing his release to continue the chase on the back grounds.

Soldiers poured out of the back door to watch Nakam fly in joy toward the intruder, whose trail was marked by the disruption of the grass as the dog drew closer by inches. Passing the sparring groups who watched in amusement, the mouse found salvation in the upcoming fence.

While the little dog could pass through the balusters as well as the mouse, Marlett had put chicken wire over the lower portion of this section to avoid losing so many hens to the predators in the woods. So the mouse got through the wire while Nakam was stopped cold, barking in fury.

But Alberon was not out of the woods yet. He stopped to catch his breath, changing into a squirrel while he was at it, but Pia, the Polonti wild child, came running up. Fixing at once on the intruder, she pointed at it, crying, "*Hoopuni!* [trickster, fraud] Catch it!"

Her Polonti attendants were on it at once, and Alberon the squirrel startled at a slung rock that barely missed him. He began running again as fast as he could go. His immediate objective was to get out of her woods, so he ran due north. Nakam, watching from behind the iron fence, ran north as well. The chicken wire extended only so far.

Emerging from the woods, Alberon the squirrel found himself on rocky ground that impeded him while he was being pursued by Polonti and canine. When Nakam was upon him again, Alberon became an adder, rearing before him with jaws open wide. The dog backed off, barking, but another slung rock hit the snake on his belly.

Writhing in pain, he slipped under a barricade to fall nine feet onto a ledge. As men looked down into the hole, Alberon, knowing where he was, changed into a fish and slipped off the ledge into the cavern waters forty feet below.

He swam for quite a while, until finding another ledge in the darkness, close to the water. This was deep in the hill, far from any possible reach of the humans. Changing back into faerie, he crawled up on the ledge to rest, putting a hand to his side where the rock had struck him.

"That did not go exactly as planned," he breathed. "But no matter. This is an excellent place to hide; they can't get to me here, and I have only to wait a while, until they have pulled the guards, and the fortress is asleep. . . ."

In his almost-human exhaustion, he was about to drift off when he became aware of another presence in the cavern. He sprang up trembling, his senses almost crushed under the power of the being that rose up before him. "Who—who—?" he gasped.

At once, Alberon found himself standing upright in dim light, dressed in glorious kingly robes of silk, silver and gold. A heavy gold crown rested upon his brow. He stood pinned in place by the weight not just of the crown, but the voluminous robes that bore down on his left arm and the staff that anchored his right. He could not turn his head, nor could he raise either hand to call up faerie magic. But he could see the diminutive faeries flow before him from the left to the right, each saying as they passed, "Hail, King Alberon."

"Stop. I command you to stop and get me down," he said.

"Hail, King Alberon. You are our Standing Godling; you may not get down," they said in passing.

“No, I am your king! I command your obedience!” His brow was wet with humanlike sweat.

“Hail, King Alberon. You are our Standing Godling; you command no one,” they said, and he looked over the dark, vast recesses of his living tomb.

At that time, two tiny creatures that had been sleeping in his hair, undisturbed by his frantic flight or his frequent transformations, awoke. Finding themselves in the favorable conditions of the dark, wet, spacious caverns, they crawled out of his hair and began to procreate.

Far above, standing by the barricade around the hole, Efran was holding Nakam, now quiet on his arm. The Polonti around him were talking excitedly; Arne was trying to make them be quiet so he could tell his part of it, which Efran had already heard. He was waiting for Lorient to make his way up the switchback and over to the barricade. Because Efran had summoned him up here.

When Lorient arrived, Efran told him, “No one can see the intruder down there. I want to know if you sense his presence in the caverns. I want to know if he’s a threat to us down there.”

Lorient, frowning, looked down into the hole, and stood as though listening. The others were quiet in respect. “Yes, he is down there, deep down. But—I do not sense movement. Only, I hear, ‘Hail, King Alberon.’ And that repeated often, with other words I don’t understand—‘Standing godling’? This is new to me.”

Efran’s face cleared, and he breathed, “Ho, that is interesting. No, if that’s what you hear, then I don’t believe he can do much.” *El Toqev at work*, he thought.

“No, Captain. There is great power in the hill, but not from him,” Lorient said, drawing back.

“Go get you dinner. Everyone, as you were,” Efran said. He looked up at Minka anxiously waiting in the courtyard, as he had prohibited her from coming out on the treacherous hillside. So he began carrying Nakam over to her.

When he reached her, she took the dog in one arm and pulled him down to her with the other. “What? Who was it? What happened?” she demanded in one breath.

“I will pretend to be Kele and give you a clue,” he said, placing an arm around her to walk her to the fortress steps. “Does this sound familiar?—‘Hail, King Alberon, Standing Godling.’”

“Ohhh—are you serious? Or are you playing with me?” she asked suspiciously.

“That’s what Lorient says he heard. If you think he’s joking, go take it up with him,” Efran said righteously.

“Ohhh,” she breathed again.

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Chapter 10

The next day, January 5th, Efran asked Kele to look at the sack that Alberon had abandoned in the library. She came at once; regarding it with a glance, she said, “Oh.”

“‘Oh’?” Efran repeated. DeWitt and Estes, deep in their daily toil, were nonetheless listening. DeWitt had borrowed Koschat for the day, finding him a formidable slayer of numbers.

“Oh, it’s definitely of faerie origin, but it certainly can’t have been used by any of us here, for it is a cloaked bag, which is forbidden in human domains,” she said offhandedly.

“‘Cloaked’?” Efran repeated. “As in ‘hidden’?”

“Yes, it’s invisible when attached to the hand of its bearer,” she replied.

“And who was its most recent bearer?” he asked.

“Alberon,” she admitted, eyes down. “But he has been deposed and rendered—ineffective,” she said with a touch of anxiety.

“As we’ve heard. All right, thank you, Kele,” he said, careful not to dismiss her.

“You are most welcome, Efran,” she said, and departed on her own.

In Crescent Hollow, Lord Showalter was leaning back in his sumptuous leather chair, regarding his library of obscure books. “Very interesting,” he murmured. “Alberon has not penetrated the Treasury, but is deep in the hill . . . hiding? Waiting? Or . . . trapped?” He contemplated this, then smiled. “Nonetheless, he is still there, and if they think to have secured him, that is all right as well.”

He stood to pour himself another drink from the cut-glass decanter. “Well. Adele will arrive shortly at the Abbey Lands with her part to play. And she knows Efran’s weakness better than anyone. The deep, fatal weakness of the conscientious. . . .”

Settling back in the comfortable chair, he raised the glass to his lips, peering intently at the unseen. “What’s this?” He sat up abruptly. “Efran has spoken to Toqev? Oh, that is . . . excellent.” Breathing deeply in satisfaction, he sipped the superior vintage through smiling lips.

En route from Crescent Hollow to the Lands, Adele lay back on the deeply cushioned carriage seat with a heavy sigh. She hated making long trips by herself, when there was little to distract her from her own thoughts. And she had a lot of thinking to do today.

Showalter was certainly wealthy and focused—traits she appreciated in men—but his aims were not hers, and she would not suffer being a tool in someone else’s scheme. His talk about “Toqev” was mad, frankly; she would not abide it. She did not care if there really were a spirit in the hill that was available for hire. Unless it would get Efran for her, she wasn’t interested.

She loved Efran, always had, and realized too late that he had been open to loving her at the very beginning.

When had he turned? Upon his imminent hanging, when Sybil had thrown childish fits while Adele herself was talking her father out of it? Or afterward, when he was taking care of Sybil in her illness, and then warding her? Yes, that was a mistake: Adele should have made him her husband that day instead of Sybil's guardian. But she hadn't discerned the balance tilting. . . .

It was certain that Showalter intended to kill him and then marry Sybil in order to obtain control of the bequest. This did not suit Adele; she wanted Efran alive. She waved away her own frequent efforts to kill him, knowing they were empty threats—anything to get his undivided attention. At any rate, she certainly wasn't going to allow anyone else the privilege. But she must gain his cooperation to save his life, so the first step had to be talking to him, telling him about Showalter. She laughed wryly at the unheard-of tactic: to go to Efran with the truth. It would certainly wreck Showalter's plan, and she was fine with that.

Mid-afternoon of that same day, a gorgeous carriage of deep green trimmed in gold pulled up to the Abbey Lands wall gates. The sentries Doudney and Detler, highly experienced veterans of Captain Efran's Red Regiment, deployed the Captain's instructions at once. While Detler let in tourists, travelers, and workmen, Doudney held up a hand to the carriage's liveried driver and called, "Who're you carrying?"

"A lady of import, my good man," the driver replied stiffly. His large footman looked on aloofly, not quite contemptuous yet. But he had to bat at the faerie tree branches poking at both of them with inquisitive twigs.

"Very good. If you would be so kind, pull over to the side here while we see to lesser mortals," Doudney said without cracking a smile. While the driver reluctantly guided the carriage off the road (out of reach of the faerie trees), Doudney whispered to the gate messenger, Finn, who turned his horse to ride up Main and from there to the switchback.

A few minutes later, Finn was standing at Efran's side on the second-floor balcony (above and to the east of the courtyard balcony). They were looking down Main to the gates, and the carriage that was just visible off the road. "That style of carriage is popular among Crescent Hollow elites. And how did the driver describe his passenger?" Efran asked.

"A lady of import," Finn said, sniffing in imitation.

Efran smiled slightly. "Until she shows herself, leave her sitting there. If she demands food, drink or fodder, send someone from Croft's who would recognize Adele. And make her pay in advance."

"Yes, Captain." Finn saluted, and Efran nodded his dismissal.

Finn returned to the gates with these instructions, which Detler and Doudney executed by carrying on as they were. Everyone was let in or out while the lady's carriage sat by the side of the road.

An hour later, the driver called, "Hiya! How is it a woman of rank is left on the road like a beggar? Let her in!"

"Who're you carrying?" Detler repeated, opening the gate for the fortress children and their bodyguards to return from their play hut. Toby and Tarrant, leading the rest of the children, pulled them away from trying to peek in the carriage window.

At a word from the driver, the footman climbed down to speak to the carriage occupant through the window. The footman then remounted the elevated seat to whisper to the driver, who called to Detler, "This is the Lady Dearer of Crescent Hollow."

“Excellent. Let her show herself,” Detler said.

So the footman descended again to speak into the carriage window, and the passenger’s indignant reply could be heard by almost everyone at the gates. The footman reclaimed his seat beside the driver to whisper to him again, and the driver huffed to Detler, “The Lady Dearle declines to debase herself for the entertainment of gatesmen.”

“As is the lady’s prerogative,” Detler acknowledged. Meanwhile, the gates remained shut to her carriage. Efran sat reading in the workroom. He was about three-quarters of the way through Ryal’s book on Barthelemon, as he was reading carefully, without skipping anything except the section on Goulven.

A half-hour later, the carriage door flew open and Adele stepped out to stand before the gates, slapping away the teasing branches. “Here I am. You will want to let me in because I have some very important information for Efran.”

Doudney regarded her lazily. “Huh. Pleased to meet you, Lady Dearle. It’s your misfortune to look so much like a lady that has been banned from the Lands.” He gestured to Finn, who mounted to ride back up to the fortress. Meanwhile, Detler whispered to another man, who ran off toward Barracks #3.

Adele closed her eyes in momentary impatience, then said, “Very well. If Efran is too cowardly to face me for his own good, then send Sybil down.”

“No one here by that name,” Doudney said, shaking his head. “Sorry.”

“Well then, send down Min-KA,” Adele snapped, reverting to her sarcastic pronunciation of her sister’s chosen name.

“Sorry, she’s busy,” Doudney said around a yawn.

At that time, Efran was pensively closing the book on Barthelemon. “Interesting,” he murmured. “I’ll have to check with Ryal on that.” He looked under the table, then, to see his son and Minka’s dog curled up together asleep. “Huh,” he noted, then looked up to the sentry at the door. “Find my wife, please. I need to step out for a moment.” The man saluted, moving off, and Efran turned to finger the book cover again.

Meanwhile, at the wall gates, Doudney asked Detler, “Aren’t we due for replacements soon?” Adele was still at the gates, expecting to enter any moment now.

“Yes, in fact, they should be down straightaway,” Detler said.

“Oh, good, I’m hungry,” Doudney said. “What’s on the menu tonight?”

Detler said lightly, “Depends on your fancy. Venison steak, fried trout, tender rabbit—”

“Rabbit? Not hare?” Doudney demanded.

“Nope, rabbit. Mohr found the fluffle that’s been raiding the garden, so they’re stew tonight,” Detler averred. “Braised in red wine with nutmeg and saffron first, of course.”

Doudney was replying when Adele cried, “Shut up! Just get someone down here to take a message to Efran!”

At that moment, responding to a messenger, Lorient came walking toward the gates. Seeing him, Adele relaxed. “Well, finally. Hello, darling. What have you got there?” she said, referring to a paper he carried.

Approaching the gates, he held the paper through the balusters to her. She took it eagerly, opening it. “Why—it’s just a divorce decree.”

“Yes,” he said, turning away again. Delivering the notice to her was the final step in effecting their divorce. And he had sworn to never pay attention to his dreams again.

She tore it up impatiently, then said, “Lorient! Wait!” He turned back inquiringly. “I need you to take a message to Efran,” she instructed.

He lifted his craggy face, almost laughing, then walked away while she screamed at him.

Suddenly she stopped screaming to look with exaltation toward the courtyard gates, and everyone turned to see them open. Even at this distance, they discerned Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, begin leisurely loping a black horse down the switchback. He rode straight-backed, with grace, as always, but his face was down, so that no one could discern his destination.

But Adele breathed, “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

And they all watched Efran turn off the switchback to stop immediately at Ryal’s. He dismounted, tethered his horse, and went into the notary’s shop. Adele began seething again.

At that time, Jehan and Coish rode up to the wall gates, fully apprised of their responsibilities as gatesmen tonight. The young Polonti dismounted, turning over their horses to the old guard who were going off-duty. “You’ll enjoy dinner,” Jehan said, handing his reins to Doudney.

“Ah. What’s the best dish tonight?” Doudney asked.

Jehan said, “Venison” while Coish said “Rabbit” at the same moment. They looked at each other in surprise.

“Since when do you care for rabbit?” Jehan demanded.

“I’ve never tasted any like the fortress kitchen does it,” Coish avowed. “But venison all the time gets old; it’s on the table every day.” While they argued between themselves, Detler patted Coish on the shoulder, then he and Doudney rode up to discover for themselves the highlights of dinner. Meanwhile, twilight was approaching.

Leaning on the gate, Adele sighed, “All right. Shut up and let me in.”

The young Polonti looked at her in surprise. After studying her a moment, Jehan said, “You were here before.”

She raised her face. “Yes, dear, and I need to come in again to speak with your Captain,” she said as to a child.

Coish was silent as Jehan looked at her in deep consideration. She waited patiently in expectation. Then he asked, “What do you like: venison or rabbit?”

As she screamed at him, Coish poked him. “You know better than to ask her that. Women are *loco*.”

At this moment, Efran was leaning on the notary’s counter with Ryal and Giardi standing behind it. Efran said, “I

finished your book on Barthelemon. It was very well written; very informative. Looking at your sources in the back, I saw that you gleaned a great deal from a Lord Showalter of Crescent Hollow. Tell me about him.”

“I don’t know him personally; have only talked to him once,” Ryal said. “I’m glad you enjoyed the book, by the way. But, when I started researching, I discovered that this Showalter is considered the premiere authority on Barthelemon. I did not include all of his material, only what I could independently verify.”

“Why so cautious?” Efran asked.

Ryal hesitated, then asked Giardi, “Please go get the three Showalter books on the second shelf—yes, on the left there.” Then he turned back to Efran to say, “He holds some rather fantastic ideas about the rôle of Barthelemon and the legacy of the Fortress hill. Thank you,” he said to Giardi, receiving the small leather-bound volumes. These he put before Efran. “I think you should read these as well.”

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Chapter 11

Efran picked up one of Showalter’s books. “Nicely bound.” The slim volumes were titled, *The Secret Places of the Abbey Hill*, *Barthelemon and the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea*, and *The Mystery of the Fortress Hill*.

Ryal nodded. “He’s quite wealthy.”

“Did he ever attempt to claim the bequest?” Efran asked unexpectedly.

After a pause, Ryal said, “Yes, about—twenty years ago. But his plans for an orphanage were highly theoretical; I saw no love of children in his manner or his worldview. He clearly had designs that were not—consonant with the bequest nor the charter.” He spoke hesitantly, almost haltingly, which raised a subtle alarm in Efran’s mind. Ryal added, “Besides that, he was old then. I could not see that he would have the physical stamina for the work—which only reinforced my opinion that caring for children meant little to him.”

Efran wet his lips. “You’re being very careful in phrasing your reasons for rejecting his claim.”

“There is much in him I do not see. He is . . . cloaked,” Ryal said. “I feared for a while that he would attempt to take possession of the fortress by force. He has not. But he has not lost interest in obtaining it—or whatever he sees in it.”

“This is very interesting,” Efran said. “I will read these at once and return them to you.”

Ryal nodded; Efran turned to crinkle his eyes at Giardi, and she *almost* laughed.

As Efran walked out of Ryal’s, all three small books in one hand, Adele took a deep breath and screamed, “EFRAN!” Jehan and Coish ducked in pain, covering their ears, and heads swiveled all down Main from the wall gates to the notary’s. Efran leapt up in the saddle, turned the horse’s head, and began loping up the switchback without a glance toward the gates.

The Polonti guards settled into their positions at the gate; traffic on Main began winding down as businesses

closed for the night and workers went to their homes on the plots. A rider from the courtyard brought down a firepot to light the torches at the wall gates, then began working his way up Main, lighting torches along the way. (DePew had paid for street lamps on Main and the main eastbound road, which were in the process of being installed.)

“Let me in,” Adele repeated wearily to Jehan.

He studied her through the gate, hardly taller or heavier than she. “Who are you?”

“I’m Lady Minka’s sister Adele and the mother of Efran’s son,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, that’s right,” Jehan said, adding, “You’re also banned from the Lands.” Coish watched complacently.

She eyed the boy in strained patience. “I have information for Efran that will save his life.”

“Oh,” Jehan said, looking over to Coish. “That seems important, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does,” Coish admitted.

“He should hear what she has to say,” Jehan said.

“Yes.” Coish solemnly advised her, “Write him.”

Jehan nodded as Adele fell screaming on the gate, shaking it.

The large footman had seen enough. Main was now deserted; there were no other men guarding the gates but these two skinny, insolent boys. So he slowly, meaningfully descended from the driver’s seat. While he walked over, Jehan locked the gate. Then the two boys watched eagerly to see what he would do.

The footman gently moved Adele aside. She groaned, “Whatever you’re going to do won’t work.” Addressing Jehan, she said, “You look like a kind, handsome young man. Please just tell Croft to bring me a plate, and this gentleman will step back.” She took the footman’s arm to unconsciously stroke it, and he flexed.

“No, he’s not kind, and he’s no handsomer than me,” Coish said disparagingly of his watch mate.

Jehan added, “No, I can’t leave my post. Let’s see what your footman can do.” Both of them looked again at the footman, still flexing.

“This lock looks pretty flimsy,” the footman noted. When he grabbed at the faerie branch inching over, breaking several twigs, it jerked away indignantly.

At that point, the formidable Captain Barr walked out of the barracks to stand in the center of the street behind the boys, hands folded placidly in front of him. They did not see him, but the footman did. Careful to not meet the officer’s eyes, he slowly backed away from the gates to the boys’ jeers.

“Come back to the carriage; I’ll do something else,” Adele told her footman in disgust. Upon her withdrawal, the Captain went back to the barracks mess to finish his dinner.

The footman sheepishly followed her to the carriage, where she gave instructions to the driver before climbing in. The footman climbed up, and the driver turned the horses to pull the carriage into the meadow about twenty

feet west of the road—outside the walls, of course. Here, the driver climbed down to unharness the horses and let them graze, watering them from their trip supply.

Inside the carriage, Adele ate from the basket of trip provisions, then unfastened buttons on the elegant but unwieldy dress and wriggled out of it. Sticking her head out of the window, she saw the driver and footman taking off their uniform jackets for the night. So she instructed the footman, “Take off your shirt.”

The driver glanced at the footman, who was grinning in undreamed-for hope as he stripped off the black shirt. “Give it here,” she ordered, sticking her hand out. Blinking, he handed it over, and she closed the window in his face.

After putting the shirt on over her underclothes, Adele peeked out the window curtain at the lights dotting the Lands. Realizing that she must wait hours yet, she lay down on the comfortably cushioned seat. The driver and the shirtless footman lay down on saddle blankets in the itchy grass to sleep.

In the dining hall at this time, Efran was reading, eating, and feeding Joshua bites from his plate all at the same time. Minka, on his left, talked to Ella on her left, who was describing Tess’ victories with Cloud, the Stubborn Little Mare. “The turnaround is really amazing to see. Cloud lets her ride bareback for a few minutes at a time, and Tess is always careful to slide off when she looks done.” Quennel, on Ella’s left, listened complacently, using the time to devour the venison, which he was not tired of at all.

After reading the last page, Efran closed the small book thoughtfully. He tucked it in his back pocket before picking up his fork to start on his cold dinner. Minka looked over. “Are you learning anything?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m just not sure what yet. I’ll be in the keep reading tonight; I must get the other two read.”

“No! Read in bed; it won’t bother me,” she said.

“Are you sure? I’ll need the candle,” he said wryly. The last time she was very mad at him, she had objected to his reading in bed.

“Yes, of course,” she said, hurt. “And tomorrow I’ll want you to tell me what you learned.”

“If I can put it together by then,” he murmured. For he was beginning to understand why Ryal had said Showalter was “cloaked”—his sentences were like riddles; his explanations murky. It was as though he wanted to show off his knowledge without actually sharing it with anyone. He wanted to expose secrets while retaining them to himself alone.

So when they had kissed Joshua goodnight, and Minka had taken Nakam out for his last evacuation of the day, she cuddled up to Efran’s hips while he sat up in bed with the second book, *Barthelemon and the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea*. This book was dated 15 years ago; the third book, *The Secret Places of the Abbey Hill*, was dated 12 years ago. The book he had just finished, *The Mystery of the Fortress Hill*, was undated, but he believed it to be the first, as it was more of an introduction than anything else, and told him nothing new. Efran did note a few factual errors in it, such as Showalter’s assertion that the cavern waters under the hill were entirely separate from the Sea.

Reading Showalter’s *Barthelemon* gave Efran an intense appreciation of Ryal’s ability to distill facts from the morass of speculation that Showalter had almost buried Barthelemon in. While Ryal had quoted passages from this book in his treatise on Barthelemon and the Destroyer, he used only direct quotations from Barthelemon himself or verifiable incidents. Efran got the impression of Barthelemon from Showalter’s book as a priest of a

cult of power, the source of which resided in the Abbey hill. But from the other events of Barthelemon's life, especially his own words, Efran knew him to be an earnest seeker of Christ and of holiness. The power in the hill was an angel, not a god. Whatever Showalter believed that power to be, it was clear that he wanted to have it for himself.

While Efran was reading in bed, Adele had wakened and climbed out of the carriage. Bypassing the sleeping driver and footman, she began walking along the wall westward. Almost at the Passage, she found the small, obscure wicket gate in the wall which allowed access to the mill from the outside. The miller was negligent about locking it.

Stepping over the threshold, Adele entered the Lands and began walking south toward the northwestern face of the hill. When she reached the last east-west road before the hill, she looked to the left at the switchback, with the lanterns and guards in the courtyard, and knew they wouldn't let her in, either. But her eye was drawn to a light high on the hillside right in front of her. Curious, she started climbing in her satin slippers.

The ascent was not as difficult as it could have been; in the moonlight, she discerned a well-worn foot trail. This she followed until it deviated away from the torch; meanwhile, she glanced frequently to the courtyard to make sure she was not observed.

Finally arriving at the torch, she drew aside the barricade to look down on a hole that she recognized at once. The knotted rope indicated that this was a place Efran went to more than once, probably for the same reason that drew Showalter. So she sat on the edge of the hole to grip the knots on the rope with hands and feet, then descend.

That also was not difficult. She released the rope to look around at the blackness. Feeling carefully along the back wall, she found the alcove where she had been last trapped as Standing Goddess. Since this place was the farthest from the edge, she sat here to wait, and presently lay down to fall asleep again. At that time, two small creatures awoke that had been sleeping in her hair. Finding themselves in the agreeable environment of dark, wet, spacious caverns, they slipped out of her hair down to a rock far below and began to procreate.

Meanwhile, Efran was reading in bed. In the third book, *The Secret Places of the Abbey Hill*, he finally found clear confirmation of Showalter's aspirations. Here, he could not resist exposing his great secret: "Deep in the hill, inaccessible to mortals, a great, ancient Power resides, an Intelligence and Will. It waits for the Lord of the Fortress to command it, and once the Lord descends into the hill to invoke the Power by Name, that is, T---v, then that Power is bound to the commands of the Lord, to do all that he says all his life, and even to extend his life indefinitely."

Concentrating as he was on the words, Efran was startled to realize that he was actually hearing them in the author's distinctive voice. Nonetheless, he skeptically read this passage several times over. It did not describe at all Barthelemon's view as related by Ryal nor Efran's own brief experience. So which was correct? Or closest to the mark?

Here, Efran noticed the tiny discrepancy in the name: their charter gave it as "El Toqev," while Showalter implied it was simply "Toqev." Was that important or not? What did "El" mean? Anything? But the fundamental question was, who was Toqev? And did he serve the lord of the fortress or the Lord of Everything?

Taking no chances, Efran read through the rest of the book, finding nothing but Showalter's personal exaltation over his discovery. Efran closed it, laying his head back on the headboard to think. The only thing to do now was to go find out. And the only place he knew to go was the last place he and Minka had met El Toqev.

He looked down at her, deeply asleep, and caressed her tousled curls. Then he carefully slid off the bed to collect his clothes and boots. Nakam raised his head, so Efran leaned over to pat him in reassurance before putting out the bedside candle and taking his clothes to the outer room to dress by the light of the day candle.

He went out to the foyer, lit by lanterns, and the night guards opened the doors for him, saluting. At the courtyard gates, also lit by lanterns, alert guards turned to him as he said, "I'm going to drop into the hole to talk with our friend. I shouldn't need anyone, but if I'm down there for more than an hour, you might send someone to check on me."

"Captain," Goss said, saluting as he opened the gate.

Under the guards' eyes, Efran crossed the northwestern hillside to the torch burning beside the barricade. Sitting at the hole, he slipped easily down the rope to land almost noiselessly on the ledge. He turned to face the cavern without risking a step forward in the darkness.

Then he said, "El Toqev, if you are willing, I need to speak with you."

He waited, listening to his heart thump in his chest, then he saw a tiny spot of light in the darkness. This he watched expand in breadth and intensity until he was shading his eyes. Adele, behind him, awoke. And a breath came from the midst of the brightness which said, "I am here, Lord Efran."

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Chapter 12

"Thank you, El Toqev," Efran said, shaking. "I—have questions, if you will be kind enough to hear them. I have heard different—claims as to who you are and who you answer to. I have seen great power shown in the uplifting of the hill after Symphorien's nest building, and in the healing by Minka of the men injured in battle, when she didn't even know what was happening. Was that your doing?"

"Yes, Lord Efran, as the Great One spoke to me," El Toqev replied. Efran noticed that he had lowered the resonance of his voice to a bearable range.

"The Great One—is that who we worship as God of heaven, the Father of Christ who died for us?" Efran asked, trembling.

"As you say," came the reply.

"All right; so far, so good," Efran murmured, glancing aside as he wiped sweat from his lip. After a moment, he decided to plunge ahead with what he had learned. "I ask because this Showalter claims to know your name, and seeks to use you. What does he know? Are we in danger?"

"He has been enticed by a spirit not of the Great One. Its power is great, but not of our measure."

"Here? Is it here in this hill?" Efran asked, disturbed.

“It does not abide here, but deceives,” El Toqev said.

“It calls itself by your name,” Efran said.

“It is false, so uses part of my name,” El Toqev said.

“Ah,” Efran said. So the slight difference in names was significant. “Showalter is trying to use this spirit to take ownership of the hill. What do I do?”

“Abide,” the voice said lightly.

“Is that all?” Efran asked almost as a cry.

“Stand; you shall not be shaken,” El Toqev said.

Efran exhaled; of course the Spirit of the Hill would quote from the Scripture engraved in the keep. “I will do as you say. Thank you, El Toqev.” He watched as the light faded. When Efran’s eyes adjusted to the dark, he turned back toward the rope, faintly illumined by the torchlight from above.

Adele stepped down from the alcove then, and he jumped back, deeply startled. She smirked, “Well, we finally get to talk.”

Efran swallowed, composing himself. “What do you want to tell me?”

“Showalter wants to kill you and take over the fortress. He sent me and Alberon to distract you,” she said.

He studied her for a moment. “Did you hear El Toqev just now?”

“What?” she asked, squinting.

“The bright light. The voice,” he said.

She looked pitying. “I heard you praying, which you’ll need. Showalter has joined up with this Toqev to bring you down.”

“Oh,” he said, enlightened. “And you are here to warn me.” He smiled.

“Of course,” she sighed. “I just realized that I’ve always loved you.” For once, she told the bare truth as she understood it.

He said kindly, “I’m sure you have, but it’s such a tired old ploy, I’m disappointed that a man like Showalter would use it.” He turned to quickly scale the knotted rope while she looked on.

“Ploy?” She didn’t understand what he was saying. “You have to help me climb. It’s harder going up than down,” she said, irritated.

After he had lifted himself out of the hole, the black silhouette of his head appeared against the circle of torchlight above her. “A little later,” he said, drawing up the rope.

“Efran,” she said. “Efran!” He was gone. In disgust, she sat back down on the cold stone.

When he reached the courtyard gates, he told Goss, “You may hear a woman screaming from the hole. Don’t mind her; that’s Adele. Tell the morning guards to let down breakfast for her, but don’t let her out. Oh, and put her driver and footman up at Croft’s or Firmin’s, whoever has room.”

“Yes, Captain,” Goss said. Efran clapped his shoulder as he turned to go back inside. In his quarters, he stripped to his breeches and climbed into bed to wrap up Minka. She snuggled down into his side in her sleep.

In the morning, January 6th, Minka got up before Efran, for once. When he woke, he found her and Nakam gone, and a plate of cheese and fruit on the small table. He dressed and ate, then went to the nursery to pick up Joshua, who had just finished his morning bottle. They two went out to the back grounds, where Efran spotted Minka supervising the little dog in the orchard.

Carrying Joshua in the sling on his back, Efran came up to catch her around the waist with a kiss. “I hope I didn’t disturb you last night,” he said.

“No, I didn’t have to get up to go look for you anywhere,” she said triumphantly.

“That’s good,” he said tentatively.

“Did you learn anything?” she asked.

“I think so,” he said, then told her about talking with El Toqev and finding Adele in the cavern.

She listened in quiet astonishment. When he had got it all out, she said, “And Adele’s still there?”

“Should be. I hauled up the rope,” he admitted. “They’ll feed her, but I’m not letting her out until I see what happens with Showalter.”

She protested, “What can he be thinking? That he’ll just walk in and start commanding the angel of the hill?” She kept an eye on the little dog darting in and out of the balusters disturbingly close to the cliffs. “Nakam. Here,” she summoned. He trotted to her to be picked up.

“No. He has to kill me, first,” Efran said.

She looked at him quickly. “And me, as Lady Sovereign.”

“No, he’ll marry you.” He drew close enough for Joshua to reach out and pat her hair. “At any rate, I have to return Ryal’s books to him. Put up Nakam and come with me.”

She pouted, “You carry Joshua; why can’t I carry Nakam?” She cuddled the dog, who squirmed.

He paused, then said, “We’ll find something for you to carry him in.” And he turned with her to walk to the stables. While she watched Tess and Ella work with the horses, Efran went hunting for something the right size.

Shortly, he returned with a leather pouch which he slung over her shoulder. She brought it around to fit Nakam inside, and he nestled down contentedly. Glancing toward Ella, Efran asked Minka, “What happened to Law classes for you both?”

“But we went this morning,” Minka protested. “It was just a little shorter than usual because Ryal needed Soames to do some copying.”

“Thank you for reminding me,” he said. After asking for horses, he took her back into the fortress to pick up the three small books he had borrowed yesterday from Ryal. Then they went out to claim their rides, he with Joshua and she with Nakam. From the saddle, Efran looked back at her primly perched with her little dog in the messenger bag. Joshua waved at them and laughed.

They rode down the switchback at a walk, obviously. The faerie tree branches reached down to (presumably) pet Nakam, who snapped in surprise at them. Joshua chortled again while Efran reached back to roll up his collar. “Remind me to ask the nursery girls for teething rags,” he muttered. She looked over, nodding.

When they dismounted and entered Ryal’s, Giardi immediately came around the counter to greet Joshua and meet the new baby. Minka was pleased to show him off, and he did not bite Giardi.

Meanwhile, Efran put the three small books onto the counter. “Thank you, Ryal; they were most helpful,” he said, then repeated to him and Giardi what he had learned and what had followed his speaking to El Toqev. They listened silently, then Efran asked, “Did I really speak with the angel of the hill? Or was something of Showalter deceiving me?”

“Did he give you any proof?” Ryal asked.

“I didn’t ask for any,” Efran said, thinking.

“I wish Nakham—the man—were here. I trust him,” Minka said, stroking her Nakam’s head.

The four of them stood in thought. “Why,” Efran began slowly, “why would a man as rich and powerful as Showalter need Alberon and Adele for anything?”

They all thought about this, then Minka observed, “I don’t know, but now they’re both in the hill.”

Efran looked at her, then breathed, “You’re right. They’re both *in the hill*.” He jerked his head up and said, “El Toqev, I beg you to get Alberon and Adele out of the hill and off the Lands.”

He and Minka studied each other, then she said, “Shouldn’t we go look?”

“Yes,” he said.

Efran, Minka, Ryal and Giardi stepped outside to stand on the steps of the shop and look around. They saw nothing unusual at the gates, on Main, or in the courtyard above the switchback. Ryal turned to Efran to ask, “Why are you petitioning this El Toqev?”

Efran looked at him in surprise. “That was in your book on Barthelemon. That’s what I was telling you about; how Minka and I went down to the cavern to address him.”

“What?” Ryal said, squinting.

Minka looked up to the sky. “God of heaven, we don’t know what to do about Adele and Alberon. They are both in the hill, and are both a threat to us. Please help us.” She suddenly looked across the street to see Nakham standing outside Croft’s. He looked at her, then looked up.

Everyone looked up at the darkening sky where black, roiling clouds appeared out of nowhere. Shoppers and workmen scurried inside the nearest buildings, but no rain came down yet. Efran looked down the street at a young Polonti lifting a hand in greeting: “Ino!”

They all watched the blackness descend on the fortress and upper hill. It closed over the courtyard and extinguished the torch set over the hole into the cavern. There was a flash of lightning followed immediately by rumbling thunder that shook the hill. Then the black cloud lifted northward again, and they heard faint screaming.

Two bodies fell out of the darkness onto the stone bridge. One, dressed in gorgeous kingly apparel, stood to begin running up the road north. As he ran, he shrank into a small animal that darted like a hare. The other, a blonde woman in an oversized dark shirt, stalked back over the bridge to scream at the gates again.

And the clouds dissipated as quickly as they had gathered. The Lands residents, used to such strange phenomena as dragons and sudden storms, returned to their work and errands. Efran, regarding Adele at the gates, went across the street to instruct that her driver and footman be returned to her *outside the gates*. Then Efran gestured Minka to their horses, and they left the notary’s shop to mount the switchback.

From the courtyard, Efran went across to the hole in the hill to see that the barricades had been incinerated and the hole itself crammed full of rocks. He then returned to the courtyard to take Minka, her dog, and Joshua back inside.

Hours later, Efran was informed that, after listening to the lady rant at the gates beyond anyone’s endurance, the footman had locked her in the carriage, which had then departed northward again.

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Chapter 13

And for the next three days, Efran was a walking cauldron. Moody and preoccupied, all he seemed to do was climb up and down the northeastern hillside, or practice *aikē* shooting, or roam the hilltop woods and talk to Pia, all with Joshua. He consented to pace on the back grounds with Minka, but there was not enough room to assuage his restlessness, so time and again, he and Joshua explored the eastern face of the hill, or went walking the Lands as far east as the animal pens and back. The times he visited the children’s hut and garden west of the Passage, taking Minka and Nakam, even Toby perceived his foul mood.

On their last visit, Toby asked her, “What is Efran mad about?”

Minka said, “It’s not anything that you or I have done; he’s not understanding what’s below the fortress, and no one else knows, either. Don’t worry; he’ll get it worked out.”

Later that day, when Efran had returned a sleepy baby to the nursery, he finally vented to her, “I asked Toqev to evict Alberon and Adele. Nothing apparently happened. Then you asked God, and Ino came. Did Toqev summon her after all? Or did he do nothing? Is he real or a fraud? If he’s a fraud, then why did Ryal mention him in his book on Barthelemon, being so careful about what he included? *Why does our charter name him?*”

Minka replied, "You're asking the wrong person. I don't know anything."

Exhaling, Efran went to the keep, deserted at this time. He stood before the ten-foot-tall crucifix to regard the depiction of the Sufferer. Then he looked up to the light streaming in at the window. "Enlighten me. Help me understand. I don't understand. I can't afford to walk in darkness with the fate of the Fortress in my hands."

He turned to look at the Psalm engraved on the wall. He knew it so well that it seemed to be engraved on his heart. But he stared at the letters and words carved in stone, trying to understand. The lines that were illumined now were not the ones that caught his eye, however. It was the two opening lines:

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him.

He only is my rock and my salvation. . . .

He *only* is my rock and my salvation. . . .

He **ONLY** is my rock and my salvation.

Staring at these words, and one word in particular, Efran whispered, "Why do we have to go down into the cavern to ask an angel to help us? Why do we have to invoke his help by calling him by a certain name? Why did Barthelemon instruct us to do that, when he laid himself at the foot of Christ about everything else?"

In extreme aggravation, Efran went to the library to retrieve Ryal's book on Barthelemon and the Destroyer. With trembling hands, he flipped through the pages until he found the passage in question: "Barthelemon also secured from the lord of the Fortress the name of the angel of the hill, which served the lord who knew his name. That name may not be repeated in these pages, for it is only revealed to the lord of the Fortress in his charter. And to secure the cooperation of the angel of the hill, the owner or owners of the Fortress and the charter must go into the hill to address the angel by name and request his assistance."

Efran picked up a stray peach tree leaf from the floor to mark the page, then stuffed the book in his back pocket and ran out to the front courtyard. The gate guards saluted as Efran looked aside to the unseen stables, where he must wait for a horse to be brought out. But Efran did not wish to wait for a horse. But descending the switchback without one took too long. So he did something he had only done once before, also when he was in a great hurry.

Routh and Tiras, the gate guards, had opened them immediately upon his appearance, so Efran ran from the courtyard at full speed to leap from the first level of the switchback down to the second. He rolled upon landing, then scrambled up to run again and leap for all he was worth down to the third. Soldiers, pedestrians, shop owners, workmen, and playing children stopped what they were doing to gape at the Lord of the Fortress leaping down the switchback levels like a mad acrobat.

Minka ran out of the fortress to look down, but Routh put a hand out. "Lady Minka, will you kindly wait for a horse?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, flashing a worried smile at him. By the time she got the horse, Efran had entered Ryal's shop, and the Lands' activities resumed. As she began trotting the horse down the switchback, a small body shot out of the fortress door to slip through the gate balusters and run down.

Inside the shop, Efran found Ryal engaged with a customer, so the impatient lord had to wait after all. Were Efran's hair on fire, Ryal would not assist him out of turn. Efran fell back against the wall, panting and laughing.

By the time Minka came to the door, the customer had received his plot assignment and was leaving. He paused to bow briefly to Minka, holding the door for her. But he did not recognize the dusty, disheveled, sweating man waiting on the wall.

"Yes, Efran?" Ryal asked, looking at him over his spectacles.

Efran had paused to put an arm around his wife and kiss her forehead, remarking, "I hope you didn't jump down the levels."

"No, I'm not wearing pants," she replied, studying him.

Laughing again, he approached to withdraw the book and whack it down on the counter. "Hello, Ryal. Explain the passage at the bookmark, please."

Taking note of the title, Ryal opened the book at the peach leaf and looking up inquiringly. "Here." Efran pointed at it upside down. While Ryal read, there was a whining and scratching at the door.

Minka went over to open it, and Nakam ran in, jumping up on her skirts. "Silly dog, how did you get out?" she cried in delight, picking him up. This pleased him, as he was tired from having run down the switchback the long way. Holding him, she returned to the counter to watch Ryal.

He looked at the page for a long time, then looked at the pages encompassing it, and looked at the title page again. "One moment," he said, then explained, "Giardi is running errands for me."

He went into the back room, then came out with a book identical to the one that lay open on the counter. He turned pages to the same place in the new book, then looked back and forth between the two copies. Efran was watching intently.

Finally, Ryal turned both books toward Efran, open at the same place. "I don't know how to explain this, but your copy has been corrupted. I never included that passage about Barthelemon in my report on him; it was one of the most egregious statements in Showalter's work which I rejected as unfounded."

Open-mouthed, Efran looked between the two books; Minka leaned beside him to do the same. "The handwriting is the same. The surrounding words are the same. But the statement is not in your copy," Efran said.

"That's correct," Ryal said, studying him.

Efran looked away, then said, "But El Toqev is named in our charter! Estes read it off to me."

"One moment," Ryal said, then went to the back room again.

He was gone a little longer this time, during which lull Minka studied the discrepancy between the two copies of his book. "Oh, look! The surrounding text is not exactly the same. The first sentence of the next paragraph is correct, but the rest of that paragraph has been cut to make the pages end on the same line."

Efran leaned over to look where she pointed, then nodded in agreement.

Ryal then returned with a single sheet. “Here is my copy of your charter. Show me where this name is referenced.”

Efran took the sheet Ryal held, laying it down so that Minka could read it also. She lifted her head with a shake, but Efran took a lot longer to search for the missing words. Finally he looked up to whisper, “It’s not in there, either.”

“Someone has very skillfully tampered with your documents,” Ryal said.

Efran looked at him for several long seconds without speaking, then asked, “What does *El Toqev* mean?”

“Spell it, please,” Ryal requested.

Efran squinted up at the ceiling to recall the word from the charter: “Ah, T-O-Q-E, ah, V.”

“One moment,” Ryal said, taking both the charter and his book on Barthelemon to the back room.

While he was gone, Efran turned to Minka to whisper, “What do you make of this?”

“Someone wants you to pray to El Toqev as if he were God,” she whispered back.

He turned back to the counter, trying to remember everything that was said at their encounters with El Toqev—particularly when Efran alone talked to him. “I told him what miraculous things he had done and he agreed. When I asked if he served the God of heaven, he said, ‘As you say.’ Does that sound—?”

“Slippery?” she asked wryly.

Ryal returned with another old book which he laid on the counter, referencing a line with a forefinger. “*El* is an old canonical word for *God*. *Toqeph* is another old word of the same language which means *authority* or *power*. I can find no place where the two words are used together. *Toqev* appears to be merely a corruption of *toqeph*.”

“A corruption,” Efran repeated.

“And a deception,” Minka observed.

Meanwhile, Ryal took up Efran’s copy of the book about Barthelemon along with his own. “I will have another copy of this book, a correct one, made for your library. However the falsification was done, Barthelemon would be outraged to see it.”

Efran murmured, “I’m sure he was; I was afflicted until I could see it corrected.”

“Check your charter again,” Ryal said.

“Yes, thank you, Ryal,” Efran said. Then he suddenly looked at Minka. “Nakham told me to study this book,” he said accusingly.

“Yes,” she said. “How else would you find the lie?”

He lifted his head in comprehension, but argued, “He did not tell me about it.”

“Would you have listened if he had? Wouldn’t it mean much more for you to find it yourself, as you did?” she asked. He nodded, convicted. Then he lifted his head and said, “Toqev, whoever you are, whatever you are, get out of my hill.” He could not know that the spirit did as it was commanded. But other little creatures remained, and were very busy.

After Efran and Minka had left, Ryal stood bleakly considering the situation. He was confident of the integrity of the material he had included in the book on Barthelemon and the Destroyer, but was dismayed at how Showalter’s skewed views had crept into Efran’s thinking, distorting it so. And as it turned out, Ryal had used nothing of Showalter’s that was not confirmed elsewhere. So . . . his little books, so beautifully bound, that Ryal had paid so much for, were . . . complete falsehoods. He had to get rid of them.

Sighing in dismay, Ryal took the lovely little books off his shelf, tore up the pages, and then dumped all the remains in his garderobe.

Outside Ryal’s shop, Minka remounted Rose with Nakam on her arm, then Efran walked beside her to ascend the switchback. Glancing up at the gate sentries watching, she said, “They’re disappointed that you’re not jumping up the switchback.”

He threw back his head to laugh, “Now that’s cruel.”

At the fortress, they went immediately to the second-floor workroom. DeWitt and Estes looked up as Efran said, “Estes, please find our charter again. Ryal believes there may be an error in it.”

“Really? That’s bad,” Estes said, rising. DeWitt stopped working to watch as Estes pulled out a folder which he opened, leafing through papers to hand one to Efran.

He and Minka looked at it. “Here,” Efran said. “This line: ‘The guardian of the hill is *El Toqev*.’”

DeWitt stood to look as Estes studied the writing. Then he said, “That’s a later addition. The ink is darker.”

“The hand is different,” DeWitt observed.

“Who has been tampering with our documents?” Estes asked, outraged.

“I know who, but I don’t know how. The line is not in Ryal’s copy of our charter. So just—strike it,” Efran said.

“That’s not good enough. I have to blot it out,” Estes said. He grimly retrieved the solvent and paper rags from the cabinet, then set to work. Having obliterated that addition, Estes reviewed several other of their founding documents, but saw nothing else amiss.

At this time, Adele and Alberon were again sitting in Lord Showalter’s elegant receiving room. The lord said, “I hope you found your pay sufficient for this last endeavor?”

Alberon began, “Well, yes, Lord Showalter. A hundred royals for such a simple task—”

“Speak for yourself; mine was almost frightening,” Adele murmured, anxious that she not be perceived as overpaid.

“I’m terribly sorry, my dear. Do tell me what happened,” Showalter said.

“Oh, let us hear from Alberon, first,” Adele said with curled lip.

Sipping his brandy, Alberon said, “Well, I had a very interesting incursion. I had no difficulty at all accessing the Treasury room, only to discover that they have moved all valuable pieces to another location and filled that room with used furniture and spare parts for their mechanical devices. It was a disappointment to find the information I had been given inaccurate”—he flicked a sharp glance at his host—“but I shall merely take the time to make a more accurate assessment in the near future.”

“That is indeed most interesting,” Lord Showalter said, expressionless. Turning his watery eyes to Adele, he asked, “And how did you find matters, my dear?”

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Chapter 14

“I also found the situation at the Abbey Lands unexpected, frankly,” Adele said in wide-eyed innocence. “The moment the gates were opened to me, my ex-husband approached with the intent to have me all to himself. I could do nothing but run, so spent a very uncomfortable night in hiding before one of Efran’s henchmen found me. It was all I could do to get away with my honor intact. I will have to find some disguise before I attempt to enter the Lands again; it is not safe for me,” she said, eyes downcast and a hand at her low-cut bodice.

“How very distressing for you, my dear, and frustrating for our faerie friend. And I must admit to being cruelly disappointed when Lord Efran rejected Toqev, who has vacated the fortress upon his failure. But—”

“What?” Alberon said. “I thought Toqev was the power you sought!”

Showalter laughed, “Oh, no, dear friend; not *that* Toqev. No, the one Lord Efran rejected was a counterfeit I had planted in the hill to lead the lord to his death. I wonder what gave it away? Nonetheless, the *real* Toqev, the one of unimaginable power, remains hidden deep within the hill, waiting. Which means that Efran must die by other means.

“And there you’ve helped me!” Showalter said brightly. “For you both found your way into the caverns beneath the hill, and there left a small surprise for the lord of the fortress from me.”

His hearers were momentarily silent upon the jarring suspicion that *this* was what he needed them for. Then Adele asked smoothly, “And what was that?”

“Snobbles, my dear. I attached just a few of them to both of you before you last left here,” Showalter said.

“What?” Adele cried, jumping up from her chair, while Alberon riffled anxiously through his clothing.

“What are snobbles?” Alberon demanded.

Showalter laughed, “At ease, friends; they’re gone, and did you no harm while hitchhiking on you. They’re just tiny little people that multiply exponentially in the right conditions, such as that of the caverns in the Abbey hill. And when they reach the right number in three or four days—in the millions—they will emerge from the caverns

into the fortress. From there, it will be only a few days more before the fortress is cleansed of its present occupants and ready for a new lord.”

His companions were quiet for a moment, then Adele said, “What about the charter? I thought you needed it to take power.”

“Oh, I do, and I will merely take Lord Efran’s place as owner of the charter. For you see, I can be him or anyone for short periods of time,” Showalter said, passing a hand over himself. And where he stood, they suddenly saw Efran smiling at them. “It’s actually quite easy, although uncomfortable to maintain for long,” he said in Efran’s voice. “But it’s all I’ll need to convince anyone that I am the legitimate lord, and for long enough so that I can acquire the power in the hill.”

Then he gestured to resume his original appearance. “And you, dear lady,” he added, “will have the opportunity to see your Efran eaten alive by the snobbles. If you request, I can show you when it happens—although the sight may be a trifle disturbing.”

“That would be lovely,” she said tightly. “But how are you going to live in a fortress filled with these things?”

Showalter’s smile was almost Efranesque. “There is, in fact, a very simple remedy to eliminate them quickly and entirely.”

“Well, if you’re going to use me to carry them, you’d better show me what that is,” she said with teeth clenched.

“An understandable request, which I shall certainly satisfy. If you and friend Alberon will accompany me downstairs, I will demonstrate,” Showalter said, gesturing to the door, and both guests followed him.

Late that evening, Adele was scrawling out an urgent letter, which began:

“To Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands

“From Lord Bache of Crescent Hollow

“Dear friend, I will never forget your kindness in returning my stolen gold. Feeling that I owe you a large favor in return, I wish to warn you that you may have been subjected to an invasion of snobbles. Fortunately, they are easy to eradicate when you know how. This is what you must do: . . .”

She finished the letter with a few lines, then folded it, addressed it with instructions, and sealed it. Rising, she opened the door to her bodyguard/manservant standing outside. When he turned to her, she put the letter in his hand. “Cammack, have this delivered to Efran at the Abbey Fortress immediately.”

He looked at her dubiously. “Lady Adele, an overnight delivery? That would take—”

Turning to the table, she picked up a heavy pouch to thrust in his chest. “Is that enough?” she demanded.

He paused to look in the pouch, then said blankly, “Yes, Lady.”

“Then why are you standing here? GO!” she shouted, and he did. Then Adele flung herself to a chair to put her head in her hands.

The following morning, January 10th, life at the fortress started out as usual: busy. Sunrise deliveries of rice, eggs, produce, and meat came to the kitchen from various plots below, and Madea's crew started preparing breakfast. Soldiers emerged from the hilltop barracks to begin their duties, and Soames walked up the switchback for Law lessons with Ella and Minka. Tourjee's crew got to work in the gardens; the archers, slingers, and sparring groups began their drills; Lwoff and his assistant Evrard took up the day's chores of cleaning, arranging and inventorying arms and equipment in the hilltop armory.

But people passing through the first-floor corridor paused at the faint rumble they heard. It was not alarming, but strange, and no one could quite pinpoint where it originated. So they passed on.

An hour or two later, however, the rumbling was making itself felt in the stone floor and walls. One or more people stopped to listen, particularly outside the closed door of a storage room. Then one soldier, Gaul, opened that door to look. With a cry of surprise, he slammed it again, shouting, "Captain! Help! We need—arrgghh!" he cried.

For at his feet, numerous small things with sharp teeth were emerging under the door to crawl up his legs, biting. As he cried out, men rushed up to stomp on the creatures, but they were still emerging from under the door. "Bring something to block the gap at the bottom of the door!" several men shouted, stomping and swiping at the creatures. The men soon learned to use something other than their hands, however, as the creatures bit through flesh with exceedingly sharp teeth.

A kitchen helper ran up with two bags of flour, which were quickly shoved up against the door cracks. After chasing down and stomping the remaining creatures, the men stood back, panting, to watch the door shiver from the weight pressing against it. Gaul, bleeding all down his legs, had to be helped up to Wallace's quarters on the second floor. The bags were only minimally effective, however, for the men had to press them against the door with all their strength to keep them up against the gap. And the creatures were eating through them.

Efran and DeWitt came running down the stairs to look. "What?—" Efran gasped. The inward-opening door bulged against the strained jambs, accompanied by the loud drone of hundreds of thousands of tiny sets of teeth clattering. The men showed him the squished bodies of the creatures and their sharp, bloody teeth. Then they all looked down at new holes in the flour bags.

"God of heaven, what is this?" Efran gasped. "Help us—Keep everyone out of this corridor! Minka, Ella, Soames—get out of the library! Shut the nursery door!"

A young Polonti, Enon, ran into the kitchen, shouting, "Torches! Hurry!" By then, the creatures opened a large hole in one bag to begin streaming out. The men stomped them as fast as they could, but there were too many.

Enon then ran up with two torches, handing one to Efran. "Use the smoke!" he cried.

Efran held the torch in bewilderment while Enon directed his smoking torch down at the stream of creatures emerging from the bag of flour. And everyone watched as they turned back at once to begin chewing on the creatures behind them. "Don't burn them; smoke them out! The smoke drives them mad!" Enon cried. "More torches!" he called over his shoulder as a half-dozen men ran into the kitchen.

Efran held the torch down to watch the creatures scurry back in panic. But the door was still bulging ominously. "We have to open the door, but we need a lot of smoke to hold them back," Enon called. He was trembling but coherent.

Soon there were a dozen men with burning torches, and the corridor full of smoke. “All right,” Enon said shakily. “All ready? I’m going to open the door.” He was coughing; everyone was coughing for the smoke. But there were no more creatures skittering about the corridor.

Efran, beside him with a torch, nodded. Someone behind him tied a kerchief around his mouth and nose, and he glanced back at the other men, likewise protected. Another man covered Enon’s face with a kerchief while his hand was on the door latch. He mumbled something, his eyes watering. All their faces were wet with tears from the smoke.

Then Enon turned the latch to shove the door, which did not move for the weight pressed against it. So he kicked away one flour bag, holding his torch down to the gap. And the creatures that began to surge out immediately turned back, attacking those behind in a frenzy.

Meanwhile, the men had shoved away the second bag to fill the gap with smoke, and Efran was pushing on the door. Bit by bit, it began to open, the door and the frame singed by the torch Efran held to the widening crack.

The more the door was pushed open, the more smoking torches were shoved inside. Soon, Efran had the door fully open to reveal the horrifying sight of countless chittering creatures filling the storage room to the ceiling.

But the smoke was driving them back to madly consume each other in their desperate retreat. Someone brought a shovel to begin taking out the dead things in a wheelbarrow, transferring them to the great kitchen fireplace. Watching the pattern of the creatures’ retreat in the smoke-filled room, Efran discerned that they had come from the closet—which no doubt meant they had originated in the caverns below.

When the kitchen fireplace proved inadequate for the number of bodies that required burning, the men built a bonfire on the back grounds. Soon, there were more men shoveling than there were with torches.

But with the door standing open letting in fresh air, the buggers began to revive and resume their forward progress. So the door had to be shut again on a few men with torches inside. These men had to be rotated out frequently, however, to be taken outside to recover from breathing the smoke.

Efran, coughing and wheezing, stepped back into the corridor, but refused to go outside until he could see all of these things dead. Shortly, he covered his face and went in again with a torch. Here, he saw the last of the wretches skittering under the crack of the closet door. Opening it, Efran looked down at the trap door that had been thrown off by the creatures’ surge out of the cavern below.

So he set four torches in sturdy containers on the closet floor and shut the door to retain the smoke in that small space. Then the men were able to open the door of the storage room again to resume shoveling out the carcasses. A few men with torches continued to sweep through the room to drive all remaining creatures into the closet. Those few left alive in the room were then easily squashed, smoked, or shoveled outside to be roasted.

About five hours after Gaul’s discovery, the room was sufficiently cleared for Efran to step back and assess. Numerous men had minor lacerations. Gaul was the one most severely injured, being the first on the scene. Wallace, the doctor, said, “He’ll be in a great deal of pain for a while, so I’m giving him a rationed amount of hard ale. Nothing life-threatening, thank God. But what the devil are these things?”

He had a few dead specimens on his table, which he had been studying under a lens. Efran took the hand lens to look at one of the things himself. And he saw a somewhat human shape, translucent, about an inch long. Half of the body was the head, which was entirely a set of jaws equipped with numerous sharp teeth. The rest of the

body consisted of a round abdomen and a set of arms and legs which ended in curved claws for climbing or grasping.

Efran stood, wiping his mouth. "Send this down to Ryal, please. Ask him what he knows about them."

"Yes," Wallace agreed.

"Now, the caverns," Efran breathed. "Are they reproducing in the water?" he asked Wallace.

The doctor shook his head. "No, they're definitely not aquatic." He then turned as another man hobbled in with lacerated hands and legs.

Efran went back down to the first floor to glance at the cleaning operations in progress. Shelves and everything on them had been taken from the room and lined up in the corridor to be cleaned of dead creatures. Nakam was also on patrol, sniffing out the half-dead things to finish them off and carry them outside.

"Captain," Corwyn saluted him. "The storage room and closet are clean, but there's no telling how many of these devils are in the caverns."

"That's what we must see to." Efran collared another man to say, "Get me Gerard. Have him meet me out back."

"Captain!" The man saluted and ran off.

To Corwyn, Efran said, "Keep torches burning in their holders in the closet night and day. And create a duty roster of men to check them by the hour. I'd like to not burn the fortress down."

"Yes, Captain," he said.

Then Efran went out to the back grounds to meet Gerard, one of the fortress' building engineers. Efran told him, "Somehow, we have to fill the caverns below the fortress with smoke, quickly. But it's not safe for anyone to go through the trap door in the storage room closet."

"We'll devise something right away, Captain," Gerard said. Turning to head for a storage shed, he whistled to several men.

"Good," Efran exhaled, then scanned the grounds. "Who . . . where is the young man who first called for torches?"

"That's Enon, Captain," Captain Towner said, his face blackened with smoke. "He's in my regiment. That's him, lying on the ground over there."

"Thank you," Efran said, patting his shoulder as Towner turned to hear someone else's question. Looking, Efran saw the bonfire blazing away—and Minka going around with well water for the men. He smiled wearily, but she was too busy to see him. Also, there were a number of men stretched out on the ground.

Efran went over to the group to generally ask, "Enon?"

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Chapter 15

“Here, Captain.” At the voice, Efran looked down at a young Polonti struggling to sit up. His face, hands, and the entire front of his uniform were black; his lower legs bleeding in places.

“Do you need to see the doctor?” Efran asked, crouching beside him.

“No, Captain; Moiwahine has been giving me water, and I am all right,” he said.

Efran smiled; the Polonti still considered Minka their Queen. “I’m glad. Now, how did you know what to do about these creatures?”

“The man in the funny hat,” Enon said. “He was in the courtyard to tell the guards what was coming, but they thought he was loco. But I was hearing, so he told me. And I ran in, and there they were.”

Nakham, Efran thought. “Where did they come from?” he asked.

Enon shook his head. “I—he didn’t say, I don’t think. Only what to do, with the smoke.”

“All right. Thank you, Enon. As you were,” Efran said, standing. Enon continued to sit, breathing.

DeWitt came over, scanning the men and the bonfire. “What are these things? Where did they come from?”

“I’m going to find out,” Efran breathed. “I need a commendation for Gaul and a Meritorious Cross for Enon.”

“Who?” DeWitt asked, glancing around. “Enon?”

“The boy sitting on the ground over there,” Efran said, nodding. “If he hadn’t paid attention to a crazy man in a funny hat, the fortress would be full of bleeding corpses by now.”

DeWitt peered at him. “I’m taking your word for it; will draw up the awards. And I expect to hear whatever you find out.”

“And I expect to find out,” Efran uttered. He looked up to a brilliant blue January sky. *God of heaven, who has set these things upon me? Who is the enemy that has polluted my hill with—*And then he remembered that both Adele and Alberon had been in the caverns . . . having been sent from Showalter.

An hour later, he had washed up and changed clothes, surprised to see the bites on his lower legs. Then he asked the kitchen for breakfast to be brought up to him in the second-floor workroom. It was now late afternoon, and Joshua was exceedingly angry at having been left in the nursery for most of the day. But he patted Papa’s shoulder in forgiveness as he took him upstairs.

Estes leaned back with an expectant look, but Efran had to deal with a squirming baby before explaining the last eight hours. Estes said, “We’ve been getting reports throughout the day, Efran; all I can say is, thank God you contained it. You can fill me in when you’re able. Oh—Ryal sent a message that the creatures are completely unknown to him; he’s going to research it further.”

“Yes. What happened, was—” Just as Efran had put Joshua on the floor to crawl under the table, Minka came in with Nakam, struggling to get down as well. When he was settled under the table with his playmate, she went over to be enclosed in Efran’s arms.

They stood there holding each other until a kitchen worker brought up a trencher. “Here’s your breakfast, Captain,” he said wryly.

“Thank you,” Efran sighed, turning. Declining to sit on his lap while he tried to eat, Minka sat beside him at the table. And he began inhaling eggs, ham, apple crumbly, and Delano’s Mild Ale.

A sentry entered, extending a letter to him. “Message from Crescent Hollow, Captain. The messengers declined to wait for a reply.”

“Give it to the lady, please,” Efran mumbled around a mouthful, which the man did, saluting. Efran then nodded at her to read it.

Minka looked at the lettering on the outside. “It’s addressed to you, ‘Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.’ It’s specified for ‘Overnight Delivery,’ with the instructions, ‘No Reply Needed.’ And, it’s Adele’s handwriting.”

Efran looked up quickly. Then he cleared his mouth to say, “Interesting. I’m glad I gave it to you to read.” By this time, DeWitt had entered to take his usual seat at the table. Efran told him, “Letter from Adele in Crescent Hollow that was supposed to be delivered this morning.”

DeWitt shook his head. “Hired messengers won’t ride through the night; only men who are riding for their lives.” Efran and Estes concurred, glancing at Minka to continue.

She read, “From Lord Bache of Crescent Hollow:

“Dear friend, I will never forget your kindness in returning my stolen gold. Feeling that I owe you a large favor in return, I wish to warn you that you may have been subjected to an invasion of snobbles. Fortunately, they are easy to eradicate when you know how. This is what you must do: Wherever you find the snobbles gathering, fill the place with smoke. This will drive them out, though it may require several hours to kill them all off.’ And that’s it,” Minka said, laying the letter down. Then, frowning, she picked it back up to hold it to the light.

Estes asked, “Are you sure that’s from Adele?”

“Oh, yes, I know her hand. There’s a watermark on the paper,” Minka said, squinting.

Efran reached out, and she gave him the letter. He stood to take it to the window. “SW,” he said.

“That’s Lord Showalter,” DeWitt said. “Elderly, extremely wealthy eccentric in Crescent Hollow.”

“Of course. Now why do you suppose he has Adele warning me about this attack?” Efran asked contemplatively. He sat again, tossing the letter down to the table.

DeWitt winced dubiously. “He’s subtle, but having her use his watermarked stationery to implicate him is beyond subtle, clear to the absurd.”

Minka was also shaking her head. “No, that’s from Adele. If she wrote it at night, she wouldn’t notice the

watermark. But if she's been staying with Showalter, and he told her about these snobbles, then she was genuinely trying to warn you."

The men considered that, then she squinted at the letter again. "She says, 'you may have been subjected'—not, 'you may be.' This tells me she knew the snobbles were already planted here."

"Because he used her to do it?" Efran asked.

"Possibly," Minka said.

"How could she not know? Those things were—devouring everything," Efran said, reduced to trembling again.

Minka said, "Once they were here, yes. But they had to have been transported somehow. How else would they get here? They're not from the Sea." She knew this for having pumped the coastal-born Teschner for his observations about them. She added, "And its quite possible that this Showalter used her and even Alberon to do it without their knowing."

Cleaning his plate thoroughly, Efran muttered, "And then she found out about it. I can see that she would be angry about being used as a carrier without knowing. But why would she care what happens here?"

"You are here. Her son is here," Minka pointed out.

Efran pushed aside his empty plate, then took a swig of ale and leaned back to look up at the faerie tree branches covering the ceiling. "So now I must devise an answer for this attack. Lord God, please prevent Showalter or Alberon from hearing my words or my thoughts—for I don't know what power either have."

As it happened, that was one concern about which Efran need not trouble himself. For the eviction of Toqev, Alberon, and Adele, and Efran's exposing the changes made to Ryal's book and the Abbey's charter all helped quash Showalter's one-way channel into the fortress. But the killing blow was Ryal's destruction of Showalter's books.

That evening, Adele dined with Showalter at his sumptuous table. Alberon was not there. She was white-faced, waiting in almost unbearable darkness to know whether Efran and all his people had died horrible deaths today. Showalter said, "You look lovely tonight, Adele."

"Thank you," she replied softly. Of course she did—despite a life of extreme turmoil, she was still beautiful, only 22, and dressed in one of the most expensive gowns made on the Southern Continent.

"Did you enjoy our visit to Lord Ennemon's shop?" he asked.

"Yes," she said vacantly, wearing one of the lord's creations. "His dresses are certainly unique."

"I heard that he worked feverishly night and day for weeks to come up with the dresses you saw today. He has been very cautious in displaying them; doesn't want copies to be made," Showalter said.

"Of course. One look would give a competitor all that was needed to copy them perfectly," she mused.

There was silence between them for a few minutes, then Showalter said, "I am disturbed not to see Alberon tonight, nor to have received a response to my invitation."

She glanced up over her cut-glass goblet. "I thought he was staying here as well."

"He did last night, but told me today that he was taking a room in town, to better pick up on tittle-tattle, which is always helpful. But when I sent a man to the Elegance, he could not be found. Nor did my man find him anywhere else," Showalter said, troubled.

Adele slowly raised her eyes. *Showalter doesn't know? He can't perceive where Alberon is?* Out loud, she said, "That's disappointing. Surely you can find him? He owes me money; I lent him quite a sum just to get here."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Showalter said in apparently genuine regret. "I'll make it up to you. But no; he seems to have cloaked himself, the rascal."

"How irritating," she breathed. "Well. What can you tell me about the snobbles in the Abbey fortress?" She tried to keep her tone light, mildly interested.

Showalter paused, looking to the side. Adele regarded a tired, lost old man and despised him. Then he said, "There is silence. Only silence in the Abbey fortress. They are all dead."

Her heart almost stopped, and tears filled her eyes. The thought of Efran, her lover Efran, mangled and bloodied beyond all recognition filled her with a grief she had never experienced before. "Really?" she cried in apparent joy. She stood, taking up her meat knife so adroitly that the old man would never notice, even had he been watching her. But his eyes were still searching off to the side. Something was wrong; he discerned that he was not sensing death at the fortress, but a locked door.

She swept around the table to lean over his chair and hug his neck, the knife still in her right hand. She murmured, "You are so powerful, and I love powerful men. Close your eyes, now, because I have a surprise for you."

"Do you?" he said with a chuckle. "Do you think I do not see the knife in your hand?"

As he started to turn around, she felt the knife slipping from her fingers. But with a more powerful will, she held it tightly in both hands to plunge it into his upper back. He fell forward onto the table.

Leaving the knife sticking up from his back like a signpost, she cheerfully dragged a chair to rest under the knob of the door behind him leading into the butler's pantry. Then she swept around the table to open the doors into the garden. From there, she went out the door at the other end of the dining room, which led to the corridor.

Standing at this door, she turned to call into the dining room, "I'll only be a moment, I promise. What? Oh, no, don't give it a thought, you dear thing!" She laughed gaily, then swept away—by about five feet.

In the corridor five feet from the door, she silently waited until she glimpsed movement coming toward her. Then she swept to the door again, saying sweetly, "See? It didn't take me—" Seeing the scene before her with someone behind her, she screamed loudly, staggering back. The servant behind her dropped the dish in his hands to rush into the dining room.

"Alberon!" she cried. "Alberon just darted out! How could he?" And she ran away in hysterical tears.

While chaos engulfed the dining room, Adele quietly slipped into the library to remove a heavy pouch from one of the drawers. This she took upstairs with her to change into dark clothes suitable for riding.

With the pouch slung over her shoulder, she skulked to the stables to saddle and bridle the best horse she could find. After attaching the pouch securely to the saddle, she led the mare out quietly, watching all around. Gaining an obscure back gate, she mounted and rode out into the twilight.

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Chapter 16

At this time, Gerard was telling Efran, “Well, Captain, here’s what we did: we loaded three large tin tubs with kindling and wood, which we doused with oil and set on fire. These we shoved off from the bank into the Sea on the southwest side of the hill. We timed it to catch high tide coming in, which swept the tubs right into Symphorien’s nest. One of the tubs got overturned in the waves, but the other two are still burning.”

“How do you know?” Efran asked.

“We’re watching them through the trap door in the storage closet, Captain. Even the floating wood from the overturned tub is still burning because of the oil, which produces a greasy, heavy smoke, you know. And we’re seeing the creatures drop by the hundreds into the burning water and the tubs, which carcasses provide more fuel for the fire. There’s no place for the smoke to go but up, and they’re apparently clinging to the ceiling and walls of the cavern. If they hit the water, they drown.”

“Excellent,” Efran breathed.

“We’ll have shifts watching all the night,” Gerard added.

“Very good. But—if even a few are left alive, they’ll start reproducing again,” Efran muttered.

“Not necessarily, Captain,” Gerard said hesitantly. “Once they reach maturity, they need food to survive and multiply. We think they’ll starve to death like any creature that can’t eat.”

“Would they eat fish? Other cavern life?” Efran asked.

“Again, they’re not suited for the water. But we do see indications that something in the water is eating them,” Gerard said.

“Oh, good,” Efran said, wiping his lip. “Keep me apprised.”

“Of course, Captain,” Gerard said with a salute.

Efran went to the trap door in the closet to look for himself, and found it just as Gerard said. Moreover, his crew had fitted a metal mesh screen to the trap door to prevent the snobbles crawling out while being observed. And they replaced the trap door in between viewings to keep the smoke confined to the caverns.

With thanks to that crew, Efran went to check the nursery, and found Joshua asleep. Then he took a last look up and down the corridor. Most of the shelves that had been in the storage room were now relocated to other areas to keep the corridor clear. Seeing men on watch, and everything under control, and everyone still alive, Efran staggered back to his quarters.

Minka was asleep with Nakam at her feet. He barely opened his eyes as Efran undressed and fell into bed beside her, scooping her into his side.

Even before breakfast the following morning, January 11th, Efran went to the storage room, its door standing open. There, he found two men standing outside the closed closet door. Despite thick towels crammed under the door, smoke permeated the room. Graeme stood aside, saluting, as Caswall said, "Good morning, Captain. Would you like to take a peek?"

"Yes. Have any more come out?" Efran asked.

"No, sir, but we're still seeing them fall into the water from the cavern roof or walls," Caswall said, opening the closet door. The trap door was open, but the screen covered the hole. Caswall set aside the solitary torch in its container for Efran to get down on his knees and peer into the cavern.

The waters were brightly lit from the morning sun coming in through Symphorien's entrance, so Efran could see the blackened remains in the tin tubs bobbing on the water. A few splotches of decaying fire remained, and Efran watched random, isolated splashes that indicated the death of another snobble.

He stood, backing out. "Very good; carry on." Caswall saluted, then replaced the torch, shut the closet door, and stuffed the towels in the gap again.

Efran went to the door of the dining hall where he paused, trying to think of what else he needed to do. Fennig approached holding something in his left hand while saluting with his right. "Captain."

"What've you got?" Efran said in quick interest.

"Well, Cap'n, I saved three of the buggers alive to play with. They did all right through the night in a clay jar with a lid, but, the minute I took them out into the sunlight, they went toes up." Almost despondently, he showed Efran the three shriveled creatures, all with jaws wide open as if they had died in agony.

"Oh, that is good to know," Efran said, studying them. Yes, he remembered the one he saw in Wallace's quarters: it was pale to the point of translucence, obviously a creature of the dark. "Which is why Showalter had them smuggled into the cavern," he murmured. And the storage room was comfortable, as well, being windowless. The corridor was better lit, however, and he briefly wondered what the breaking point would be for them.

Grateful that these ruminations were theoretical, Efran said, "Yes, show Gerard. Well done." With another salute, Fennig went to find the engineer, and Efran turned into the dining hall.

Minka met him, and he engulfed her before sitting down to eat. "When you're done eating, I want you to go lie back down," she whispered.

"Will you come with me?" he asked her, taking the plate Dobell handed him.

"Yes," she said, leaning into him. He held her on one arm while he ate, then went back to their quarters as she had requested.

An hour later, he got up from bed feeling human again. Minka raised up as he did, smiling, "Now Joshua will be beating on the nursery door for you." Nakam was stretching and yawning after his nap, too.

“I know. I’ll be right there,” he said, glad for his son’s company. But first, he went to the keep, empty at this time. He got down on his knees before the crucifix to thank God for sending Nakham to tell them what to do, and for a young Polonti who listened. “God of heaven, we have a dangerous enemy to deal with, and I don’t know how. Show me what to do about Showalter—I see nothing but a blank wall before me,” he whispered.

He continued to pray a while longer; receiving no enlightenment. But with that first, potentially devastating attack having been thwarted, he couldn’t take their protection for granted. On that thought, he went to the nursery for his impatient son.

Joshua helped him keep an eye on the snobbles cleanup, then the door guard Coxe approached. “Captain, the wall men say that Adele has ridden up alone. First she demanded to know if you were alive, which the men let slip that you were, so now she wants to come in for a chat.”

Efran absorbed this. “At this time of day”—late morning—“she’ll have started very early. . . . Yes, bring her up to the workroom.”

As Coxe saluted and turned away, Efran asked the kitchen to send up a plate and a mild ale, then he sent another sentry to find Minka. Following, he took Joshua up to the workroom to put him under the table while Efran threw himself to his chair to wait. He did alert DeWitt and Estes as to who was about to appear. They sat back in anticipation, putting down their quills.

While waiting, Efran considered other possible exits for the snobbles from the caverns. Sitting up, he asked, “What happened with the house that Dora bought for her son, ah, Beddridge?—the house with the entry to the caverns in the backyard that you had to cover?” This was almost exactly a year ago.

Estes replied, “After Dora backed out of the lease, it was rented again right away. The family there now is using the cover as a deck for entertaining. No other weak spots have appeared around it.”

Efran mulled that over, then asked, “How is Dora?”

Estes looked inquiringly to DeWitt, who said, “She left the Lands shortly afterward. As far as I know, she returned to Westford.”

Efran winced. “That was before the Goulven and the fires.”

“Yes, it was,” DeWitt confirmed. And they lapsed into thoughtful silence.

The plate and ale arrived first, then Minka with Nakam. She had barely released him to the floor and sat herself before Adele was shown in, disheveled and weary, with dark circles under her eyes.

She looked first and only to Efran, who was sitting back in his chair with a slightly sardonic smile, fingers at his lips. Removing his forefinger to point to the plate containing a bowl of stew and flatbread, he said, “Sit down and have a bite.”

Without looking at the food, she collapsed into the chair. “You got the letter,” she breathed.

“Yes, and I appreciate your thinking of us,” Efran said, lifting the message which still lay on the table. “Why did you?”

She glanced down. “He used me as a carrier without bothering to tell me. When I found out what they were, and what they would do. . . .” She looked genuinely shaken. Efran glanced at DeWitt, who slightly rolled his eyes, and Estes, who slightly shook his head. Both believed her to be acting.

Efran told her, “You’ll want to go ahead and eat.” She picked up the spoon to begin on the rabbit stew. “Does Showalter know we survived?” he asked her.

Stirring the stew, she didn’t say anything for several minutes. Finally: “He’s dead.”

Efran regarded her, then looked past her to Minka, who was studying her sister. Minka raised her eyebrows at him and glanced away. He interpreted this to mean that she didn’t know whether Adele was telling the truth.

“How?” Efran asked Adele.

“I killed him,” she said, turning her eyes to him, “when he told me you were dead.”

Efran shifted to casually put both feet to the floor. “Tell me how that happened.”

“We were at dinner when he told me. Alberon was supposed to be there, but he wasn’t. So I picked up the knife by my plate, and went around the table to hug his neck. He said, ‘You think I don’t know you have a knife in your hand?’ He tried to make me drop it, but I stabbed him in the back. Then I went out screaming about Alberon. While everyone was occupied, I took a horse and rode away. After a few hours I had to stop in the trees to rest, but other than that, I came straight here . . . to see . . . whether it was—true.” She gave out then, lowering her face to cry quietly.

In the ensuing silence, Efran looked around the table again. DeWitt deployed a full eye roll; Estes returned to his worksheets; Minka looked conflicted. After a minute, Efran said, “Well, then. You had better finish the stew.” She looked at him, and he added, “Because you’re leaving right away.”

“I prevented you and everyone here from dying,” Adele observed.

Efran glanced away briefly as though amused, and replied, “You allied yourself with a man who was willing to kill a fortress full of innocent people in order to appropriate my charter. I appreciate your concern for us after the fact, but it—*doesn’t change anything.*” The last three words, slower and quieter, were what he wanted to get across to her.

She rose from the chair, and everyone else in the room fully expected her to throw that bowl of stew at him. Efran himself looked ready to duck. But she stiffly walked out and went down to the courtyard. “I need my horse,” she said quietly to the gate guard.

He looked over at Squirt, who said, “You have to wait a minute. He’s been rode hard, and he’s eating.”

Adele glanced down at him while he eyed her defiantly. Then she reached in her jacket pocket to pull out a royal and flip it to him. “Then I’ll wait a minute.”

He caught the royal, looking up at her quickly. She walked out of sight of the front doors, then sat with her back against the fence and dropped off to sleep.

When Squirt brought the horse to her about half an hour later, it lipped her hair, waking her. Groggily, she lifted herself by means of the balusters, then climbed into the saddle. The courtyard guards opened the gates for her

before she got there, and the wall gate guards had them opened for her when she was halfway down Main. Upon her riding out, the faerie trees swished her along.

Adele rode over the old stone bridge, then paused at the intersection of the coastal highway with the main road north. She looked left, toward Crescent Hollow. “Oh, yes, I should ride another eight hours back there to be questioned about the death of Lord Showalter,” she muttered sarcastically. Looking straight ahead, she said, “I can stay in burned-out Westford. It should be rebuilt in five or ten years. Or I can go on up to Eurus, under the rule of the crazy little man who thinks he’s a supernatural.”

She turned her gaze to the right, then, and saw . . . a man in a dark blue uniform riding toward her. He was alone, riding at an easy lope, clearly on his way to the Abbey fortress for one reason or another. So she turned her horse to ride toward him.

When they met, they both pulled to a stop. She was studying a rather nice-looking Polonti, and he was studying a beautiful woman riding alone. “Where did you come from?” she asked.

“Venegas,” he said.

“What—is that a city?” she asked.

He smiled charmingly. “Yes, and we are building shops, and our lumber mill is operating to capacity, and we have bought Barnby’s to make compotes and dry meat,” he said proudly.

“How far is it?” she asked.

“Only about three hours, an easy ride,” he said, interested.

She turned her gaze east. “I’m going to Venegas,” she said, unaware that she had spoken out loud.

“If you wait just a moment, I will ride back with you. I only have to deliver a message,” he offered, smiling.

She tossed her head. “Deliver your message. Then if you catch me, you can ride with me.” She spurred her horse east and the messenger rode quickly over the stone bridge.

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Chapter 17

Hawk, on front-door duty at this time, came to the workroom door to salute. “Captain, Administrator, Steward—messenger from Venegas says they got in a large load of raw lumber from Eviron, want to know what we need.”

Estes immediately began sifting papers. “Yes, I have a list somewhere—here it is. Here’s what Lemmerz, Oxenham, and Hereward tell me they need. That’s for the chapel, DePew’s inn, and the animal pens,” he added in an aside to Efran and DeWitt. To Hawk, he clarified, “That’s our minimum order; we’ll take more for housing.”

Hawk came around the table to take the sheet from Estes’ outstretched hand, then said, “I’ll get this right down to him. He seems to be in a hurry to ride back.” The others glanced at him in mild curiosity, upon which he

elaborated, “Wall gate guards said they saw Adele riding toward Venegas.”

“Oh, no.” The groan came almost simultaneously from the three men; Hawk saluted and left. Minka continued to sit quietly at the far end of the table, where she had been ever since Adele came in.

“What have we unleashed on our closest allies?” DeWitt muttered.

Efran shook his head, then whistled for the guard at the door. A young Polonti stepped into the room, saluting. “Captain?”

“Yes, go down to Captain Barr; tell him I want two scouts sent to Crescent Hollow. Their job is to find out if Lord Showalter is dead, and the fallout from that. I also want two scouts sent to Venegas. Adele has just ridden that way; I want to know what she’s doing,” Efran said.

“Captain,” the boy said, but waited for Efran to dismiss him before striding out.

Then Efran looked tentatively at Minka. “What do you think? About what she said.”

She inhaled, looking away. “I’m not even sure that was Adele. She was . . . really shaken to think you were dead.”

“Yes, that someone beat her to the punch,” Efran muttered. DeWitt snorted. Estes was back in his worksheets. Minka had her eyes down, deeply troubled. Then she abruptly got up to collect Nakam and turn to the door.

“Wait! You wait for me,” Efran ordered from the floor, where he was trying to get hold of Joshua. After a minute of dodging his father’s hands around the tree roots, the baby finally allowed himself to be captured. He congratulated his dad with a pat on his shoulder.

Coming abreast of Minka in the doorway, Efran said quietly, “We can walk around the back grounds or down the switchback. The problem with walking down the switchback is that we have to walk back up it.”

She chuckled reluctantly. “We’ll walk the back grounds.”

“Fine,” Efran said. As she turned, he raised his eyes to Estes, who acknowledged him with a nod.

They went downstairs and through the corridor, where Efran involuntarily glanced aside at the storage room. Seeing nothing new or alarming, he made himself keep walking. Minka appreciated his effort to not get distracted.

Out back, they took their respective babies to the orchard, where Minka released Nakam to sniff in the grass. Joshua wanted to get down, too, which Efran didn’t permit. So Joshua just kept an eye on Nakam’s findings.

“All right, explain it to me,” Efran said.

Minka exhaled, closing her eyes. “She’s in love with you.”

“You’ve been telling me that for months. I don’t see what’s different now,” he said.

“She’s. . . .” Minka was having trouble expressing the difference, which was not a good sign for his being able to understand it. “It was always: she was attracted to you, but wanted wealth. Or, she wanted you, but would rather

have a high position. Or, she could see loving you, but not more than power. Now, it seems that you have finally become her priority. She wants you more than anything. And if she can't have you, she'd rather see you dead."

"Really?" he asked uncertainly.

She turned to him. "Alberon was exactly right when he said that Adele would be fine eternally locked up as his Standing Goddess as long as I was, too. If she couldn't have you, she would make sure that I couldn't have you either."

Efran considered this silently as they walked. She had to pause for Nakam to evacuate, then she picked up his droppings with leaves to toss them over the fence. From there, they continued walking. Efran lifted Joshua to sit on his shoulders and look around. Atop this high seat, Joshua waved and squealed at the archers at practice and the sparring groups in their drills. Those who heard him waved back.

"I'll heed the warning. I'll pray. I've sent her away, which is all I know to do," Efran observed.

"I know. I just—didn't expect it. After she had discarded you, it never occurred to her that you might come to me," she said, eyes still on the ground.

He paused in perception. "You still feel inferior to her."

"Of course," she exhaled.

He groaned, facing her as Joshua dribbled on his head. "Picture me in twenty years, looking like Loriot or Melchior. And I am still demanding you take a bodyguard on the vast Lands, and asking for the same Christmas present that I asked for every year since the last one."

Half-smiling, she regarded his Polonti face with his spine-tingling smile. He added, "And I've already told you what you will look like at forty. Will you please carry that as my pledge to you?"

"Yes," she said. He leaned down to kiss her, and Joshua fell forward to grab her hair with both little fists. She uttered a laughing cry, then Efran had to disengage the chubby little fingers from her windblown curls without being able to see what he was doing.

Not too much later, the messenger Hews was riding with Adele into Venegas, pointing out their new construction, their new shops, and the great load of trees that had been rolled down from Eviron to be processed in their own lumber mill. She admired everything. "Yes, I can stay here. Yes, this will work," she murmured.

"I have given you my name, lady; tell me yours," he said.

"I am Adele, sister of Lady Minka of the Lands. Her husband, Lord Efran, has evicted me," she said quietly, face raised in stoic suffering.

He pulled up abruptly before her, stopping them both. "Stay with me. I will shelter you," he urged.

Lowering her eyes, she murmured, "You are too kind, Hews."

As if she were consenting and not tactfully rebuffing him, he turned to continue their ride. "I have only to drop off our lumber order with the Surchatain, then I will take you to my home."

She cut her eyes to him. “Who is the Surchatain?”

“Surchatain Sewell. He is a very good ruler; he allows us to prosper,” Hews said.

“I would like to meet him, if I could be found worthy,” she said demurely.

He took on a guarded air. “Perhaps later, Lady Adele. It would not be good now.”

Shame-faced, she confessed, “I know; after my flight from the Lands, I must appear unpresentable to his eyes.” He said nothing to this, which made her study him from under her brows.

They arrived at a nice but not luxurious manor in the center of the town. At the gates, the guards looked at them—her—in interest, but Hews dismounted to tie both horses to posts at the back of the entry area. “Wait here. I will be back directly. If anyone talks to you, tell them you are my servant,” Hews said.

“Of course, darling,” she said adoringly, while thinking, *Your SERVANT. Are you SERIOUS?* She watched him stride to the gates to talk to the guards. One pointed to her; Hews shook his head dismissively, then was allowed in. When he was out of sight, Adele dismounted, looking around like a lost child.

One guard approached her. “Who are you?”

Hand submissively at the top button of her dark shirt, she said, “I am Lady Adele, sister-in-law of Lord Efran. He has evicted me from the Abbey Lands, and I have nowhere to go.”

His face took on a half-smile. “Would you care to see Surchatain Sewell?”

“How can I, unpresentable as I am?” she asked, head down.

“Come,” he said, taking her arm.

At the gates, he paused to say something to the other guard in their language, who smiled and nodded. Then the first guard took her into the manor house.

In the receiving room, he spoke to the evident Steward, who looked her up and down. This man then summoned a maid to whom he gave instructions, gesturing to Adele. The young girl spoke to her; Adele peered at her without understanding, so she took her arm to lead her away.

Taking her to a crude washroom, the girl then stripped her and put her in a tub of cold water to wash her vigorously from head to foot. Other servants or laundresses went in or out, all speaking this language that Adele did not understand. All this she endured, knowing it was necessary to meet the Surchatain. And once she was his wife, she would make sure everyone spoke the correct language around her.

Clean and partially dry, she stood shivering with only one small towel as cover while several women came in to look at her. They argued back and forth as three or four dresses were held up to her chin. Being all of inferior make, she didn’t bother expressing a preference. Finally, the women decided on a garish red dress with a lot of black ruffles, and this was pulled down over her head, having no buttons.

She was pushed down to sit on a low stool. Standing again, she lifted the dress to say, “I need lingerie.”

The women peered at her, and she shouted, “Underwear!” pointing to her hips. They laughed at her, shoving her back down to the stool.

Then another woman took charge of her, running a comb so forcefully through Adele’s wet hair that she cried out. This prompted a slap to her face, which rendered her speechless in shock. So, despite the yanking that brought tears to her eyes, she did not complain again.

For the next several hours, Adele’s hair was elaborately braided and arranged in loops on her head. She could hardly imagine what it looked like until the hairdresser, proud of her handiwork, put a silver mirror in front of Adele to see her coiffure. She stared in profound disbelief at the hoops and rings of braids that covered her head.

Then she was given ill-fitting black slippers (still no underwear) and taken out to be escorted by two guards to a drawing room. They brought her in as several men turned from documents scattered on a table. One guard made an announcement, which caused all the men to look at the one in the center of their group, evidently the Surchatain. Adele curtsied to him as best she could, which elicited broad smiles. Incidentally, everyone she had seen thus far was Polonti.

Smiling, the man in the center approached her to ask, “You are known to Lord Efran of the Abbey Lands?”

“Yes, I am Adele, sister of his wife Minka. He has evicted me from the Lands,” she said in pathetic relief upon finding someone who spoke a civilized language.

He paused, unsure of the word *evicted*. So he asked, “Your name is Adele? And he sent you to me? I am Surchatain Sewell.”

“Yes, Surchatain Sewell,” she said without examining the pivotal question. And she was completely unaware that her dress and her hairstyle signaled her special occupation.

His smile was one of surprised delight. He turned to one man to say (in Polonti), “Send Lord Efran a written message to say thank you from me for the gift of the *hookama* Adele, and also that we will be sending his order of lumber immediately.”

The secretary replied with a quick bow, reaching for the writing implements. Sewell excused himself with a wry word to the other men, who laughed and waved him away. He bowed shortly to Adele, offering her his arm. She inclined her head and accepted it. Then he took her out of the drawing room and down the corridor to another room.

After they had entered, he locked the door, and she turned to see a large bed with a thick mattress. She looked back at Sewell, who was complacently undressing.

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Chapter 18

“I should have expected this, after they wouldn’t give me lingerie,” she muttered. Since it was inevitable, she decided to make the best of it. He wasn’t Efran, but he was apparently the highest-ranking man here. So she undressed as well. With just the dress to remove, it didn’t take long.

The next hour was a disappointment because he did what he wanted quickly, without regard for her whispered instructions. Also, he kept getting his fingers caught in her braid hoops. It hurt enough that she finally slapped him. This he enjoyed so much that he slapped her back. So she didn’t do that again.

When he was done, he got up to begin dressing without a word. She sat up to demand, “Wait! Where are you going?”

“Back to work,” he said, lifting his face to smile at her. “You did fine; I will teach you better later.”

“Wait, I’m hungry,” she said almost desperately. No one else here appeared to speak her language.

“Do not worry; I will send Lady Sabine to take care of you.” He opened the door.

“Who is she?” Adele demanded.

He turned back to say with a smile, “My wife.” Then he walked away, leaving the door open.

As Efran and Joshua were about to join Minka at their table for dinner, the door guard brought him a rolled parchment. “From Surchatain Sewell, Captain. The messenger is waiting for your reply.”

“Ah. Thank you.” Efran opened the roll to study it with drawn brows for a moment. “‘*Hookama Addell*’ . . . ?” he whispered. “*Hookama*.” He looked off in concentration, then his face cleared. “Ohhhh.” He repressed a snort, at which Minka looked back at him.

Then he told the guard, “Tell Sewell, ‘you’re welcome.’ Dismissed.” The guard turned back up the corridor, and Efran leaned down to tell Minka, “I have to give this note to Estes. I’ll be right back.”

“All right. What do you want to drink?” she asked.

“The mild ale,” he said, moving away, and she nodded.

Adele redonned the dress to sit on the bed and wait for a long time, but the purported wife of Surchatain Sewell did not come. However, maids, guards and messengers all glanced into the room at her waiting on the bed and smirked.

Having had enough of this, and still very hungry, she got up to find her way back to the washroom. There was nothing of use here, but a side door led to the laundry room. At this time of day, it was unoccupied. Scanning the room, Adele spotted cubicles of folded clothes along the wall.

Riffling through these gently, Adele finally found underclothes, which she quickly put on. The red dress she folded up to put in another cubicle, regardless of the name. Continuing to search, she found a modest dress much

like the maids were wearing. This she put on as well, then began the tedious task of untying and unbraiding numerous loops on her head.

A woman stuck her head in the door, then entered with a stream of rebuke in Polonti and rushed over to begin slapping Adele about the face and head. Normally, Adele would have fought like a bobcat, but glimpsing the woman's elegant dress warned her against this plan, so she lowered her head and quietly submitted until the woman mastered her anger.

When the blows ceased, Adele raised her face to blink and say in a childish voice, "I'm sorry; did I do something wrong? I'm new here." She spoke like a simpleton, cocking her head with a blank expression.

"Oh!" Dropping her shoulders and raising her face in exasperation, the woman issued a stream of invective at the ceiling. Hearing "Sewell" once or twice in the outburst, Adele gathered that this was his wife. She was Polonti, of course, quite beautiful, with her sleek black hair held back with a single gold clip. Adele stood still, folding her hands meekly in front of her, waiting with submissive patience.

The woman then turned back to demand, "You are *hookama* from Efran?"

"A what?" Adele screwed up her face in childish ignorance. "I'm Hews' servant."

"You belong to messenger Hews?" the woman asked, squinting at her.

"Uh huh." Adele nodded affirmation in open-mouthed stupidity.

"Oh." The woman closed her eyes in aggravation, which was considerably less hazardous than her anger. "Go wait at the back gate; I will send him around."

Adele displayed her ignorant face again to say, "I don't know where the back gate is."

"Argh!" the woman cried, slamming open a door. She called someone, who turned out to be a maid, and shouted at her in Polonti. Then the wife stormed out. Adele looked back at the maid, who was gesturing her to follow. Quickly, Adele did.

The maid took her through several corridors, then into a sitting room which had a large glass window giving view into a garden. Looking around as though anxious not to be seen, the maid opened a door from the sitting room into the garden and shoved Adele out. "Back gate," she said, pointing, and Adele quickly went to crouch down beside the gate.

It opened an inch. "Adele?" a male voice whispered.

She jumped up and the gate opened wide enough for Hews to reach in and pull her out, then quickly shut the gate again. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you," she breathed.

He took her arm, briefly regarding her hair in mild disappointment. "Urgh!" she exhaled peevishly, a hand to her braids. "I'm not a hooter; they just made a mistake, but Sewell's wife let me go."

Nodding in confusion, Hews walked her calmly to the back of a shop close by. He sat her down against the back wall, saying, "Wait here. Pretend to not understand anyone who speaks to you."

"That's easy," she muttered. Glancing around, he trotted away.

He returned a few minutes later, before anyone had even noticed her behind the shop. He stood her up to drape a voluminous rebozo over her head and shoulders, wrapping the ends to cover her upper body entirely. Then he walked her two blocks away to a large building faced with many doors and windows.

Opening one door with a key, he said, "I am so good at my job that I have my own home." And she looked into a tiny apartment with a table and two chairs, a fireplace, a washtub, and a wooden pallet for a bed.

"It's lovely," she said tonelessly. "But I haven't had anything to eat all day."

"Sit. I will bring food," he said, coaxing her down to a chair. He left, and she heard the door lock behind him. She began working in earnest on the braids.

Adele had half of her head unbraided by the time Hews returned. Still unbraiding, she watched intently while he unloaded bounty from a cloth bag. He brought out two bottles of beer, which was fine. Then two small loaves of bread. It looked like barley bread. All right, now what? Then he brought out handfuls of raw vegetables and something large wrapped in paper. She kept unbraiding.

Taking up a kettle he said, "You start the fire. I will get water."

"Sure," she said, fiercely unbraiding.

He darted out the door again, and a few minutes later returned with the kettle full of water. This he poured into a pot, observing, "No fire."

"No, there's not," she agreed, working intently on her hair.

So he set to gathering tinder, which he ignited with his flint and firesteel. Then he laid on kindling and wood to produce a nice crackling fire. He placed the pot on a stand over this fire, then took a knife out of his belt to begin chopping up the vegetables on the table. When those were in the pot, he unwrapped the paper from around the bovine tongue, which he also chopped in chunks to go in the pot. Adele swayed slightly, but kept unbraiding.

Suddenly she stopped and said, "Where is your garderobe?"

He looked up blankly at the word. ". . . gardeobe?"

"I'll use a chamber pot," she conceded.

"Oh, there is pit in back of the building," he said, stirring the stew.

"A pit in back of the building," she repeated in shock. "A public latrine."

"It's getting dark. I had better take you," he said, standing.

"So I won't be assaulted?" she gasped.

He looked confused. "So you won't fall in."

She swayed where she sat, but he took her arm to lead her out in the murky twilight to a vast stinking hole over which boards had been placed with strategic openings. With two-thirds of her frizzled hair standing out from her

head and a third still braided, she stared down in unbelief that she was about to use a public latrine.

Thinking that she didn't know how, Hews pulled up her dress and pulled down her bloomers to sit her carefully over one opening. Then he gave her a handful of straw. Since they were here, he sat to go as well, and turned to smile at her on the board next to him. When they were done, they washed their hands in the public washbasin, then he led her back to his little dwelling in the dark purple twilight.

In another hour the stew was ready. Adele ate her entire portion and drank all of her beer, then fell down on his pallet with a half-inch mattress. He disrobed to lie down with her, and she did not even care that he crawled on top of her on the narrow bed.

In the morning (which was January 12th, for all she cared) Adele barely woke when Hews got up to begin dressing. "I must go in to work. You stay here; you are safe here. If I have to ride out with messages, I will come here first."

She sat up, a portion of her hair still braided. "Where is my horse?" There was a pouch containing at least 30 royals on that animal.

"Oh." He paused in thought. "It would be taken to the stables. I will try to find it for you when I come back tonight."

"Thank you. That would be lovely," she said in exaggerated and insincere gratitude, folding her hands over her knees. He leaned over to kiss her with a happy sigh, and she smiled at him. "Oh. Breakfast?" she asked.

He paused in concern, then took a few silver pieces out of his pocket. These he placed on the table. "This is all I have until I get paid in a few days. Go to the garden shop; stay away from the baker." He paused at another thought, then brushed it off and went out.

Adele sat where she was for a moment, then set to unbraiding the rest of her hair with grim determination. When that was accomplished, she pulled her hair back and tied it with a string she found on the floor. Then she covered herself with the rebozo and went out.

The latrine was largely unoccupied this morning, so she used it, washing her hands with a grimace. Then, fully covered with the rebozo, she began demurely walking up one street after another, just looking. Abruptly, she stopped to stare at two Polonti who were standing by a food stall, eating and talking. Observing their healthy horses and their good tradesmen clothing, she peered at their faces.

With a light scream, she ran at them. Startled, they pivoted toward her. "You! You're from the Abbey! Your name is—Gosse!" she hazarded.

The men's faces froze; the man she accosted said, "*He aha kou makemake?* [What do you want?] *Pupule oe!* [You're crazy!]"

"Take me back to the Abbey with you!" Adele said savagely, clinging to his jacket with claws of steel.

The other man said quietly, "If you like. Here, have some breakfast first." He sat her down on a bench with his venison on a stick and bottle of beer. She seized both with a gasp, taking a long swig of the beer before chomping down on the meat. Meanwhile, the men backed quietly away with their horses. When they were out of sight around the stall, they mounted and rode west, laughing hard.

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Chapter 19

When Adele had finished inhaling the venison and beer, she looked around to see Efran's men gone. So she replaced the rebozo firmly over her head and shoulders to quietly walk up the street again. Spotting an unattended basket, she picked it up as further cover, and continued to walk aimlessly around blocks. However, she was always careful to maintain sight of the main road west.

Finally, she came upon an unattended horse carelessly tethered outside a shop. Stopping near the horse to pretend to rearrange items in her basket, she scanned the area for witnesses as she untied the reins with one hand. Then with desperate quickness, she jumped up to the saddle, kicking the horse to a furious run westward. Moments later, the animal's owner came out to find it gone.

Looking around in panic, his eyes followed the sound of retreating hoofbeats, and he ran into the road to see his horse diminishing in the distance. So he pointed and cried, "*Aihue! Aihue!* [thief]" Shortly, a couple of soldiers rode up, to whom he emphatically explained the situation. So they spurred after the miscreant.

By the time Efran's scouts were nearing the Lands, he was in the notary's shop listening to Ryal: "I finally found a few references to snobbles in an old book on aberrations of nature. Originally known as *eteres*, they are clearly of artificial origin, and as such are too fragile to survive over time. As you've seen, they are creatures of the dark; once introduced into a suitable environment, such as the caverns, they reproduce quickly, feeding on debris, insects, algae or liverwort. But the more they reproduce, the more quickly their food sources are depleted, so they roam into new areas, such as the storage room, in search of more." Ryal was flipping gently through the book, referencing a passage here or there as he talked.

"How can we eradicate them completely?" Efran asked.

"I don't know. I would periodically send fires into the cavern and see what drops. I would also temporarily seal the storage-room closet but check it and the trap door from time to time. Our problem is, the caverns in the hill are so extensive, a few of the snobbles may survive to explode again when their food sources return," Ryal said.

"I see. Thank you, Ryal," Efran said.

As he began to turn out of the shop, Ryal extended the book to him. "You might want this. It's from your library."

Efran took it with a wry smile, pocketing it. Outside by his horse, he paused to murmur, "God of heaven, this menace can only be contained by Your power. Help us. Please."

He mounted preparatory to riding back up to the fortress, then heard shouts and whistles from the wall gates. Turning, he saw the gates open to the scouts that had been sent to Venegas yesterday. So he redirected his horse there, loping down Main (and stopping at the yellow crossings) to arrive at the gates amid laughter and a lot of crosstalk.

Goss and Tiras were breathless from riding and laughing over their near escape. "What . . . ?" Efran said with a vague scowl, dismounting to talk.

“Captain, she recognized me,” Goss said, wiping his eyes.

“What? Adele?” Efran asked.

Goss confirmed, “The same, Captain. We had seen her yesterday being taken into Borthwick—Sewell’s manor house in the middle of the city. Then much later in the day, we watched a woman being sneaked out of the garden, and we felt it must be her. But we didn’t find out for sure until this morning, when we were having breakfast at one of the quick-eat stalls. Here she comes, screaming my name and latching on to me, crying to be taken back to the Abbey. Tiras here deserves a commendation for giving up his breakfast to distract her so that we could get away.”

Tiras nodded in firm agreement, receiving pats on the back for his heroic sacrifice. Efran grunted, “She’s coming back. I can’t let her in to destroy my wife again. What of Alberon?” he asked rhetorically, as no one here knew. “All right, then, go get your midday meal—”

“Captain,” someone said in warning, and everyone at the gates looked east, where he was pointing.

The men erupted in laughing groans; Efran pressed his lips together as he watched a determined female kick an exhausted horse to lope toward them. Her frizzled blonde hair was flying in all directions. Efran turned to one of the men to instruct, “Bring a pan of water. Put it outside the gates here.”

“Captain,” he acknowledged, running off. He had brought over the filled pan and placed it on the ground outside the gates before she was near enough to dismount, so the guards had them closed again before she arrived.

Pulling up, she fell from the saddle as the horse shook her off, then lowered his nose to the water. Breathing hard, Adele slapped at the faerie tree branches while she surveyed the men on the other side of the gates. Then she said through gritted teeth, “Venegas is a rat hole.”

No one replied; none of them would dare answer her but Efran, and he was silent. Zeroing in on him, she said, “You have to let me in.”

“Why?” he asked quietly.

“I have nowhere else to go,” she said.

“That could be a downside of murdering your host,” he observed.

“He deserved it,” she uttered.

Eyeing her crimped hair, he asked in concern, “Is Sewell all right?”

She leaned on the gate to mutter, “He’s pathetic in bed.” The men winced at the cold-blooded appraisal. She raised her blue eyes to Efran to add, “I want you. I’ve only ever wanted you.”

Efran sighed, “Keep looking; you’ll find someone who suits you better. Only—you’ll have to walk.” He nodded to the east. Everyone but Adele looked at the riders advancing from Venegas. One man was shouting and shaking his fist at her. She glanced at him indifferently.

As the indignant party arrived at the gates, the victim was loudly demanding that the woman be punished for

stealing his horse. Efran cut him short: "Take your horse and go home."

The wronged man turned on Efran (in workman's clothes, as he always wore) to shout at him as well, but another of his party informed him that he was berating the Lord of the Abbey Fortress. So he went silent, and as instructed, took up his horse's reins. They started back to Venegas at a walk, for the exhausted horse could do no more.

Having prevailed on this point, Adele looked expectantly to Efran. He met her eyes and whispered, "No." It was final.

Another noise, that of rolling wheels, drew their attention, this time to the west. And they watched a driver approach on a gaily colored hard-topped cart. He was middle-aged, with a clean-shaven, honest face and a decent suit slightly too small for him.

He drew the horse up to the gates for those standing around to study the ornate lettering on the side of his cart, which read, "Cadogan's Wonder Potions for All Afflictions." In smaller letters beneath it was the affirmation, "Guaranteed to Work!"

Before looking at the cart, Efran locked eyes with the driver. *He knows who I am*, Efran thought. Then the driver, presumably Cadogan, glanced up to the Abbey fortress to see people going in and out as usual. *And now he knows we survived.*

"Ho, there, good people. I'm Doctor Cadogan, offering my invigorating Wonder Potion to remedy many and various diseases, hurts and malfunctions. I see a lot of healthy men here, but one or two with digestive issues and another with chronic headaches. Care to try my potion for only a silver piece?" He had to bat away the faerie tree limbs that poked him dismissively.

Efran said, "Regrettably, no."

"Are you sure no one above might need my help?" Cadogan asked in disappointment, eyeing the white fortress at the top of the switchback.

"Yes, I'm sure. Where are you going?" Efran asked.

"Well, I've been to Venegas, and just come from Crescent Hollow. I think I'll take a jaunt up to Eviron; haven't been there since the new chap took over the logging," Cadogan said judiciously.

Efran said, "Good. I'll give you a royal to let the woman ride with you to Eviron."

Several heads spun to him, including Adele's. Cadogan said, "Oh, certainly; absolutely my pleasure. It's lovely to have company on long rides now and then."

So Efran fished a royal out of his pocket, which he gave to Adele through the gate. She took it, glaring at him, then climbed up to the driver's seat and flounced down, covering her head with the rebozo again. The hand with the royal went into her pocket.

"Oh. Very well," Cadogan said, a little bemused. Then he nodded at Efran and the men. "Good day to you all." They watched him turn the horse north to drive over the old stone bridge and out of sight.

As Cadogan left, Efran studied the cursive lettering on the back of the cart, which read, "Cadogan'S Works!"

The S and W, both capitalized, were joined together by various curlicues—a design which Efran recognized from the watermark on Showalter’s stationery. And he had no doubt that Cadogan was Showalter in disguise.

“He’s just rubbing my nose in it, now,” Efran muttered. Of course Showalter knew that Efran had recognized him. That was merely a setup for the next chapter.

“Carry on,” Efran said to his men, who saluted as he remounted to return to the fortress courtyard. But when he gave up his horse, he turned to the eastern hillside. He needed to go get Joshua; he needed to talk to Minka, but first he needed to walk and think.

In the cart on the northbound road, Cadogan and his passenger rode silently for several minutes. Then something caught Adele’s eye, and she lowered the rebozo to see Showalter driving the cart. The suit hung rather limply on him. Exhaling, she said, “That was rather mean of you to let me think I had killed you.”

He laughed mildly. “I wanted you to bask in your success for just a little while. After all, it was such a good effort.”

She looked unimpressed, glancing around vacantly. “So where are we really going?”

“To a cozy little camp off the road just ahead. Yes, there’s the turn-off, about quarter-mile up,” he said, watching.

“There’s no one in this area to buy your potions,” she said with a tinge of sarcasm.

“That’s a shame, because they really are effective. But my aim remains what it ever was: to acquire the power of the hill, which means divesting Lord Efran of his charter,” Showalter said placidly.

“Kill him, you mean,” she said.

His brow furrowed. “I’m afraid I don’t see any other way to get it done.”

She grunted, looking away.

On the eastern hillside, Efran walked until he tired, then he sat on a protruding rock. He looked east toward the fields being planted, and the new pens for the cattle, the sheep and the goats, then shook his head. “How can I fight a man who comes up with something like snobbles for an attack?” he murmured.

“When did you ever have to fight all by yourself?” someone asked. Efran began to turn around, but the same voice said, “Take care; there’s an adder at your back.”

Pausing, he asked, “What do I do?”

“Sit very still,” the voice said.

Efran barely turned his head. “For how long?”

“Until you see it—” And Efran was startled by an adder flying over his head to land on the rocks in front of him.

He turned around to see Nakham ambling down the hill toward him, lips pursed in a satisfied smile. “He’s not hurt,” he said, sitting beside Efran on the rock.

“I wouldn’t care if he were,” Efran muttered.

“No, now, they have their uses. You want them to help control your rat population. In fact, all natural creatures have a use,” Nakham said.

“It’s the unnatural ones I have to contend with,” Efran said, looking off.

“Not by yourself,” Nakham repeated.

Efran studied his strange hat, his shapeless jacket, and his somewhat vacant expression. Then he asked, “Are you the angel of the hill?”

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Chapter 20

Nakham scrunched his face up. “I prefer to call myself ‘the guardian of the fortress.’”

“Yet Minka knew you years before she came here,” Efran observed.

Nakham observed, “You’ll have noticed how important Minka is to the life of the fortress. For her to be here at all, her protection had to start long before she came.”

Efran’s jaw tightened. It took him a while to get out, “I couldn’t live without her.”

“I know,” Nakham said.

“You’re the one who righted the hill and the fortress after Symphorien knocked out the hillside for her nest,” Efran said in sudden comprehension.

“That was fun,” Nakham admitted wryly.

“What about the Destroyer five months ago?” Efran demanded. “Would you have repaired the fortress had I not found the doors?”

Nakham shook his head, lips puckered. “I’m afraid the Destroyer outranks me. I’d ’a’ been out of a job as surely as you’d ’a’ been out of a home.”

Efran looked alarmed. “Is he still—out there somewhere?”

Nakham lowered his head to concede, “Waiting.”

“Something else to worry about. And now I’ve sent off Adele to help Showalter. What do I do; what do I do?” Efran groaned, pressing his head into his palms, his elbows braced on his knees.

“Haven’t you always known what to do when the time came to act?” Nakham asked, his wide mouth curled in mild rebuke.

Efran lifted up. “Yes. At least—I did what I had to do at the time. And you were there to tell Enon what to do.”

“Part of my job,” Nakham said, stroking his throat.

Efran smiled at his preening, then he squinted. “What was El Toqev?”

“Oh!” Nakham almost fell off the rock for laughing. “The worst impression of me I’ve ever seen. Come now; think about his answers to your questions and you’ll kick yourself for not seeing through him right away.”

Efran looked wounded. “He quoted the Scripture from the keep!”

“Didn’t the devil do the same?” Nakham asked, flattening his lips so that he looked like a frog.

“And he—told me to abide!” Efran protested.

“Well, of course, he didn’t want you to think too hard about any of it,” Nakham said. “The way he used it, he meant to sit back and do nothing. The correct meaning is to do what you should be doing all along.”

“I understand,” Efran sighed. “What I need to do is go get Joshua and Minka. So—” He stood, but Nakham was gone. So Efran began working his way back to the courtyard. “Abide,” he muttered.

As the courtyard guards opened the gates for him, young Salk said, “Nice flip o’ the snake, Cap’n.”

Efran paused. “Did it look like I did that?”

“Didn’t you? It sailed right over your head!” Salk said. The other gate guard, Eymor, nodded.

“Oh,” Efran exhaled a laugh, going in to free his son from the nursery. Then they two went out to find Minka and Nakam on the back grounds, and bring them in.

It was almost time for dinner, so when everyone had filed in to grab plates and seats at the benches, Commander Lyte went to the front of the hall to ask for their attention. When the hall was sufficiently quiet, he said, “It’s hard to believe that it’s only been two days since we were attacked by hundreds of thousands of flesh-eating creatures. Yet here we are, carrying on as usual. We cleared out the point of entry for the creatures, then the caverns, as far as we know, with only minor injuries to show for it—

“Except for one man. Gaul, the first on the scene, was the one to take the brunt of the initial attack while the rest of us were just trying to figure how to fight them. Gaul, for your courage and your pain, I am pleased to confer on you this commendation.”

He gave the insigne to a man by his side, who began trotting it to the bench where Gaul was struggling to stand. Lyte said, “Rather than aggravate your injuries, I’m asking my Aide Gabriel to present it to you.” So when Gaul had gotten to his feet, Gabriel pinned the insigne on his jacket and shook his hand. The dining hall filled with applause; Gaul raised a hand in acknowledgment and sat again.

When the noise died down, Lyte said, “Enon, come forward.” The young Polonti, no older than 13 or 14, came to the front in nervous excitement at the prospect of being commended for his part in subduing the snobbles. Trembling slightly, he stood beside the Commander as Lyte said, “Enon, you are one of many young Polonti who have come to the forefront of battle with courage and resourcefulness. In our fight with these creatures, you

demonstrated more than that—you showed the ability to listen and quickly put your findings to use. It is certain that our losses would have been much heavier, possibly to the breaking point, had you not brought smoking torches to the door.

“Therefore, for your quick thinking, courage, and lifesaving actions, I wish to award you the Abbey Fortress Meritorious Cross,” Lyte finished. He turned to Gabriel (who had made it back to the front by this time) to receive the silver cross and pin it to the boy’s uniform jacket. Enon stood stunned, for the Meritorious Cross (carried over from the army of Westford) was the highest award given to Abbey soldiers. Many men—most of the men—served out their whole careers without receiving it. Faeries who were perched on the ceiling rafters applauded, and the fortress bells pealed loudly.

Enon restrained the tears as his comrades, the great majority of whom were older than he, rose to their feet to applaud. He remembered to shake the Commander’s hand, then began stumbling back to his table, wherever it was. But when he looked up to see Captain Efran and Moiwahine Minka standing for him, he embarrassed himself by crying.

So it was a wonderful dinner for all. Efran, reflecting on the fact that their lives had been saved by the actions of a boy in a moment of great stress, then believed Nakham.

That evening, holding Minka in bed, Efran asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yes, as long as you are,” she said, nestling into him.

“I can start worrying again any time now. Showalter came to pick up Adele from our gates,” he said. Minka turned her eyes up to him warily, and he recounted her return from Venegas, then Cadogan’s appearance.

She thought about that, then said, “It’s like a play. Actors coming on stage, performing their part for the story that has to be told.”

He raised his head slightly. “You look at it as a story?”

“Of course, so we can see again what God does. We have been praying; Earnshaw is leading prayers in the keep. We just wait to see what we’re supposed to do.”

“Have you been talking to Nakham again?” he asked suspiciously.

“Occasionally,” she said drowsily.

“He’s the angel of the hill,” Efran told her.

She murmured, “Good that he gets a walkabout now and then.” And she was asleep.

The following morning, January 13th, Estes and DeWitt were at their usual tasks in the workroom while Efran was under the table trying to persuade Joshua to give over whatever it was he had in his mouth. At that time, another soldier came to the door, saluting. “Fellowes reporting, Captain. . . . Captain?”

“Yes,” Efran said, rising from under the table with an expression of distaste. He carried something in his palm which he tossed out of the east-facing window. Looking down, he grimaced. “Sorry!” Then he turned back to the young soldier. “Yes?”

“Captain, this is going to sound strange,” Fellowes began uncertainly.

“Then I probably need to hear it,” Efran said, wiping his hand on his pants.

Fellowes said, “Yes, sir. Well, I woke up this morning with the strong conviction that we need to . . . pour water on the grass all around the walls. It seemed so stupid, I set it aside, but the feeling just gets stronger--”

Efran whistled, and the sentry at the door, Shane, stepped in and saluted. Efran said, “Go with Fellowes to alert all the men to drop whatever they’re doing and water the grounds all around the walls. Everyone turns out with buckets, and have them keep water buckets at the wall. Now.”

The men saluted and ran out. Efran muttered, “And don’t run down the stairs, except for today; just take care not to fall.”

DeWitt glanced up over his spectacles. “An attack by fire, then?”

“Possibly. In any case, I can’t afford to ignore promptings,” Efran said. “It’s been a few weeks since we’ve had rain. . . . The strong north wind has pretty well dried out the meadowgrass around us.”

Shortly, he went out to the courtyard to look down on the men’s efforts. And he saw bucket lines from the Passage, the community well, and even the lake. Yes, there were unquestionably hundreds of men out watering, particularly around the mill. Also, they had evidently warned plotters to water, for those with plots along the wall were also rushing out to water their grounds.

Efran stood in thought, looking north. Did Showalter go all the way to Eviron? *No*, Efran scoffed; he’d stay closer to attack. But a grass fire, while potentially devastating, seemed so—common. Too banal for a show-off like Showalter. Looking up to the sky, Efran turned to call for water buckets to be filled and arrayed around the fortress.

An hour later, small, random fires began appearing in the meadowgrass here and there. Men promptly ran out with buckets to douse them. Efran went out to the courtyard to look. The men’s efforts were successful thus far, but Efran noted that there was no apparent cause of the fires—they just spontaneously erupted. This was uncomfortably reminiscent of DeVenter’s dragon.

Then the fires began to break out in the east meadowlands, near the animal pens. The men had a few fire buckets on hand, but not nearly enough to extinguish the many small fires, which quickly merged into a large one. To save the panicky animals, the herdsman opened the pens to release them.

Next, fires began breaking out on the plots. Leaseholders ran out with buckets; neighbors assisted in extinguishing the flames near their own land. While these were successfully managed, the men looked in concern at the fires in the eastern meadowland burning out of control.

They waited, watching. Then a fireball fell out of the sky onto the chapel under construction, engulfing it. While men ran over with buckets, other fireballs began falling: on DePew’s inn under construction, on homes, on Croft’s, on individual fields. Everyone began scrambling in panic. “God of heaven,” Efran murmured, watching.

Following, fireballs began raining on the hilltop, hitting the stables, the orchards, the gardens, the woods, and the fortress rooftop. Efran, in the courtyard, had to dodge flaming balls that seemed to be aimed at him personally.

For several minutes the hilltop looked as though it would be consumed by an inferno. The hot wind of the conjoined fires rose above the fortress to meet the cool January air, and. . . .

That is one explanation for what happened next. Another is—“Ino!” cried a young Polonti gate guard, scrambling to his feet. For there was a sudden darkness, a cold, whipping wind. Black, angry thunderclouds that covered the sky released a furious outpouring of torrential rain.

Sizzling clouds of steam mixed with the rain obscured Efran’s view of the Lands, except to see that the red was completely gone. The sudden downpour lasted about a half hour, long enough to drench every inch of land south of Westford to the Sea.

Adele was awakened at this time by a deluge of water pouring onto her cot through a ripped seam in the canvas of the tent above her. Screaming, she rolled out of the overturned cot to gain her footing and scramble into clothes. While the pounding rain buckled the tent to soak her, she was flinging invective on her host and his stupid idea of shelter.

She groped her way out of the collapsed tent to see him standing pensively in the downpour about fifty feet south of the campsite. After staggering through new mud pits, she drew up beside him while he studied a sooty glass flask in his hand. Weaving slightly, she breathed in fury, “I’m soaking wet and what are you doing?”

He looked up, placidly blinking in the rain. “Just releasing a precursor, dear girl. The rain will stop momentarily, and I’ll get a fire going to dry you. Give me just a moment to throw something else out there.”

Efran gazed over the Lands. The new inn was badly damaged; the chapel a total loss, but they were only in the beginning stages of construction. The rest of the hits were isolated and repairable, even the hit on Croft’s. Efran exhaled; it could have been infinitely worse.

He looked up as the last of the clouds cleared to permit a benign coastal sun to shine down on them. Efran whispered, “Thank You, God of heaven—” But something else was coming. Something was stirring. Efran looked over to the eastern hillside.

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Chapter 21

Focusing intently on the rocky, barren eastern hillside, Efran thought at first that there was an earthquake—it looked as though the whole terrain were in motion. Peering, he saw that it wasn’t the ground, but something on top of it. Shortly, that moving layer left the hillside to come toward the courtyard, the switchback, and the plots below.

It was a tsunami of snakes. The hillside adders had come out en masse, apparently responding to a summons. But so many of them! There could not be that many snakes on the hillside; their numbers had to have been augmented, somehow. Efran ran quickly up the fortress steps to shut the doors, then he took up the walking stick that Nakham had left by the steps.

As the adders swarmed into the courtyard, the young Polonti gate guards scaled the fence to sit on the rails.

Leaning down with their swords, they swept the blades through any rising bodies. This was effective, as the snakes could not climb the balusters. But it also meant the boys were trapped.

Efran stood on the top step to club the snakes with the walking stick. On level ground, that would have been futile, but the steps impeded their progress and the doors protected his back. So he kept swinging, hearing shouts relayed from the back grounds, where Tourjee's garden crew had attempted to get back to work. Glancing to the plots below, Efran glimpsed frantic activity as the adders emerged onto the main east-bound road.

Hearing something else, Efran paused. It was Pia in the woods, singing. She was using her gift of *aina*, the ability to command animals, to call—something. Efran didn't know what, but the boys on the fence were raising their swords, laughing. And Pia continued her song.

Efran fell back against the doors as great flapping wings descended in front of him, and his immediate view was filled by an eagle, one of many that made their nests on the southern cliffs of the hilltop. The huge bird closed its claws around three or four writhing adders and lifted off with them.

Shortly, more eagles, buzzards, and hundreds of crows converged to feast on the snakes. There was the drumming of countless wings, the screeching and cawing of predatory birds that thronged in for a gorging. They swarmed not only the hillside, but the road that the snakes were attempting to cross. Efran could not see that below the birds, other predators—badgers, foxes, and feral cats—were helping themselves to the snakes that had crawled into holes or other hiding places.

In minutes, the chaos subsided; the birds ascended, and the hilltop was still. The few remaining adders writhed in their death throes or slithered rapidly back underground. Efran breathed, "Thank You, God of heaven, for the gift of dominion that You gave us. . . ." Then he broke off, looking around. Something else was in the works. Feeling the gathering of power, Efran peered at the partly forested area on a ridge a few miles north of the Lands.

On the edge of those woods, Showalter stood looking at the staff in his hand, carved in the shape of a snake. But it was useless now, cracked down the middle. "How are they resisting all this?" he muttered in aggravation. Behind him, a small man in a green tweed suit with a matching flat cap was curiously, and unwisely, approaching. He picked up an empty flask to sniff it.

Suddenly aware of a trespasser, Showalter wheeled on him. "Leave that alone!" he roared, whacking the little man on the head with his staff. He fell down, sighing in death. Then his small body simply evaporated. But there were muted voices behind him murmuring in outrage.

Showalter returned to his task. Frowning at the cracked staff, he muttered, "You will not be able to resist my next venture, Lord Efran."

In the woods behind him, Adele hurried over to sit down by a small fire, her shivering unabated. "Is this little bitty fire the best you can do? I thought you were powerful, or something. If Efran caught you in person, he'd snap your skinny neck with one hand. What a failure of a wizard. You can't even make a good fire!" she vented to Showalter.

"It will burn higher as the ground dries, dear," he said absently, putting the useless stick aside.

"Well I'm cold *now*," she spat. "I know you're busy playing with your toys there, but I'm hungry and COLD."

He closed his eyes. "Just a minute more, and it will all be over. Now is the time to rise to the heights." He began inhaling regular, deep breaths, palms uplifted.

“Yes, I see your power with that shoddy little tent,” she sneered. “I wish Alberon had stayed a little longer last night,” she murmured, with a sigh.

Showalter opened his eyes again to say sarcastically, “Yes, it was so nice of him to drop by. Very amusing that he thinks he’s earned any of the Abbey Treasury, which we’ll shortly have all to ourselves.” He glossed over the fact that he had made the same promise to another young woman.

“What were you and Alberon arguing about? What of his do you have?” she asked curiously.

“Just a trinket that I acquired by my superior power, as I am not bound by any provisions for humans,” Showalter said wryly. “For now, I require you to sit by quietly until this last demonstration is complete. And then you will see your little Lord Efran crushed underfoot once for all.” Again he closed his eyes, raising his palms.

Adele broke out in screeching laughter. “Is that what this is? You think you’re scaring Efran with thunderstorms?”

He opened his eyes again. “Be still and be quiet.”

“Or what?” she hooted. “You know, I don’t think you’re all that powerful. So I hit a bone and didn’t kill you. If Efran had been holding that knife, it would have gone clear through your chest.”

“Be quiet,” he said in a low voice.

“I’m trying to be, but you’re making me laugh!” she cried. “Old man with delusions of power. Sets up a tent that can’t even hold up under the rain!”

“Be still. Be quiet,” he said, almost trembling.

“All right, Grandpa,” she snorted. Then she sneered, “Weak old man. Can’t even keep it up. At least Ryal could satisfy a woman—”

He wheeled on her in a rage. “You will be still and quiet until I give you leave!” With a sudden drawing, she was then still and quiet.

Calming himself, Showalter turned once again to close his eyes, inhale deeply, and raise his hands, palms up. Then he paused, opening his eyes. Much as it pained him to admit it, she had a point about the Polonti lord. Surely this last demonstration will bury him. But . . . there was the tiniest chance that the brash Polonti might thwart it as well. So, just in case. . . .

Reluctantly, Showalter drew a knife from his belt. Kneeling to place his left hand on the sandy ground, he winced deeply, then with a swift stroke, cut off the thumb of his left hand. Whining, he used the bloody knife to dig a hole in the soft earth in which to bury the severed finger. “Deal with *that*, Lord Efran,” he muttered.

He stood to lift his hands again. In irritation, he had to order his left hand to stop bleeding twice before it obeyed. Then he began speaking words.

Nakham came to Efran’s side in the courtyard as he was peering north. “What is it?” Nakham asked, pursing his lips as he gazed into the distance with him.

“I don’t know,” Efran whispered. “I’m feeling something strange—something . . . growing.”

“Really?” Nakham asked, pushing his hat back a little to get a wider view.

“Is that something coming out of the trees?” Efran asked.

“Where?” Nakham asked, peering as well.

“There—a mile or two east of the main road. There’s a stand of elms, one or two old oaks on that ridge. Good hunting ground for wild pigs. But—” Efran broke off as he watched a gray dome slowly rise up out of the trees. By this time, Minka, Estes, DeWitt and several soldiers were observing from the second-floor balcony.

The young Polonti gate guards had climbed down from the railings to squint into the distance. Captains Towner and Rigdon, as well as many of their men, had congregated in the courtyard to look. With Nakham at his side, Efran focused on the trees. The onlookers all watched the gray dome rise to reveal a face underneath, and a neck and shoulders beneath that. A gray-haired man rose up from the trees, growing taller and broader each moment.

He looked to be dressed in a flowing black robe trimmed in silver which expanded with him as he grew in height and breadth. Finally, when he was about a hundred feet tall, he stepped over the trees to begin striding south, his eyes fixed on the Abbey fortress. Everyone in the courtyard, and many on the Lands, watched helplessly as the giant approached to claim their Lands for himself.

Nakham leaned over to whisper to Efran, “What do you do now?”

Efran slowly shook his head. “Nothing. There is nothing we have—nothing I can do. God of heaven, I am powerless.”

“That’s exactly right,” Nakham said, and he started laughing. “You’re right!”

Efran turned to him in pained disbelief, and the men stared at him in contempt. Nakham pursed his lips, hitched up his pants, and walked over to the courtyard gates. “Open ’em,” he instructed the boys. They looked to Efran, who nodded. They opened the gates so that the angel of the hill could stride out in his funny hat and sloppy suit.

The courtyard observers were torn between watching Nakham jauntily descend the switchback and the gray-haired giant approach with long strides, his robe swinging with every step. He crushed trees as though they were weeds, and stepped over the gully as one would a crack in the road. He took no notice of the solitary figure coming toward him, who certainly did not merit any notice. But as Showalter approached the walls of the Abbey Lands, and Nakham departed the switchback to walk down Main, something began to happen.

Nakham began to grow. Striding down Main, he grew about two feet per step, then four feet, then eight feet. At the same time, his clothes and his hair began to change—they grew lighter, tighter, yet somehow flowing from him like currents of water, or air. By the time he reached the gate, he was about forty feet tall, clothed in the wind, with a face that looked to be carved out of granite. The gates he merely stepped over, taking care to not damage the faerie trees, which were bending far out of his way.

Showalter saw him and raised his face to laugh, as Nakham was less than half his height. Showalter grew another twenty feet for good measure. They were only about a half mile apart at this time. Showalter advanced eagerly, sweeping his arms out, while Nakham stepped over the road and stood in a meadow to wait, looking up at the approaching figure, still twice his own height.

Showalter drew up to loom over him, reaching down with one hand. But then there was a terrific explosion of light like a nova. All the observers, even as far away as the courtyard, turned their faces or raised their arms against the blinding light. When it subsided enough for them to look again, they saw a tremendous pillar of light towering over the hundred-twenty-foot-tall Showalter as though he were a small dog.

Squinting through the blinding white light, the Landers watched this gigantic column that they knew as a man in a funny hat bend down and pick up the puny Showalter. Rearing back, the angelic being threw him high in the air toward the fortress.

The courtyard observers dropped to the ground. Efran ducked, but kept his head up to watch the screaming figure in black sail high over the fortress. Those in the courtyard slowly picked themselves up to watch him continue to rise in a steep trajectory several miles high, until he was practically a dot in the blue. And then he began to descend.

At that point, everyone on the front grounds of the fortress ran to the back to watch Showalter land, wherever that would turn out to be. He had been flung so high, they all had several minutes to find a good viewing spot on the back grounds for his eventual landing.

When he finally came into view again as a discernible human figure, they could hear him still screaming. But the observers were unable to see much more than that, for he had also been flung far out over the Sea. They watched his 120-foot-tall form plummet to the water, with the sound of the splash reverberating through the air. Minutes later, the waves created by his splashdown surged up forty feet to wash over the cliffs and run through the fence into the orchard. And the bells tolled in jubilation.

Everyone stood frozen for a minute, then Efran turned with a hop to run back around the fortress to the front courtyard, soldiers following him. There, he looked for Nakham, but he was gone. Efran breathed, "God of heaven, You have delivered us, *again*. May we remember this; may we ever abide in You."

When the courtyard gate guards hurried back to their posts, Efran looked down on them. They lowered their heads in shame at having run off, but he said, "Get me a horse."

"Captain!" Ayling ran toward the stables.

"Where are you going, sir?" Captain Rigdon asked.

Efran looked north again. "To wherever Showalter came from up there."

Rigdon said, "Requesting permission to come, Captain."

"Granted. Whoever wants. I may need help when I find it," Efran said.

Shortly, Efran had a horse and about thirty volunteers. As he was about to mount, Minka appeared on the front steps with Joshua. Efran paused in dismay. He looked at her; she looked at him and said, "I'm about to drop him." He had gotten too heavy for her to carry around several months ago. And his face was red from crying because he hadn't seen his father practically all day.

Walking over to them, Efran turned his head to say, "Another horse, please." Whereupon half of the men offered their horses to her, insisting they'd get another.

While Efran draped the sling over his shoulder and got Joshua settled in it to ride, Minka chose a horse that was only a little larger than Rose. The man who had given it up for her, Stourt, helped her mount before running back to the stables for another.

As they rode out, Efran carried Joshua lying down on his left arm, which made for a rocking motion that put him right to sleep. The faerie trees waved their branches high in exaltation and the streets quickly filled with clapping, cheering Landers who saw their homes and livelihoods saved. Riding past them, Efran shook his head, scowling. "I didn't do anything! Thank God!" And they cheered in agreement.

The search party exited the wall gates with the faerie trees swinging so wildly that Efran was afraid they'd knock someone off his horse. Then he made the group stop right where they were. "All right, who wants to track for us?" All of the men raised their hands, so Efran said, "Detler, Routh, up front."

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Chapter 22

On horseback, Detler and Routh pulled abreast of Efran as he said, "We want to follow these cart tracks." They all looked down at the obvious tracks in the dirt.

"Right-o, Cap'n," Detler said. He and Routh rode at the head of the group with the cart tracks between them, having only to glance down occasionally to keep them in view. The rest of the group followed at a walk, talking and laughing over what they had just seen.

So that's the power in the hill that Showalter wanted, Efran thought. Nakham in full guardian angel mode. Minka glanced over at his repeatedly shaking his head, but she understood he was just trying to process it all.

A few miles up the road, Detler whistled and Routh pointed to a rough road on the right. The riders turned down this, looking all around. Shortly, they came upon a campsite. The covered cart sat close to a smoldering campfire, near which the collapsed tent sprawled a few paces away. The cart horse had been unharnessed and tended to, and was now grazing contentedly around the tree to which he was loosely tethered.

The men dismounted to look all around, especially in the flattened tent. Two men lifted the canvas to look under it, noting the split seam and the overturned cot. They dropped it again with a shrug: no one was there. Efran climbed down from his saddle with Joshua still on his left arm, who didn't wake.

Minka slid off her horse to look in the cart, coming away again with a worried frown. She asked Efran, "Didn't you say Showalter took Adele with him?"

"Yes," he said.

"I don't see her . . . or any trace of her," Minka said. She watched the men poke around for burial spots, and she went over to one man who thought he had found something.

From where he stood, Efran scanned the ground. Upon seeing an elaborately carved walking stick that looked to have been thrown down, he walked over to pick it up. Carved in the shape of a snake, it was cracked from end to end lengthwise. Close by, he found a glass flask that had soot on the inside.

As he considered these, he felt something, or heard something. Glancing around, he saw no one, so returned his attention to the ground. He saw what looked like drag marks—shallow gouges left in the earth from something being dragged. They stopped abruptly at a plane tree. He knelt to look closer at the placement of these marks, but could make no sense of them.

When he placed a hand on the plane to hoist himself up, he felt it move ever so slightly. Looking quickly at the trunk, he discerned what appeared to be the shape of a woman's lower leg in the wood. As he slowly stood, his eyes followed the form from the leg to the hips, arms down at the sides, all in the wood of the tree. He raised his eyes past the shoulder to the barely perceptible shape of a face. The tree shivered slightly in determined movement while deep from within he heard a muffled voice: "uh unnhn uhn!"

Exhaling gently, Efran backed away from the tree to return to the scouting party. And having found nothing remarkable, the party returned to the Lands, bringing the horse and the cart with them. They arrived in fresh gratitude to see the bustle of repairs, reconstruction, and life going on. The Lands were still theirs, and they were alive to enjoy it.

Efran kissed Minka to comfort her at the loss of her sister, then he rode out with Joshua to check on fire damages around the Lands. Arriving at the livestock pens first, he found all the animals safely returned. Hereward told him, "The sheepdog there is a wonder. As soon as the thunderstorm had put the fires out, he goes herding up all of 'em to get them back where they belong, and they all minded him right off."

"Good, good," Efran breathed. "No fire damage to the pens?"

"No, Captain, just a lot of burned grass that will grow back," Hereward said.

Efran left him with thanks, then looked over the fields that had been plowed, tilled and planted. Fires had struck them in places, but since nothing was growing yet, nothing was burned. So Efran resettled Joshua on his arm to begin riding back to the new construction, which worried him most. Joshua was awake, looking around attentively, quietly listening to conversations.

Efran rode up to DePew, who was surveying the blackened rubble of his new inn under construction. Fortunately, it had not progressed beyond the framing. "Well. What are you going to do?" Efran asked in concern.

"Start over," DePew said. "It's fortunate, in a way. I was in such a blasted hurry to get it done that I ignored design problems and mistakes in the framing. Now that I have the opportunity to go back and fix all of it, that's just what I'm going to do. I'll just have to eat the loss of the wood, but that's also not the problem it could have been, for Venegas is delivering more."

He gestured, and Efran looked to the wall gates where a large cartload of planks was being unloaded even then. Efran inhaled, "I'm so glad. Well done, Lord DePew."

"Thank you, Lord Efran." DePew smiled a little sardonically as he surveyed the work that would have to be redone.

From there, Efran and Joshua rode over to the site of the chapel going up, where half of the framing lay in blackened rubble. A work crew was in the process of dismantling it all, separating out the useable wood from the waste. Even the waste was not wasted, however; the men were collecting the partially burned pieces into a pile which was being thoroughly burned.

There were many uses for the wood ash, which would be distributed all over the Lands and hilltop: for gardens, the tannery, soap-making, chicken coops, glassmaking, medicines, firefighting, pottery making, cement making, cheese making, pickling, curing, beauty potions—by selling the finely burned ash for a silver piece per bucket (cheap!) the builders would be able to recoup a decent percentage of their loss.

So Efran was encouraged to see Lemmerz—the construction supervisor of the chapel—in a relatively cheerful mood at the chapel site. “What do you think, Lemmerz?” Efran asked in cautious hope.

“Well, the good Lord works in mysterious ways, what, Captain?” Lemmerz said philosophically.

“Yes, He does,” Efran replied guardedly. “And what did you see Him do?”

Lemmerz said, “What happened was, the committee that had approved construction plans for the chapel started bickering among themselves because half the members said it was too small. The other half said that a larger chapel had not been approved, nor had the extra expenses for such, since the Fortress was paying for it. So a few of the wealthier committee members pledged the extra funds for a larger chapel.

“That was well and good, but the construction on this one was to the point that demolition would have been wasteful, sinful, and a breach of contract. So this crazy firebomber steps in to solve our dilemma. The Steward has approved the larger chapel; the site can accommodate it, and with the members’ contributions, the Fortress won’t bear any greater burden of the cost,” Lemmerz finished in triumph.

“That’s excellent, Lemmerz,” Efran laughed in mild disbelief. “I am very glad to hear it.”

“Indeed, Captain. Excuse me,” Lemmerz said, as a few workers were calling him over for a consultation on some aspect of the work.

Seeing everything else under control, Efran rode back to the fortress to give Joshua over to the nursery for his nap. Then he went around checking on damages to the hilltop from the fires. First, the building engineer Gerard came over to report: “Captain, a fairly large firebomb hit directly to the rooftop, being absorbed by the tree. It was heavily damaged, probably half the crown destroyed. But it cushioned the blow so that there is no discernible damage to the fortress itself.”

“Thank God,” Efran breathed.

“Incidentally, in checking the foundations through the trap door, we saw no more evidence of the snobbles. But just to make sure, we’ve launched another tub of burning wood into the cavern; have a man stationed in the storage room to see if any try to come up. None have, yet.”

“Excellent. Thank you,” Efran said, clapping his shoulder.

From there, he went to the back grounds to see what all was damaged out here. The worst was at the stables, where half of one stable had been completely demolished, killing two horses and injuring several others.

Tess and Ella were both crying; training was postponed until the pens could be repaired. Quennel had requested and received time off from his regular duties to help in the reconstruction. But right now, he was holding Ella while she cried. (Quietly, the dead animals were carted down to the tanner Weber for use of their hides, but then the carcasses were sent out to Sea. The Law of Roman forbade the eating of horse flesh except in famine.)

While Quennel comforted Ella, Tess sat on a half-burned rail in one of the dead horses' stalls to cry alone. All these animals were like her children, her friends. They had their own personalities and needs; tending them provided her the companionship that she had trouble finding among the two-legged.

When a shadow blocked the light from the broken stall door, Tess raised the back of her hand to her dripping nose without looking up. "I'll be out in just a moment; I know work is waiting."

"It can wait a while longer," a deep Polonti voice said, and her eyes shot up to see Lorient.

She wiped her eyes with the heel of her palm, almost the only part of her hand that was dry. "I know you have duties as well," she said in a shaky voice.

"They can wait as well," he said.

She launched herself at the wall that was Lorient; he caught her to hold her in massive, gentle arms. There, she found to her surprise that she could stop crying. Lifting up, she said, "I have to clear away the rubble here."

"I might be able to help you with that," he observed. She smiled at him, and he leaned down to kiss her forehead.

Her eyes started tearing up again at this unprovoked show of affection, but she was determined not to ruin it by going to pieces. "Thank you," she said, going over to collect broken wood for one of two piles: useable wood and that for the burn pile. Lorient picked up the broken crossbeam to carry it out.

Meanwhile, Efran was scanning the grounds to note the charred, shallow pits where the fireballs had landed. But no one had been hurt, which was a miracle in itself, considering how quickly and randomly they had dropped. In looking around, he saw Minka on the bench under the walnut tree. She was holding Nakam, who wanted to get down, and . . . she was hurting.

When Efran walked over to sit beside her, she released the dog to lean into him. "Is it your sister?" he whispered, covering her with his arms, stroking her damp hair.

Wiping her face, she raised up. "It's just—not knowing," she replied. "If she's dead, I can deal with that. If she's gone elsewhere, that's all right. I know she cared nothing for me, and never will. But to not know. . . ."

He sighed, looking skyward. "It's too late to go to the campsite today. But tomorrow I'll take you back to see if we can find any clue as to what happened to her."

"Really?" She looked up at that handsome Polonti face.

He crinkled his eyes at her. "Yes. But—" and his eyes uncrinkled. "If by some miracle we find her, or find out where she went, she can't come back to the Lands."

"Oh, no," she agreed, shaking her head. "We've seen over and over how that ends. I just need to know what happened—what this Showalter did to her."

"We'll go look tomorrow," he promised.

She studied him, and he raised his brows in inquiry. "You don't believe me?"

She said, "No, of course I do. I was just remembering—Nakham said, or confirmed, that she was originally

meant for you.” Efran’s face took on an expression of adamant disagreement, and she laughed a little. “But he also said that since she rejected you, you chose me, because I loved you.”

Efran considered that, then said, “Far be it from me to argue with our guardian angel, but, everything I’ve experienced tells me you were the right one all along.”

She smiled, nestling into him. “He didn’t say I wasn’t, only—she was given the choice to have you for life, and refused. By the time she had changed her mind about you, it was too late. Not all options wait for us.”

“Ah. Yes, that I can agree with,” he said. And he continued to hold her until the children ran up, demanding their attention to the latest improvements to the hut, and wasn’t the angel of the fortress awesome?

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Chapter 23

The following morning, January 14th, Minka wanted to check on the rooftop faerie tree before she and Efran left for the campsite, so he walked her up all the stairways to the bell tower to see it. Queene Kele met them, as did numerous other faeries, to show off all the new branches which the faeries were encouraging to grow by means of song, petting, and gentle pulling. This the humans appreciated.

Efran was also very grateful for the tree taking the blow meant for the fortress roof. Even though the faeries and the guardian of the hill could heal the fortress, they couldn’t have brought back to life anyone killed by falling stone.

When Efran and Minka came off the stairway to the first floor, they heard a small voice crying, “Papapa! Papapapa!” along with door banging. Minka smiled at Efran as he turned on his heel to the nursery. She watched him lean down over the half door to pick up his son, then receive the sling from the nursery attendant. As he walked back up the corridor with Joshua patting his shoulder, Minka smiled warmly on them both.

“You’re such a good father,” she murmured.

“He won’t let me do anything else,” he grouched on their way out.

In the courtyard, Efran requested horses and whoever was available to accompany them to Showalter’s campsite. Shortly thereafter, six men brought around eight horses. Minka laughed as Efran grimaced at them. “So many? I don’t know that we’re expecting another invasion.”

Conte said, “Captain, unless you can guaranty one, idle men will jump at the chance to go do anything.” (But when repairs were completed, all idle men were to be put to work in the fields, per Estes’ plan.)

“I understand.” Efran mounted with Joshua on his arm, then looked back at Dango, Mohr, Doudney, Stephanos, Verrin and Conte saluting. “Come, then. We’re going to see if we might have missed anything at the campsite.”

“Yes, Captain.” “Yes, sir!” They were all agreeable.

As they set off down the switchback to Main, Efran noted that the old chapel framing had already come down

and the site cleared for construction of the larger chapel. DePew's deconstruction was slower going, as his had a great deal more space to cover.

The wall gate guards saluted as the party left the gates, then they set out at an easy lope up the northbound road toward the rough turnoff. Efran glanced down at Joshua once or twice to see that he was chewing on his fist, determined to stay awake.

Efran nodded at the turnoff to the right, then they came upon the dead campfire and the collapsed tent. They all dismounted and tied off the horses. Several men began investigating the tent thoroughly while others searched in the surrounding brush. Efran, carrying Joshua, took Minka toward the artifacts and the gouge marks in the earth.

"I found these yesterday," he said, gesturing down to the cracked walking stick and the sooty flask. While she picked these up to study them, he looked aside at the plane tree. Although he saw the vague human outlines in the wood, the tree was quiet. Was she asleep? Or . . . ?

Turning back to him, frowning, Minka stepped unknowingly on the drag marks. So he pointed them out: "Those gouges are interesting, as well. Almost looks as though something was dragged."

Still holding the artifacts, Minka looked down at her feet, stepping aside. Efran was silent while she studied these, then looked at the plane. Her eyes followed the same path his had: starting at the foot of the tree, following the legs up to the hips, the vague outline of breasts under clothing, the shoulders, the face.

Minka dropped the flask from her left hand to reach out and touch the face. Then the tree, about 20 inches in diameter, trembled slightly, and the same muffled noises emerged. Minka's fingers were still exploring the face, but it was clearly wood, and as such, did not yield to her touch.

She dropped the snake stick to grasp both shoulders in the wood and pull. Then she said, "God of heaven—get her out of this tree. Please!"

They watched, waiting, but nothing happened. "Nakham!" she called, turning to the south, toward the Lands. "Nakham!"

"Yep?" he said.

She and Efran jumped, turning to see him in his funny hat and his limp suit, leaning against another tree. Shaking, Minka said, "Nakham, will you get her out of there, please?"

His broad mouth turned down in dismay, and he shook his head. "I haven't been given permission. Sorry."

Pale, Minka put her fingers to her mouth. "How long must she stay there?"

"I don't really know, to be honest," he said. "It depends on when she's ready to come out."

Minka's great blue eyes widened. "She can come out herself?"

"Possibly, if it works out that way," he said.

Minka whirled back to the tree as if to plead, or argue, or cajole, then looked at Nakham again. "It depends on her heart, doesn't it?" she asked.

“As everything does,” he agreed.

She looked back at the tree for a long time. It moved a bit now and then, but issued no more sounds. Minka turned again to Nakham to say, “Thank you for being such a good friend to us. Thank you for your great service to God on our behalf.” Tears were pouring down her face as she said this.

Nakham reached out to take her words from the air and hold them in his hands to blow gently on them, infusing them with flecks of gold. Then he threw them upwards, and the three of them watched her golden words wing their way up to heaven. Nakham looked back at her with a warm smile, and his whole being became infused with light—that bright white light, again—and he vanished.

“Nakham, don’t leave!” she cried.

The whisper floated back, *When you see my walking stick gone, I’ll just be down at my post below.*

Minka reached blindly to Efran, who gathered her up with Joshua. They held each other for a little while, then she pulled away to see the tears standing in his eyes. With a shake of his head, he quietly insisted, “You were always, only, the one meant for me.”

Nuzzling Joshua, she smiled at him, and they returned to their horses. The other men had found nothing, except for Dango. He approached Efran to put something small in his hand, and Efran looked down at a signet ring. “Is that Showalter’s?” he asked, examining it.

“If it was, he wasn’t wearing it, Captain. Fact is, it looked to be hidden. I found it in a wee pocket of the tent,” Dango said.

“Well done,” Efran breathed, giving the ring to Minka.

She studied it closely. “That looks like an ‘A’ entwined in ivy,” she murmured.

“An ‘A’?” he asked. “Alberon?”

“Could very well be. Where is he?” she asked.

Efran shook his head in ignorance, and they remounted to return to the Lands.

When they got back to the fortress, Efran took Joshua and Minka up to the second-floor workroom. After releasing Joshua under the table, Efran threw himself back in his chair and said, “Queene Kele, if it’s convenient, may we have a word with you?”

She appeared at once wearing pants that looked suspiciously like Minka’s, with her white hair wrapped in a kerchief. “Dear Lord Efran, of course I’m happy to come visit with you, because you understand that I must get back to ministrations on the Great Tree as soon as possible. Hello, dear Minka.”

“You look adorable, Kele,” Minka said grinning, and the faerie did preen a bit.

“Thank you for your time, Queene Kele; we’ll let you get back right away. We were just hoping you could tell us who this ring belongs to.” Efran gestured at Minka, who held the signet ring out to her.

“Oh!” Kele’s eyes widened. “Why that’s—yes, Lord Efran, that’s Alberon’s, and I’m very surprised to see it out

of his possession, because what power he has left is greatly constrained without it.”

“I see. Thank you, Queene Kele; you may return to the Tree,” Efran said.

“You’re welcome, Lord Efran. Dear Minka,” Kele said, then had thoughts. “Don’t try to put it on, dear.”

“Thank you for the warning,” he said with feeling, and she vanished.

They all looked at each other, and Efran’s deep brown eyes fairly glistened. “So I can’t wear it. We may find a use for it yet,” he observed, holding out his hand. Minka gave the ring to him, which he put in his pants pocket.

That afternoon, after Minka had cleaned two coops, she received a letter from Justinian. “Finally!” she cried, running it upstairs to the workroom. “From Justinian!” she exulted. DeWitt and Estes smiled over their work. Looking around in disappointment, she asked, “Where’s Efran?”

“Here,” he said from under the table, where Joshua presided. Efran crawled out, then took something small to the open window. But this time, he looked down before dropping it and wiping his hands. “It’s unfortunate that the path from the grocer’s gate to the back kitchen door runs under this window.” Before anyone could comment, he added, “Justinian? It’s been a while since we’ve heard from him.”

“About two weeks,” Minka said, breaking the seal eagerly.

“To my adorable Minka,” she loosely rendered. Efran, knowing immediately that she had improvised the salutation, held out his hand for the letter. But since she was out of his reach, she continued:

“We have been enjoying a period of such tranquility that I walk in fear, watching for the sky to fall. Nonetheless, here is what scant news I have to convey:

“The Council of Eurus, led by Grand Councilor Vanidestine, has issued a proclamation praising Surchatain Webbe for his final and complete eradication of the flying Goulven, which supposedly plagued all the Southern Continent. These only Webbe could see, of course. But upon his victory over them, the Council has alerted him to the rampage of mad hares that are—again purportedly—tormenting the countryside. Since the Council feels certain that only the Surchatain can see these as well, they have committed the containment of this scourge to him. Meanwhile, the Council has made hard ale freely available to any remaining Goulven victims, of which there are a handful.

“Bowring’s daughter Trina has obtained a divorce from Reinagle to marry his son Folliott. However, she is unhappy, for she has yet to receive her order of clothing from Elvey’s because Folliott has not yet paid for it. So she is expressing a desire to return to the Lands. Bowring, mostly recovered from his handling under Reinagle, is also highly desirous of returning, so beware. Reinagle has slipped away with a portion of Webbe’s wealth, so is probably also headed south. Again, beware.

“AND: the scourge of faerie trees which somehow spread rampantly from Lord Oslac’s estate have now apparently been occupied by a worse scourge of Abbey Land faeries. These enchanting creatures have been driving my fellow Eurusians to the brink of insanity by various pranks and high jinks. However, they adore our Lady M, and only occasionally tease Hartshough. And my unworthy self they treat with the greatest kindness, so I have no objections to their harmless fun.

“The most intriguing bit of news I have is this: just today, January 13’—yesterday,” Minka interjected—“a

character completely unknown to me addressed me by name on the street. Slender, a few inches shorter than I, with long black hair combed back, slanting eyes, long fingers—overall, a sly fellow. First he asked for news from the Lands, of which I protested ignorance, then he indicated his intention to visit you at once. He was certainly tense and aggrieved, as though somehow wronged, at least in his view. This character I deem more dangerous to you than any of the above, and certainly on his way to you. Inform the Gargoyle.

“Your eternal suitor,

“Justinian,” she finished, handing Efran the letter.

He looked it over contemplatively. “Alberon,” he murmured.

“Missing his signet,” she said with raised brows.

This Efran retrieved from his pocket to study. “How to use it,” Efran murmured, studying it.

DeWitt offered, “Or at least, how to prevent this sly fellow from retrieving it.” Estes nodded in agreement, returning to his work.

At the stables, Lorient was single-handedly holding a new crossbeam over his head as workers on either end aligned it atop support posts and partly secured it with nails. “Got it, Lieutenant,” one said. Lorient let go and stepped back, studying it.

Then he went over to pick up another large beam. This he held vertically at the edge of the crossbeam close to the middle. “Is it centered?” he asked.

A man on the ground eyed it, then said, “Two inches to your left, Lieutenant.” Lorient moved the beam, and the man said, “That’s good.” Then Lorient jammed it under the crossbeam. Another man held up a plumb line to indicate minor adjustments. When Lorient made these, he was given a thumbs-up, and the workers secured all posts and beams with steel plates nailed in.

Tess was watching them as she changed dressings on an injured horse just outside the rebuilt stables. When Lorient emerged, she straightened. “Thank you for your help; that took days off the time to repair it,” she said, nervously twining the soiled bandage.

“I’m glad to. Have to go down to my regular work now,” he said. She nodded, dropping the used bandage into a bucket for washing. He added, “So I’ll meet you at Croft’s when we get off tonight.”

She looked up quickly. “That would be lovely,” she said, smiling. He walked off with a vague smile, and she inhaled in gratification.

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Chapter 24

That afternoon, Alberon finally made it to the campsite, where Showalter had promised to return his signet to him. Alberon's ring of power had been stripped from him when that Minka had invoked the Provision for a Wronged Human against him the last time. Somehow Showalter had recovered it. In exchange for the faerie spell of enlargement, Showalter had promised to return his signet to him, here, at this campsite.

All Alberon knew was that the enlargement spell had been successfully deployed. So, bound by Showalter's promise, the ring must be returned to him, and disaster awaited anyone who interfered.

In the midst of the campsite, Alberon seized the collapsed tent, discerning that his signet had been in it at one time, but no longer was. Throwing the tent aside in fury, Alberon then closed his eyes, reaching a hand south, searching for his signet.

At that time in the second-floor workroom, Efran was deep in the *Life of King Alfred* when he shot up out of his chair with a sharp whistle. Minka, Estes and DeWitt looked up in alarm. The door sentry ran in. Nakam came out from under the table, barking. Efran shook out his pants, where Alberon's signet had burned a hole through the cloth. The ring fell to the floor to begin slowly burning through it. Nakam sniffed it, not getting too close. Joshua leaned out from under the table to look.

"Kele!" Efran shouted, and she appeared at once in the faerie tree. He demanded, "What is this? What does it mean that the signet is burning hot?"

"Oh dear," she gasped, watching it char the wood floor. "Alberon is close, and is searching for the ring."

"How can I keep it away from him?" Efran asked.

"Keep it away from him?" she repeated evasively. Her face was fearful.

"Kele, he must not regain the use of his ring. How do I drain it of power?" Efran demanded.

"Drain it?" she asked in consternation.

"Kele, tell me what you know," he instructed.

Weakly, she said, "All I know is to cover it in human blood and throw it into the Sea."

There followed a moment of stricken silence as smoke curled up from the floor. "A blood offering," Efran said in contempt. "No, I will not offer blood for anything. Give me another way."

"That's all I know, Efran," she said anxiously.

Efran raised his face, shouting, "God of heaven, what do I do? How do I keep the ring from Alberon's hand?" Breathing heavily, he glanced around. Then he stilled as if listening. An idea had come to his mind. And he relaxed, smiling. Addressing the young sentry, Chilcott, he said, "Get me fire tongs, quickly." Chilcott barely paused to salute before running out.

While the circle of charred wood grew around the signet, Efran got down on his knees to scoop Joshua out from under the table. Chilcott returned quickly to extend the fire tongs toward the Captain. He nodded, "Give them to

the lady.” The boy hesitated, mildly fearful, but Minka held out her hand for the tongs, so he handed them over.

She gripped them with both hands to dig the signet out of the deepening hole and lift it. Then she eyed Efran questioningly. He nodded, “Bring it downstairs. We have to drop Joshua off at the nursery. Sorry,” he told his son.

Efran led down the stairs carrying his son. Minka followed with a tight grip on the tongs, Nakam trotting behind her. The ring appeared to be twisting in the metal grips. Efran handed Joshua to the nursery attendant, then delicately took the tongs from Minka’s hands.

During the transition, however, the signet slipped out of the tongs to begin rolling on the stone floor. It seemed to be drawn to the front door. Minka gasped, but Efran, watching it roll, said, “Here, this will save us some effort.” So he merely followed it while she followed him. Nakam herded the smoking ring, and it did seem to veer away from feet or other obstacles when he barked at it.

In the corridor, Efran warned others, “Hot ring coming; don’t step on it.”

A pair of soldiers, Allyr and Telo, jumped in front of it to make themselves the advance guard. “Clear a path!” Allyr shouted, and those passing looked down in bafflement at the rolling, smoking hot ring attended by the hairless dog.

As they passed into the foyer, Telo shouted, “Open the doors!”—which the door guards did quickly.

The ring rolled out the doors and down the steps on its own behind the vanguard with Efran and Minka following it. Nakam continued to trot alongside, keeping a close eye on it. The courtyard guards had the gates standing open as Telo, Allyr, the dog and the ring passed through them, the Captain and his wife following, and a growing crowd behind them.

The parade continued down the switchback, where Nakam barked at the ring to prevent it from bouncing straight down the slope. As it rolled up Main, carts, riders and pedestrians made way for the strange procession. Still more people began following Efran and Minka in curiosity. Meanwhile, the wall gate guards, Fennig and Graeme, had spotted Alberon striding toward them from the north, and shut the gates.

Approaching the gates from the south, Efran readied the tongs. Before the ring could leap through the balusters toward Alberon’s outstretched hand, still about forty feet off, Efran caught it firmly in the tongs. He brought them up to speak directly to the smoking, quivering ring of gold: “Signet of Alberon, I bind you by the power of ‘the blessed and only Sovereign, King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light.’ Now get off my Lands.” [1 Tim. 6:15]

With that, Efran tossed the ring from the tongs over the gates, and it landed in the middle of the road. Alberon ran forward to grab it, putting it on his finger with a cry of victory. Wheeling toward Efran, he thrust his adorned fist toward him, shouting words of power.

Everyone held his breath, waiting. Alberon waited. Efran leaned on the gate, waiting. Minka picked up Nakam to prevent his jumping through the gate balusters. As seconds passed and nothing happened, someone in the crowd behind Efran shouted to Alberon, “You gotta blow the dust off it, boy!”

Alberon, staring intently at them from twenty feet away, stood wavering a moment, then brought the ring up to puff on it lightly. A stir passed through the crowd behind Efran at the exposure of a dupe, a fool, a pushover.

The deposed faerie king rallied, raising his fist at Efran to cry more terrible words of power. Again the crowd waited, hushed, as the echoes of his voice faded and—nothing happened. Efran idly twirled the tongs.

“Aw, no, look! Yer stance is all wrong! Spread yer blasted feet!” another man shouted. Alberon, wavering anyway, spread his feet. Nakam wriggled in Minka’s arms, anxious to get down, but she held him firmly.

“No, man, what’re you doin’? Button up your coat; contain the power before you send it!” someone else instructed. Alberon looked down to button his coat.

“Shirt’s sticking out!” another man warned, so Alberon tucked in his soiled shirt.

By now, he was deluged with suggestions, which quickly devolved into taunts and jeers. When Efran and Minka were pushed from behind, Fennig and Graeme shouted at the crowd to back off, and Nakam finally escaped Minka’s arms to slip through the balusters and rush Alberon, barking fiercely.

“Nakam!” Minka cried.

“Get back!” “Back off!” the guards ordered the crowd, pushing back against those who were pushing forward. They did desist to watch the small dog rush the former faerie king.

And Alberon turned to run. Nakam pursued, snapping at his heels. But as Minka continued to call in growing distress, Nakam finally turned back, allowing Alberon to run over the stone bridge and disappear on the road heading north. “Show’s over, people,” Fennig said, and they turned away in amusement.

When Nakam slid back through the balusters in victory, Minka gathered him up. A few who were pleased with the overall entertainment said, “Good dog!” “Good boy,” as they returned to their work or their errands. The crowd dispersed; Efran and Minka, attended by numerous soldiers, began walking back up Main.

“Where did you learn that?” Minka asked him. “Is it Scripture?”

Efran laughed, “Yes, another one that Therese taught me. Lord knows how many I’ve got stockpiled in the back of my head.” Minka grinned, holding his arm with her left hand while she held Nakam firmly in her right. Having done *his* duty, he lolled his tongue complacently. Efran kissed her head.

As they passed through the courtyard to mount the fortress steps, Efran suddenly looked to the left side of the steps to see that Nakham’s walking stick was gone. He was done with his tour for now. Efran felt both relieved that he was at his post but saddened for the loss of his company. *I hope to see you again, Nakham*, Efran thought. There may have been a nudge at his shoulder in reply.

Meanwhile, Alberon returned to the campsite in a rage. “He cheated me, the devil; he either had a copy made or drained the power from it,” he muttered, studying the ring. “I’ll find him and make him answer for it. I still have power. Now . . . the woman, Adele. She’s here, somewhere.” He began to look around.

“She’s here . . . hidden. She’s hiding from me,” Alberon smiled. His eyes searched the ground, the hill, the trees. And his eyes lit on a plane tree on the south edge of the campsite.

Walking over, Alberon looked down at the sooty flask and the walking stick, then turned a sardonic eye on the plane. It was the only plane tree in the area, in fact. Looking at the immobile face, he said, “Why, hello, Adele. I’ve found you.” He paused as though listening.

“Oh, you were? You mean you didn’t crawl in there to hide from me? . . . I see. Of course he did, the scoundrel. I’m very sorry about that. Where is he, by the way? . . . You don’t know? Are you *sure*? Oh, that’s unfortunate. Because if you told me, then I’d be able to put out this tiny flame at your feet here.” He pointed to the ground, and a spark from his finger ignited the forest litter. “Now, *where is he*?”

The tree quivered as though hit by a strong wind, and there was an almost audible voice. Alberon shook his head sadly. “So sorry. Goodbye, dear.” He wheeled, changing into a free-tailed bat (which could fly at speeds up to one hundred miles per hour). Once airborne, he turned west, toward Crescent Hollow.

Smelling smoke, the gate guards looked up at a fire among the trees a few miles north. “Does the gent who just ran off think to burn us out?” Graeme asked.

“If he does, he’s an idiot. The fire won’t jump the gully, especially with the soaking rain we just got,” Fennig said.

They watched for a half hour as the fire slowly spread to cover maybe an eighth of an acre. “Should we alert the Captain?” Graeme asked.

Fennig shook his head. “It’s not even coming this way.”

“True,” Graeme said. They glanced at it now and then as it burned listlessly a while longer, then petered out in the moist woods.

Upon reaching Crescent Hollow, Alberon alighted to transform into a human, then he changed his suit into something clean and elegant. That done, he walked up to the front door of Showalter’s estate, Viotto, to tap lightly with his ebony walking stick. When the butler opened the door, Alberon smiled benignly. “Hello there, Bilhorn! Is Lord Showalter back yet?”

“No, Lord Alberon, I’m afraid not,” Bilhorn said.

“Oh, dash it. Well, he told me it wouldn’t be long, and if I arrived before he did, I was to wait for him,” Alberon explained.

“Certainly. Do come in,” Bilhorn said, backing with a short bow.

“Thank you, Bilhorn. How’s dinner coming along, then?” Alberon entered, removing his stylish pointed hat.

Taking his hat and stick, Bilhorn replied, “We’ll have something ready in about a half hour, sir. Please make yourself comfortable in the sitting room.”

“Certainly, my good man,” Alberon said, advancing to the sitting room with a smile.

In the Lands, Lemmerz looked with approval on the framing for the new chapel going up, and Oxenham had just received a large shipment of lumber from Venegas for DePew’s new inn. Lorient and Tess were enjoying a cozy dinner at Croft’s, while the fortress residents in the dining hall were laughing about the supposed faerie king shouting like a lunatic at the Captain before being chased off by the Lady’s little dog.

On the second floor, before going down to dinner, Efran with Joshua, and Minka with Nakam, paused at the golden glow spilling through the corridor. So they walked over to the southern windowseat to sit for a little while, soaking up the glory of sunset over the Sea. Efran held her tightly on one arm, pressing his cheek to her head, and she murmured, "I'm so grateful."

"I as well," he whispered.

"I as well," whispered another voice on the rooftop. "Thank you for the walkabout, O Mighty Kyrios. I'd like to do that again sometime." Then Nakham lifted his face in worship, sinking down from the rooftop, through the fortress, to the depths of the caverns in the hill, where he resumed his watch as guardian.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on January 14th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

NOTES: [Edward the Elder](#) was the son of Alfred the Great: "Edward was admired by medieval chroniclers, and in the view of William of Malmesbury, he was 'much inferior to his father in the cultivation of letters' but 'incomparably more glorious in the power of his rule.'"

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Snobbles* (Book 15)

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Adele—ah DELL	Ino—EE no
<i>aihue</i> —ah EE yhoo (thief)	insigne—en SIN yeh
<i>aike</i> —AY kay (shooting by instinct)	Jehan—JAY han
<i>aina</i> —AY nah	Justinian—jus TIN ee un
Alberon—AL ber on	Ka Mea—kah MAY ah (Maker of All, God)
Allyr—AL er	Kele—kay lay
Ares—AIR eez	Kelsey—KELL see
Arne—arn	Koschat—KOS chat
Bache—botch	Kyrios—KEER ee ose (Greek for <i>Christ</i>)
Barthelemon—BAR tuh luh mon	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
Beischel—BESH ull	Leviathan—leh VIE ah thun
Bowring—BOWE ring	<i>loco</i> —LOW coh (crazy)
cache—kash	Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
Cadogan—CA doh gan	Lyra—LEER ah
Cholmondeley—chall MON deh lay	Madea—mah DAY ah
coiffure—kwa FYOOR	<i>makemake</i> —MAH kay MAH key (demand)
Conte—cahnt	Mathurin—mah THUR in
courtesan—KOR tuh zahn	Melchior—MEL key or
Delano—deh LAN oh	meritorious—meh reh TAW ree uhs
DeVenter—deh VEN tur	Minka—MINK ah
Doane—rhymes with <i>loan</i>	<i>moiwahine</i> —mo wa HEE nee (queen)
Dobell—DOH bull	Occitania—awk si TAIN yah
Dominica—dah MIN ee ka	Pia—PEE ah
Efran—EFF run	picea—PIE see uh
egregious—eh GREE juhs (outstandingly bad)	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Eledith—ELL eh dith	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Elvey—ELL vee	Prie Mer—pre MARE
en masse—ahn mahs (all together, all at once)	<i>pupule</i> —poo POO lay (leaking brains)
Ennemonde—EN eh mund	Quilicus—QUIL eh cus
Enon—EE nun	rebozo—ray BOH soh
Estes—ESS tis	Reinagle—REN ah gull
<i>eteres</i> —ay TARES (early word for <i>snobbles</i>)	Rhinog—RINE yog
Eurus—YOUR us	Routh—roth (rhymes with <i>moth</i>)
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	Rubidoux—ROO bid oh
Eustace—YOUS tis	Sabine—sah BEAN
Eviron—ee VIRE un	Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Eymor—EE more	Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Flodie—FLOW dee	Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Folliott—FOH lee uht	Sybil—SEH bull
garderobe—GAR de robe	Symphorien—sim FOR ee in
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)	Telo—TEE low
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)	Teschner—TESH nur
Goss—gahs	Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Goulven—GOHL vin (hard g)	Tiras—TEER us
Graeme—GRAY em	Toledoth—TOLL eh doth
Hartshough—HART soh	Tomer—TOH mur
Hereward—HERR uh wuhd	Toqev—TOH kev; <i>Toqeph</i> --TOH kef
<i>hookama</i> —HOO kah mah (prostitute)	Tourjee—TUR jee
<i>hoopuni</i> —hoo POO nee (fraud)	Trina—TREE nah
hors d'oeuvres—awr durvz	tsunami—soo NAH me

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Snobbles* (Book 15)

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Vanidestine—van eh DES teen

Venegas—VEN eh gus

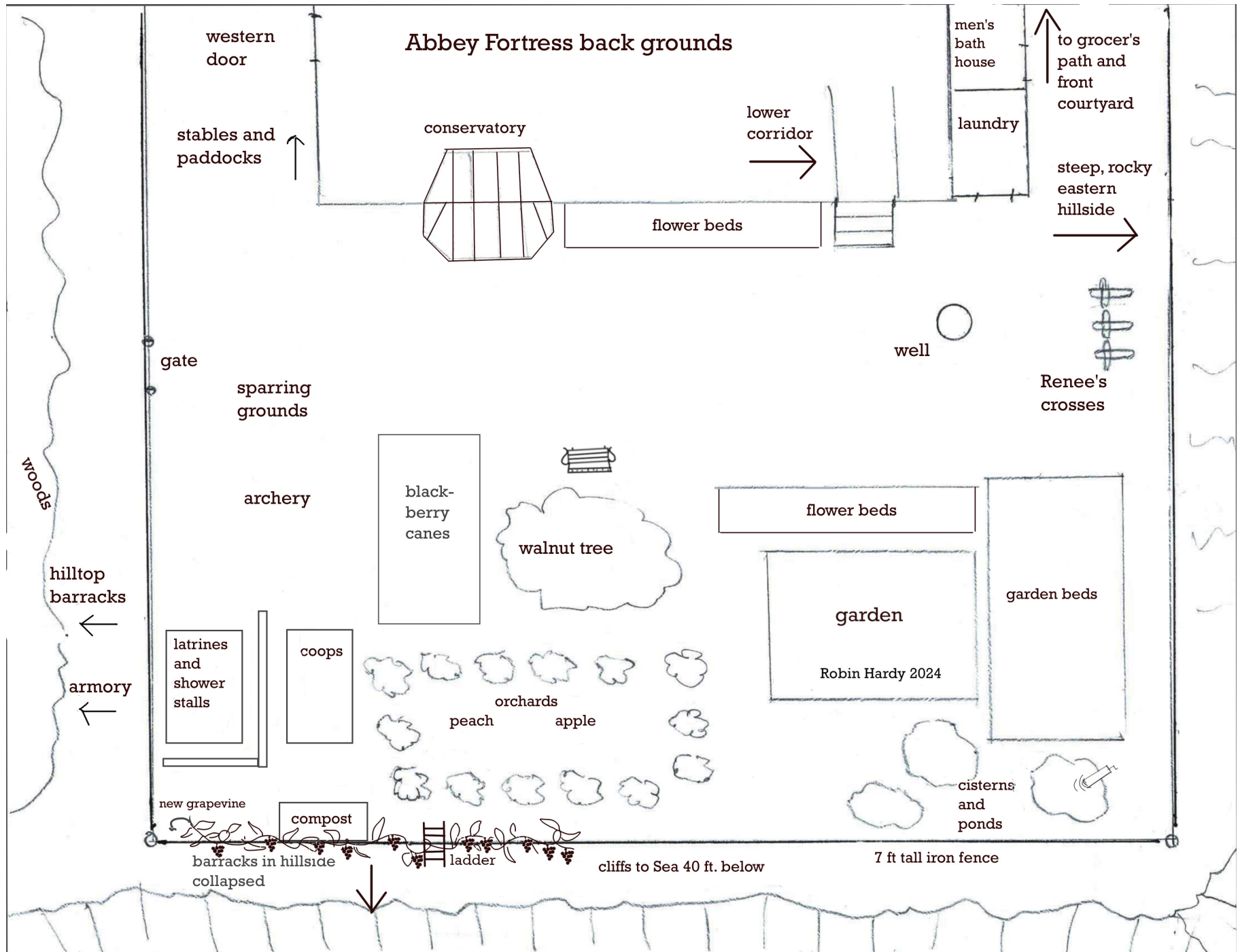
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un

verisimilitude—veh reh suh MIHL eh tood

Verrin—VAIR en

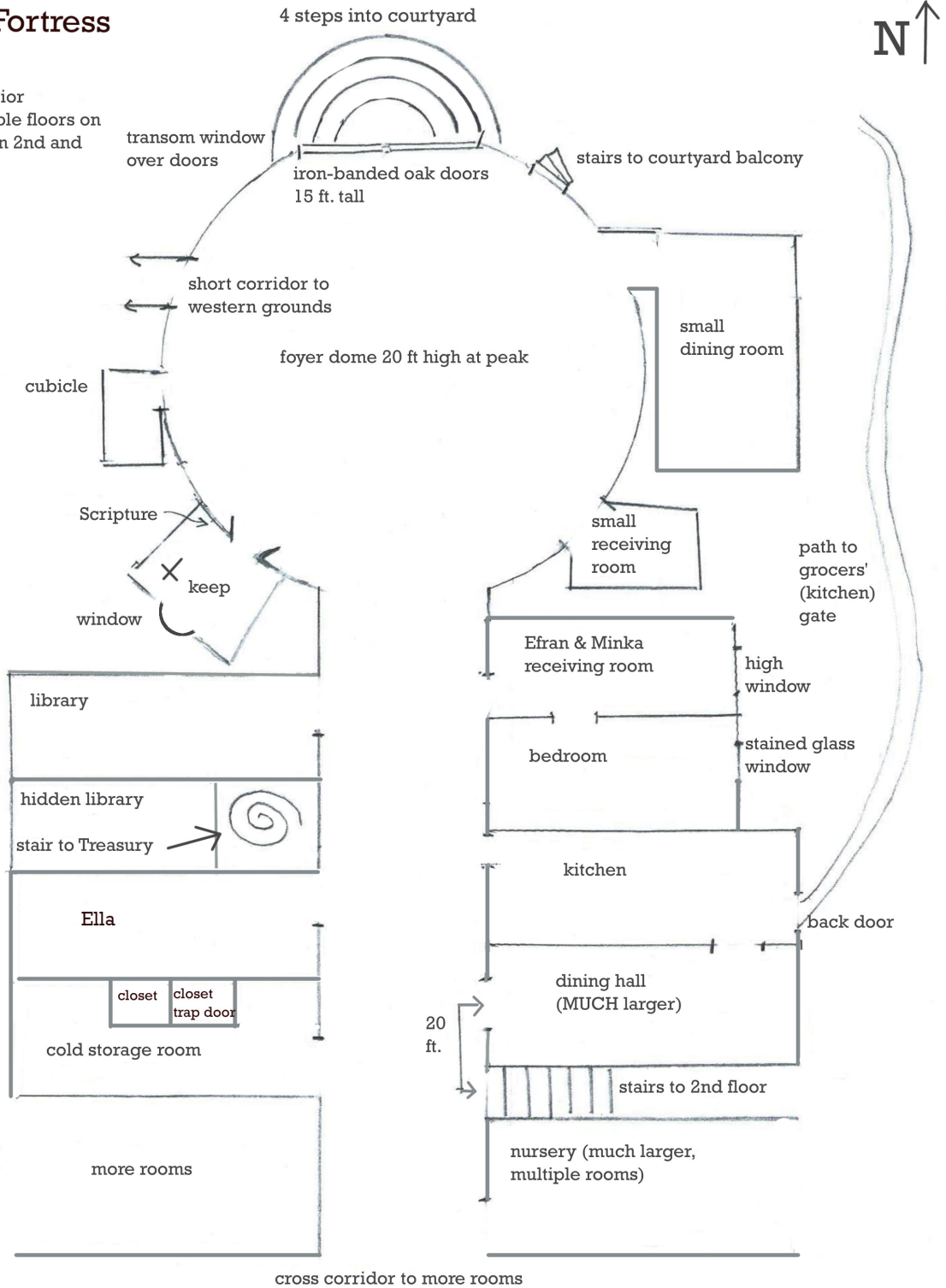
Viotto—vee OH toh

Webbe—web



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



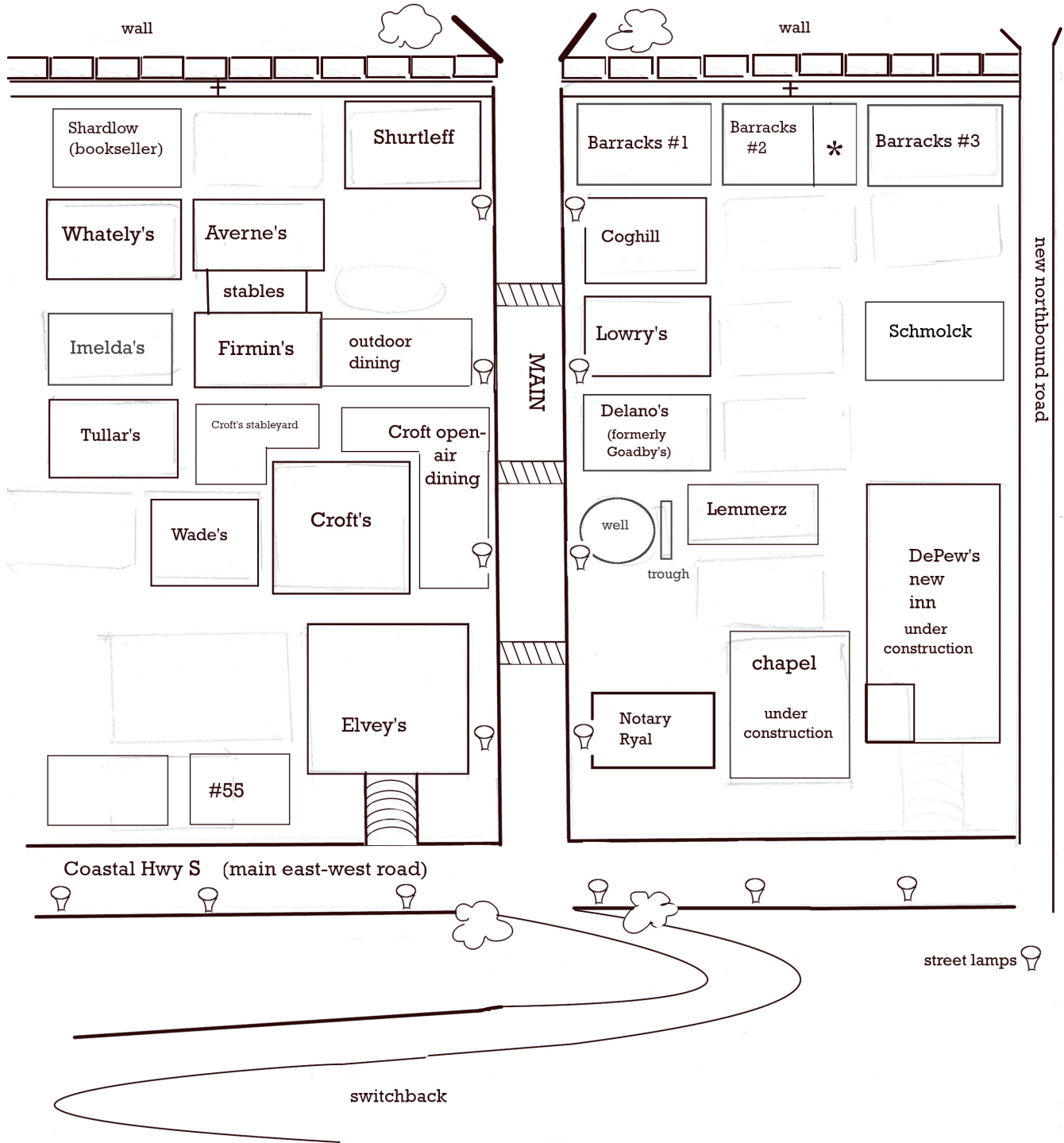
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main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds

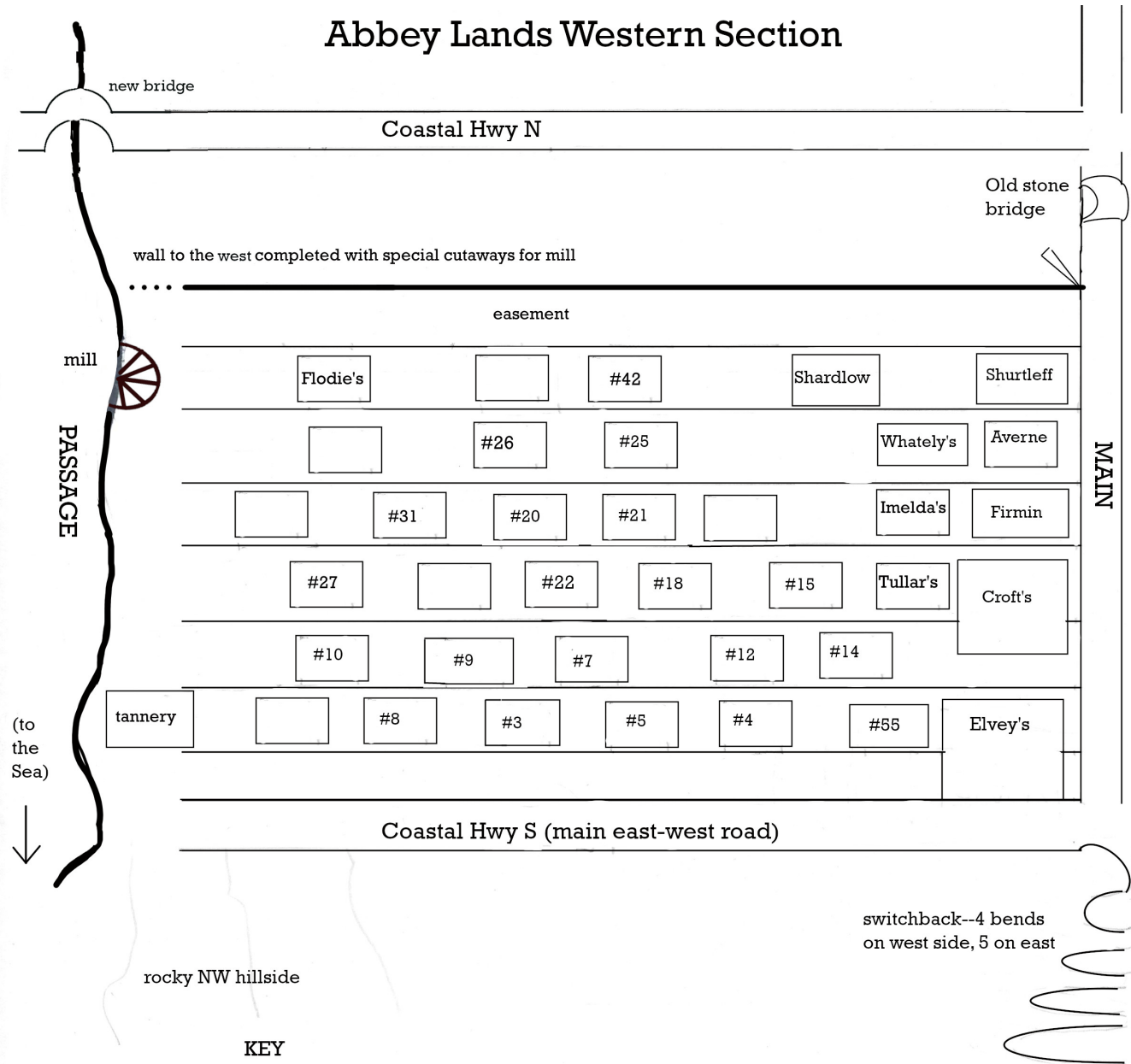
Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements

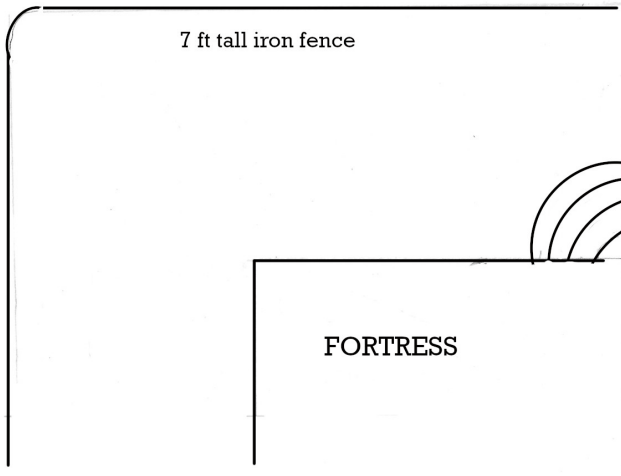


Abbey Lands Western Section



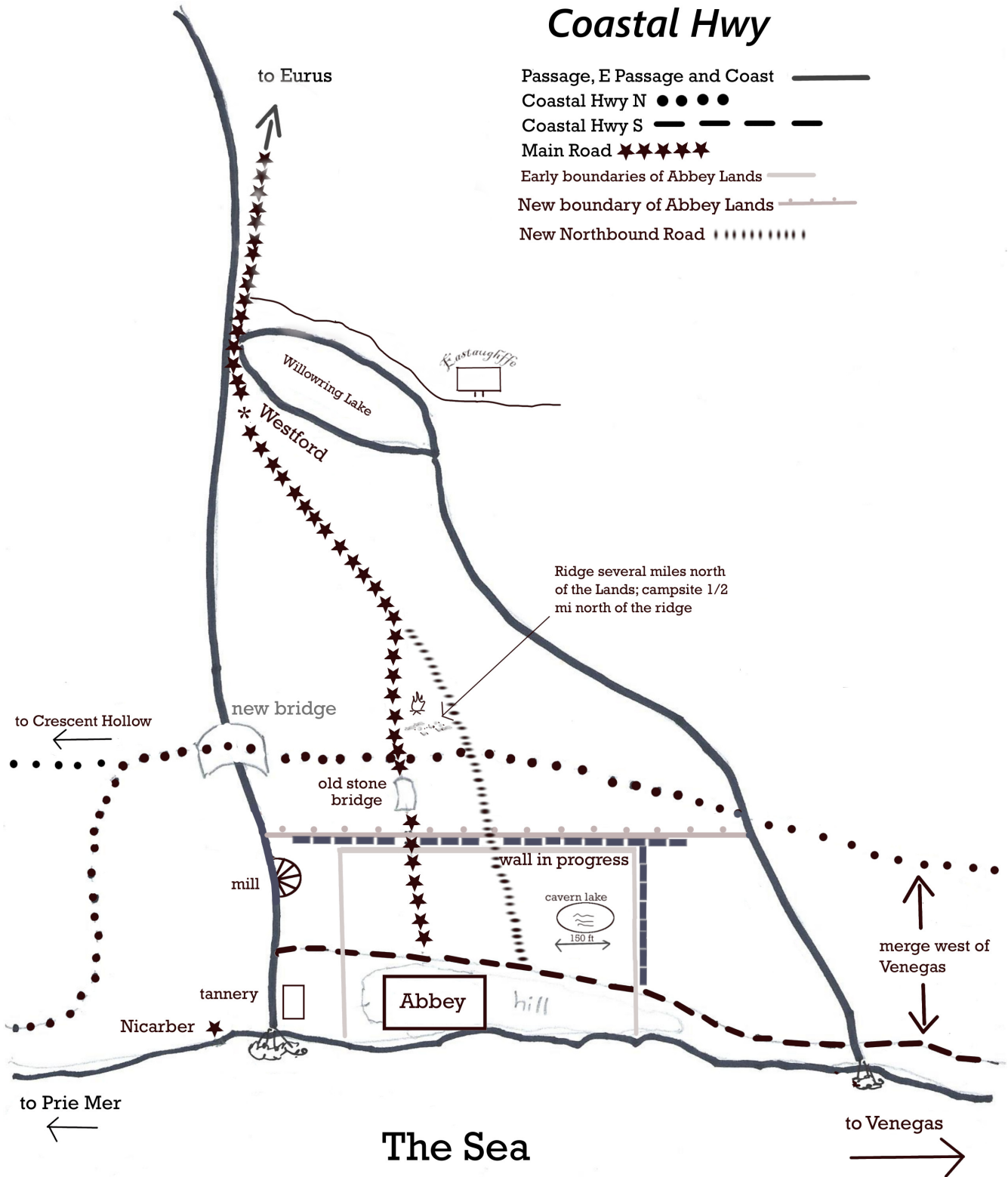
KEY

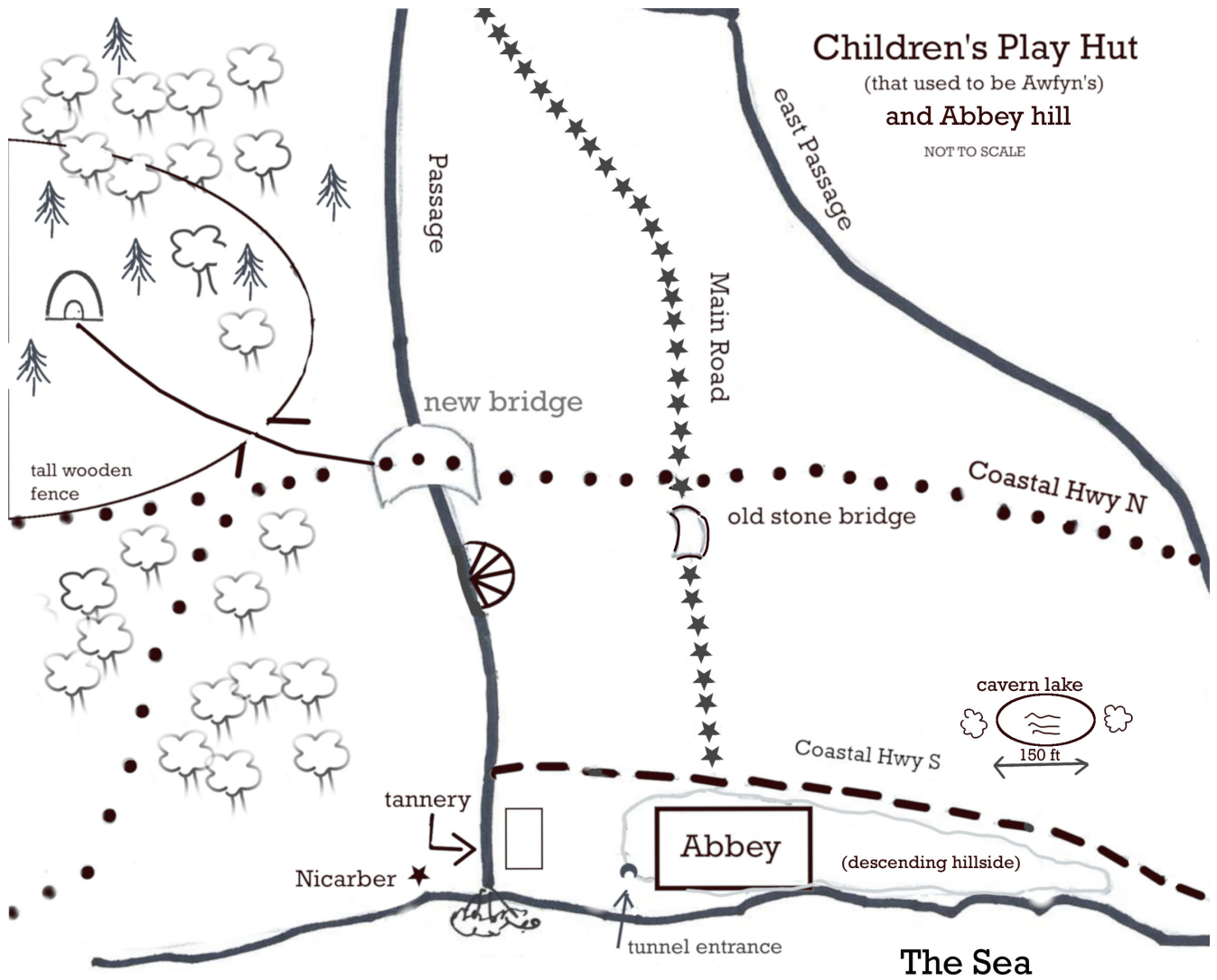
- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - Challinor & Stites
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening

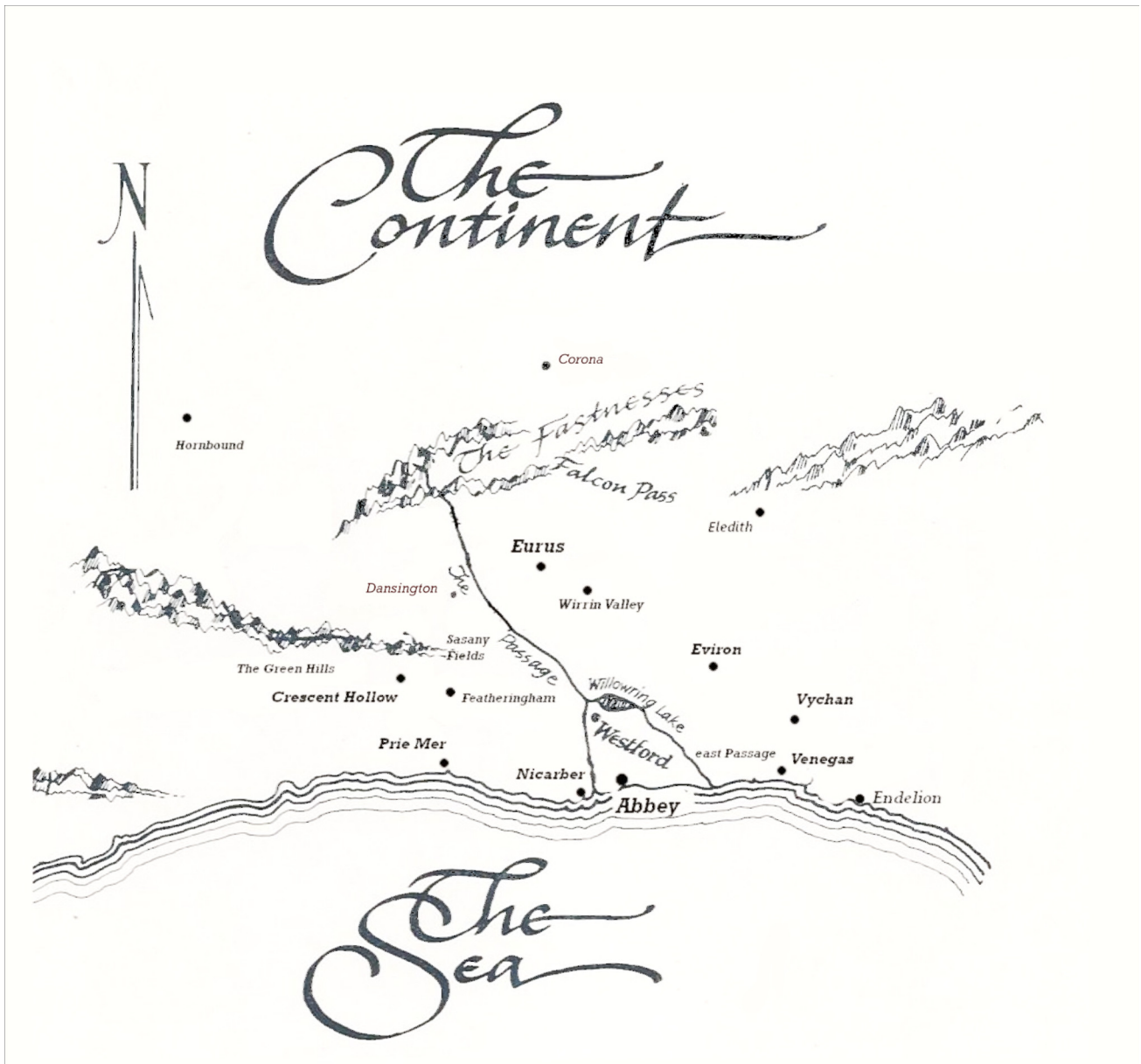


Coastal Hwy

- Passage, E Passage and Coast —————
- Coastal Hwy N ●●●●
- Coastal Hwy S - - - - -
- Main Road ★★★★★★
- Early boundaries of Abbey Lands ————
- New boundary of Abbey Lands ————
- New Northbound Road | | | | |







Standing Godling (Book 15:
Lord Efran and the Snobbles)

See the Notes--
Robin Hardy



This was so much fun. I found faeries that I like!

First, Alberon is shown receiving his comeuppance in the [Trung Trang Cave](#)¹ of Vietnam. He is dressed in the borrowed robes and accouterments from [this painting](#).² Although the laurel-leaf crown Napoleon wore was made of solid gold, our Alberon is wearing [St. Edward's Crown](#),³ which looks more impressive at a glance. I can't get over his wonderfully irritating [face](#).⁴ And we mustn't forget the [Hairless Chinese Crested Dog](#)⁵ that Minka found at Flodie's (below).



As for the faeries, I stumbled across [these images](#) on Wikimedia Commons, which led to the discovery of [The Book of Fairy Poetry](#).⁶ It is available for viewing or downloading from the Internet Archive (that last link), but I hope some day to find a physical copy. All of the faeries thronging Alberon were taken from this book.

Starting at the front left corner, the faerie playing with a Portuguese man o' war is [Lirope the Bright](#).⁷ The Polonti faerie with bat wings and his adoring companion are Salamander (fire) and Dusketha (earth) discussing their natures with (the unseen) Breama (water) and Zephyr (air) according to the poem [Song of Four Fairies](#) by John Keats. The blue boy on Alberon's shoulder is Oberon from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That's Puck sitting on the head of Alberon's scepter. Below him, in the nautilus boat, is one of the *Fairies on the Sea Shore* by L.E. Landon, another poem in the book. And I love them all.

Robin Hardy
May 9, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed by [Jakub Halun](#) on Wikimedia Commons
2. *Napoleon I in Coronation Robes* via Wikipedia
3. Part of the Crown Jewels of the United Kingdom, via Wikimedia Commons. Photographed by [Firebrace](#).
4. Photographed by [Ludovic Migneault](#) on Unsplash
5. Photographed by [Tommy Gildseth](#)
6. Edited by Dora Owen, illustrated by Warwick Goble, published in 1920
7. This poem by Michael Drayton is in the book.