

The Stories of

*The Abbey of St. Benedict
on the Sea*

Book 18

*Lord Efran and
the Insurrection*

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Preoccupied, Efran dropped off his 14-month-old son Joshua in the nursery for his bottle and nap while Efran himself changed out of his uniform into his work clothes to go help dig on the new switchback. He, Minka, Ella, Quennel, and 24 bodyguards had just returned from the procession to the new clothing shop run by the former Featheringham slaves.

At this time, Minka and Ella were still chatting and socializing in the beautiful dresses the women had made. While Minka was thus safely engaged in the fortress, Efran decided to get a couple of hours' digging in before the midday meal.

Minka didn't like his doing hard manual labor, but Efran needed it, physically and mentally. Mindless labor was good think time for him, when he could best untangle knotty problems. And after watching Minka's sister Adele—his one-time lover and constant antagonist—being transformed back into a newborn, Efran needed to think.

Trotting down the fortress steps into the courtyard, he nodded to the two gate sentries, Bennard and Cudmore, before exiting the gates and traversing the hill toward the proposed new switchback, east of the current one. He walked to the dig point about a third of the way down, then took up a shovel and glanced around.

There were about twenty men digging here, no soldiers that he recognized. Most of his men were on duty or still down around Main, having come down to watch the procession. Captains Barr and Melchior were below, talking with Captain Rigdon and a number of other men who were normally on the hilltop. Efran glanced back up to see only the two gate guards in the courtyard. There were usually many more. The structural engineer Thrupp was often overseeing the digging as well, but he was not here right now either.

Gauging the best point to start, Efran hauled over a wheelbarrow to rest beside him as he plunged the blade of the shovel into the loose dirt and hauled it up. Meanwhile, he was thinking.

He glanced at one man after another as he raised shovel loads to the wheelbarrow. No one greeted him. This was unusual; the men were always glad to see him come dig, and they wanted him to know who was digging with him. If he didn't know their names, they told him.

As he dropped another shovel load into the wheelbarrow, he took note of the activity around him. They were silently taking up small, perfunctory loads on their shovels, working in a somewhat haphazard alignment—not at all the way Thrupp wanted it done. This was also unusual; his men liked to show off their effort, and they encouraged each other with joking banter as they worked. Also, they shoveled in a coordinated effort on the areas that needed it. These men were shoveling randomly.

Except—Efran was aware when they changed their positions to begin shoveling around him. And he suddenly saw that he was surrounded by strangers who faced him wielding their shovels.

Efran issued a piercing whistle as he swept his shovel in an arc around him. He saw the flash of a knife and heard distant shouts before the courtyard gate bell began ringing an alarm. Having managed to take out the two men behind him, Efran held his shovel like a pugil stick, laying out men all around him—except for the one who slipped behind him to hit him in the back of the head.

Meanwhile, having rung the emergency bell, Cudmore was leaping down the northeastern hillside to assist the Captain, badly outnumbered. But Bennard, at the top of the hill, was watching in horror as one man struck the

Captain in the head with his shovel. Efran took him out falling, and they rolled together down the eastern hillside.

In disbelief, Bennard saw a square hole in the hillside open, and both men fall into it. Then the hole closed back up. Bennard began running toward the area, his eyes firmly locked on the spot where they had disappeared. Cudmore, as soon as he had launched himself on the attackers, was stopped by a blade in his gut, and fell writhing to the ground.

But Abbey men were thronging to the hillside, cutting off the attackers' means of escape. Having lost their quarry somewhere on the hill, they were now faced with enraged fortress defenders. Archers below the hill began taking them out with deadly accuracy one by one, stopping only when their cohorts in red arrived to wield swords against knives and shovels.

In moments, only two of the would-be assassins were still alive, being held to give information to the Abbey leadership. Cudmore, groaning, was carried into the fortress to be taken up to the doctor. And the soldiers swarmed Bennard, who cried, "There! On the hillside!" He was desperately trying to keep the spot in view.

"What?" "What happened to the Captain?" "What did you see?" the men demanded.

"Shut up! Let him talk!" Captain Towner shouted. He was the first officer on the scene, having run from the hilltop barracks.

They fell silent as Bennard gasped, "One of them hit him in the head with a shovel, and they both began falling. A spot, a—a—door opened in the hill; they fell in and it closed back up!"

They looked at each other and looked down the hillside, the blank face of which was apparent clear down the gradual descent to the foot hundreds of feet below. "Fan out and search!" Towner barked. But Bennard, heart sinking, had lost the spot on the uniformly irregular surface of the hill. So scores of men spaced themselves out to begin searching.

Estes and DeWitt came down to hear Bennard's report; Commander Lyte and the other Captains—Neale, Rigdon, Barr, and Melchior—also came to listen. Shortly, hundreds of men were climbing down and up again over every square inch of the eastern hillside. And they found nothing.

Minka and Ella, still wearing the gorgeous embroidered dresses, ran out to hear the horrible, uncertain news. Minka staggered over to the top of the eastern face to look, and would have joined the search had Estes not caught her shoulders. "You don't want to soil the beautiful dress, Minka," he said with watering eyes. She looked up at him blankly, then went back into the fortress to change into her usual work dress.

Ella's husband Quennel kissed her head, then he also went into the fortress, down the first-floor corridor to the nursery. There, Joshua was banging on the door. "Papapapa!"

Quennel reached in to pick him up. As Felice came to the door, studying his face, he said, "Get me a sling, please. The Captain is missing." Her face paled, but she did as he asked.

After interrogating the two surviving attackers, Towner came up to the workroom to report to Estes and DeWitt. Minka and Ella were there as well, and Quennel with Joshua (who was under the table with Minka's dog Nakam).

Towner saluted and said, "Steward, Administrator, as far as we can determine, this is just a—loose group of

brigands from Crescent Hollow who heard of the Abbey Treasury and decided to take a crack at it. They've been working as laborers on the Lands for months, watching for an opening, which they found in the switchback digging that started three weeks ago. And, it looks like they thought their moment had come with the procession to the ladies' shop that drew soldiers away from the hill, and then the Captain deciding to dig when he got back. It was just—an incredible alignment of opportunity."

He shook his head in dismay and wonder. DeWitt asked, "What of the search?"

"Yes, Administrator; it's ongoing. We have hundreds of men combing the hillside. They've found nothing," Towner said quietly.

Quennel said, "Tell me again what Bennard said."

Towner turned to him. "He swears he watched one of the men hit the Captain in the back of the head with a shovel. They both fell and rolled down into an opening in the hillside that closed back up." This was actually not as strange as it sounded, for the men had seen the same thing happen once before on the northwestern hillside.

Estes observed, "That gives us hope. We know there is power in the hill, but no one but Efran has explored the eastern hillside much."

Towner said wryly, "You might want to encourage Bennard with that view, sir. After he was conned by Adele to help her escape from the cavern, I put him on latrine duty, and, he's been working very hard to get his credibility back. He's going mad now that no one believes him."

DeWitt said, "That, or something like it, is the only explanation. How is Cudmore?"—Bennard's watch partner who was knifed.

Towner paused. "I don't know; let me send to ask the doctor." He stepped out to speak to a sentry.

They waited. Ella and Quennel were whispering, then she finally rose unsteadily to say, "I need to change"—glancing at Minka, who was no longer wearing the fabulous dress. Quennel rose to go with her, but she told him, "No, you stay for news." She left quickly, and Quennel sank back down to the chair, checking Joshua under the table with Nakam.

The sentry returned, saluting, "Steward, Administrator, Captain—the doctor has Cudmore lying still and bandaged. It doesn't look good, as it was a deep strike, but the doctor's hopeful."

There was a momentary silence, then Estes sighed, "All right; as you were."

Towner and the sentry saluted and left, then Quennel stood to pick up Joshua. "Steward, Administrator—I must supervise archery practice; Joshua's going to help me. Please alert me if there's any news."

"Certainly, Quennel," Estes said quietly, then they all looked to Minka. She was trembling slightly, but watched with a full heart as Quennel put Joshua in the sling. When he turned out, Nakam followed them.

Shortly afterward, Minka went to the keep to lie down at the foot of the crucifix, where she stayed the rest of the day. To not disturb her, Earnshaw forwent Scripture readings in the keep, but opened the door of the small dining room to accommodate prayers for the Captain. It was filled to overflowing.

Minka did not show up in the dining hall for dinner, so Quennel and Ella, with Joshua, explained to the children

that the Captain had taken a tumble down the hillside, and they were looking for him. The children accepted this. But Estes and DeWitt were worried about Minka, alone in her grief and waiting, so they discussed what should be done and by whom.

Before dinner had concluded that evening, Felice appeared at the door of the keep. Prostrate, Minka did not look up, so Felice came forward to lay a hand on her shoulder. “Lady Minka, please come with me.”

Minka raised up slightly. “I’m all right.”

“I know; you will be, but I’ve been sent to fetch you by some friends,” Felice said quietly.

Minka shook her head. “I can’t face anyone tonight. Thank you, but—just leave me be.”

“Oh, dear,” Felice said impishly, and Minka looked up at her with red eyes. “I’ve been charged with a solemn duty, so I’ll carry you if I have to, but once we get there, you may leave if you like.”

Regarding her mistrustfully, Minka rose on unsteady knees, and Felice held her with one arm. Then Felice walked her down to the library, where they turned in to see a table for four set with candles and dinner. Seated and waiting were Koschat, the Librarian, and Nakam (under the table). The men stood at their approach.

Felice persuaded Minka to sit, and she did smile at her dinner companions, who then sat. “I’m glad to have your company,” Minka said shakily as Felice sat in victory. “Are you going to eat with us, dear Librarian?” she asked in surprise.

“I can do so, Lady Minka,” he replied.

“Oh, I’m so glad. Librarian, can you tell us where Efran is?” Minka asked.

“Regretfully, no, Lady, as I am not well acquainted with the hill. But he is not dead,” the Librarian said.

Exhaling in gratitude, Minka took up her fork. “Then if everyone else will eat, I will, too. Oh, pie!” she said in muted delight.

As they ate, Felice said, “Lady Minka—”

“Just Minka, please,” she exhaled.

“Minka,” Felice corrected herself, “did you know that Koschat was one of the Forty who served under the Captain, and came to support him when Loizeaux attacked?”

“No!” Minka said, raising her large blue eyes to the Polonti across the table from her.

“Yes,” Koschat said, gratified by the acknowledgment. “And we—the Red Regiment—were very surprised when Commander Wendt promoted him to Captain when he was twenty—younger than many of us. Arne complained he’d have to babysit the boy. And the Captain had a lot to learn quickly, but he proved himself right well. His first big test was the Battle of the West Bank—we had no time to prepare for it; it was a rough scrabble with no plan but to throw ourselves in between this band of outlaws and the village they decided to raid.

“So what did the Captain do? He led us straight on to jump our horses over the bank into the oncoming attack. It was—crazy, suicidal, even, but—God in heaven, were they surprised. They had no chance to fight; we just ran

them down. It was wild. The bandits that were on horses turned to run, so the Captain grabbed his bow off his shoulder and started shooting them off their seats without even stopping. He never gave us any orders in that fight; he just showed us what to do. We cleared them all out by dusk. We lost a few men—not from the brigands, but from men falling wounded or unconscious onto the bank when the creek was rising. Captain saw it before anyone else; began pulling men up from the bank one after another. Saved at least eight or ten of us.”

Koschat stopped to take a bite. Minka, scooping up pie, said, “Tell me more.”

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Chapter 2

Koschat swallowed, then looked at Minka as though deliberating. “You’ll have heard about his womanizing.”

Felice looked at him with wide, forbidding eyes, but Minka said, “Tell me what you know.”

Koschat shook his head. “He was unjustly pilloried for that. Sure, he went in to the married women who crawled all over him, but—the young ones, the virgins, he never touched. Some of them threw themselves at him; even waited for him in the quarters he shared with Pindar. Whenever he went in and found them there, he just turned right back out to the barracks to sleep with us there.

“Oh, and—his best friend, the Captain of the Blue? Yeah, Captain Pindar wanted to knock down this Polonti upstart, so tried to entrap him with young girls a couple of times. We saw it, and tried to warn him, but he didn’t believe us. He just—wouldn’t go near the young ones. Ever.”

“I know,” Minka breathed, remembering. Putting aside the pie to start on the chicken, she said intently, “Tell me more.”

“Oh, the maids!” Koschat laughed. “They were all over him, all the time, especially when he went to the kitchen. The ration we got for meals was just—a handful, so little, so we were hungry all the time. Commander Wendt told them to give us more, but the Steward thought it was enough. So the Captain would go to the kitchen when just the girls were there, to give them ‘cooking lessons.’ He knew what he was doing, though—got out a large pot, told the girls how to cut up vegetables, and get him the meat. He’d make a big to-do over it—gather them all around him, let them hang on him, and kiss the girls who did the best. Then when everything was in the pot, he’d take it off the fire, tell them the lesson was over, and bring the pot back to our mess to finish cooking. That was great!” he laughed.

Minka had stopped eating to look off, thinking. “He said something vague about that—there were ‘so many maids’ he couldn’t remember them all, or something. Tell me more,” she said. So Koschat talked for another hour, until Minka was blinking in exhaustion. Then Koschat and Felice cleared away the table, took Nakam out to evacuate, and brought her bedding to sleep in the library that night—she couldn’t bear sleeping in their quarters without Efran. The men’s hillside search had produced nothing.

The following morning, March 12th, Abbey soldiers turned out to search the hillside again, this time including the northeastern and southeastern hillside—at least that beyond the steep dropoff from the east side. But as the hours wore on and the men still found nothing, they peeled off to resume their regular duties, which included digging on the new switchback.

Thrupp continued to use laborers, but only those who were vetted, and he kept rosters of those who had worked on which days. Since the new switchback was a priority of the Captain's, his men determined to see as much of it done as possible before he was recovered.

By late that afternoon, Bennard was the only one still searching, which he continued to do not only for the sake of his standing in the Abbey army, but for his sanity. He *knew* he had seen the Captain and his attacker roll into the hillside opening; he must prove it or go insane.

Since Joshua was too heavy for Minka to carry, the men took turns toting him around with them in their duties. Quennel was put in charge of assigning men to this task; when some complained that he picked only Polonti, Quennel relented to add others such as Shane, Hawk and Connor to the list of eligible caretakers. But the Southerners he picked were only from the Forty. Men who were Southerners but not of the Forty saw it and resented it, but chose not to complain.

By the end of the second day, Minka was a ghost. She sat on the bench under the walnut tree to watch the children with vacant eyes, and responded smiling when they spoke to her, but she was largely absent. Whoever had Joshua brought him for her to love on, but, both of them were distant, missing someone else greatly. The baby had stopped calling for Papa; had stopped speaking entirely. He just watched.

Minka wouldn't have eaten anything if Dobell hadn't kept bringing her favorite foods to the library. Because she liked him, and didn't want to disappoint him, she accepted the plates and tea to eat with the Librarian. He helped her more than anyone, bringing out books to read to her. She found poetry most comforting at this time, and was surprised to learn that some of what she heard was Scripture. Again, she slept in the library. She could hardly endure going into her and Efran's quarters to change clothes; sleeping there without him was unthinkable.

On the third day, March 13th, Bennard was out searching alone, and his Captain, Towner, allowed it. The fortress settled into a resumption of life without the Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. At this time, Estes and DeWitt sent a message down to the notary, Ryal, to ask: How long could they continue under the Abbey bequest and charter without the primary beneficiary and charter holder? Ryal's response was: As long as Minka is at the fortress, for if Efran is not found within a month, she assumes sole headship. Estes and DeWitt accepted this, but shook their heads—she was in no state to assume any responsibility for anything.

Late that afternoon, Bennard ran into the fortress in great excitement. "I found it! I found it! *I found it!*" Numerous men followed him upstairs into the workroom as he rushed inside, trembling. "Steward! Administer!"

Dropping his quill to hold up his hands, DeWitt said quietly, "Very good, Bennard. Take a breath and tell us what you found."

"Yes." Bennard obediently drew a breath, but his voice shook as he said, "I was looking, and they opened right in front of me. The doors opened. And I looked down. And I saw the Captain on a table. He was asleep, and there were small—tubes going into his nose and—his mouth. And there was a—dead man on a table nearby. A shriveled corpse. But the Captain was alive."

"Where?" Gabriel demanded.

"I will show you," Bennard said, and turned out. At least a dozen men followed him as he staggered out and down the stairway. DeWitt and Estes looked at each other, then stood to go over to the large east-facing window. From here, they could look down on most of the eastern hillside.

“Do you see any opening?” Estes murmured.

“No,” DeWitt said, taking his spectacles off to clean the lenses with his shirt.

Presently, they saw the men sliding down the loose rock and dirt of the hillside. The men looked around, and Bennard stopped dead, spreading his hands as he scanned the ground frantically. Estes and DeWitt heard his faint cry, “It was here! Here! I saw it! I saw him!” He jumped up and down like a child throwing a temper tantrum, and the men turned away in disappointment or disgust.

As the sun set on the third day, Captain Towner came out to the courtyard to see Bennard sitting on the eastern hillside in the gloaming. Shaking his head, Towner told a gate sentry, “Go get him.”

“Yes, sir,” Mohr said, saluting. The other gate guard, Corwyn, watched as Mohr picked his way over the unstable ground to lift Bennard by an arm and coax him back up to the courtyard.

As Mohr brought the dispirited man to his Captain, Towner surveyed him. “Bennard.”

The hollow-eyed man blinked, then brought his hand up in a semblance of a salute. “Cap’n.”

“Come to the barracks,” Towner said. Stooping, Bennard moved his lips in acquiescence and stumbled after his Captain.

Minka was not told any of this, as no one saw the need to get her hopes up. But she still heard whispers.

On the fourth day, March 14th, not even Bennard was out searching, apparently having given up, exhausted and broken-hearted. Midmorning, Corwyn (on courtyard gate duty again) glanced over to the eastern hillside and squinted. “There’s a pile of rags out there.”

“Really? Bennard?” Mohr laughed in sympathy.

“I don’t know. It’s not moving. Should I go check?” Corwyn asked.

“Couldn’t hurt,” Mohr nodded.

“All right.” Corwyn glanced down the empty switchback. “As long as no one’s coming.”

“No, just the men digging,” Mohr said, gesturing to the determined twenty or so digging on the new switchback. With a nod, Corwyn trotted out of the gates and past the diggers toward the east face. A few of them paused in their digging to watch.

Mohr raised his head abruptly as Corwyn suddenly accelerated toward something. Then he began waving wildly, whistling, and half the men dropped their shovels to run toward him. Mohr began ringing the bell.

Men flooded the courtyard as four of the diggers lifted something off the ground to begin running it toward the gates. Others on the eastern hillside were jumping, digging or searching the ground.

As the men arrived in the courtyard to lay their light burden down, Estes and DeWitt came out of the fortress. They hurried over to look. “What is it?” “What have you found?”

All of them looked down at the shriveled remains of a man. It was not the Captain.

“That’s just what Bennard described,” DeWitt said. Looking up, he ordered, “Where is he? Someone go fetch him.” A man peeled off to run toward the hilltop barracks.

Estes bent to feel the corpse’s arm. “This is not natural. Go ask Doctor Wallace to step out here,” he said, flicking his eyes up at a soldier. The man turned to run into the fortress.

Shortly, a bleary-eyed but alert Bennard ran into the courtyard, and the men parted for him to look down on the corpse. Before DeWitt could utter the question, Bennard said, “There! There! Him! It was—where?” He looked up wildly.

Corwyn replied, “It was just laying out on the eastern hillside this morning.”

“They brought him out,” Bennard said thoughtfully.

At this time, the crowd had to part again for the doctor to come look at the dead man. Wallace knelt to study the corpse intently, feeling the desiccated limbs. Then he turned an arm to expose the wrist. One man leaned over to look, noting, “Cuts.”

Wallace then turned the corpse’s head to look at the side of his neck, where there was another cut. Leaning back on his heels, Wallace said, “It appears he’s been deliberately drained of his bodily fluids.” The men stilled, and Wallace looked up to ask, “Who found him?”

Corwyn replied, “I did, doctor, but I’m not the first one to see him. That was Bennard.”

Wallace looked around as DeWitt told Bennard, “Tell us again what you saw.”

“Yes, Administrator,” Bennard said, gazing at this proof of his credibility. “I saw this one on a table just as he is now. On a table next to him was the Captain. He was alive, but asleep, and there was—a tube going into his nose and another in his mouth—in the corner of his mouth.”

“On tables?” Wallace asked. “Underground?”

“Yes, sir. In a room, with light,” Bennard answered.

Wallace stood. “Can you find the openings again?”

Bennard uttered a bitter sob. “No, sir. I’ve been looking for days, since I first saw it open for the Captain and this one to fall in.”

DeWitt asked, “Did it appear to open *in order* for them to fall in?”

Stricken, Bennard blinked, then said, “I don’t see how it could’ve been accidental—would have been one in a million chance.”

They looked back as someone small pushed through the tight circle to look down on the corpse. Minka raised her eyes to study Bennard. “So you did see him, and alive.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, full-hearted. She nodded.

The men were on high alert the rest of the day, with scores of eyes frequently scanning the eastern hillside. Minka came back to life: she bathed and changed clothes, played with Joshua and told the children the encouraging news—not that a man was dead, but that Efran was not. Cudmore, still in the infirmary, was hanging on in great discomfort, so Wallace continued to allow him one hard ale a day.

Minka went out to the training pens to watch Tess and Ella work with the horses. Tess offered to let her ride Cloud, but Minka shook her head. “I’m too excited; I’ll startle her. I want to wait until—until—”

Tess smiled. “I understand.” Ella exhaled, clenching her hands in hope.

Meanwhile, Elvey and Follriott both queried the fortress on the same thing: Where was Livy?—Adele. Estes and DeWitt debated their answer, finally deciding to reply to both that she had struck out on a new life.

Elvey’s dresser Ianna also came to ask Minka with raised brows, “When are you going to lead a procession to Elvey’s?”

Minka, her heart full of the imminent return of her husband, merely glanced at her. “Haven’t we always bought from you? Didn’t Elvey outfit our whole army? But you weren’t here then. Do you think you could be a little more appreciative and less demanding?” Then Minka turned out to look down the eastern hillside.

The fortress residents exhausted themselves looking to the east until the hillside was cloaked in darkness, then they all dropped into their beds. For the first time since Efran had disappeared, Minka also slept in her bed, alone but for Nakam.

On the morning of the fifth day, March 15th, the gate guards Allyr and Hawk scanned the eastern hillside earnestly when they came on duty early in the morning. Seeing nothing unusual, they assisted the carts’ entry from the mill, the butcher, and the greengrocer Firmin with their normal kitchen deliveries.

When those were safely unloaded, Hawk glanced over to the eastern hillside out of habit, and paused. Then he stepped out of the gates to look. It was still so early that the diggers had not yet started on the new switchback. As the rising sun made it hard to discern anything in the east, Hawk shaded his eyes to see better. Yes, there was a black-haired man slowly making his way up the hillside. And the rooftop bells began ringing in jubilation.

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Chapter 3

After a frozen moment, Hawk began leaping over the northeastern hillside toward the solitary figure. Allyr, peering, began pulling on the courtyard alarm bell as though the hill were on fire. Men came out sleepily to look, then began running. The door guards stuck their heads out, then turned to shout, “The Captain!” “Captain’s back!”

It was Efran. He paused, eyes flicking up as Hawk stopped before him to salute, gasping, “Captain! Do you need help?” Efran shook his head minutely; Hawk turned to walk beside him, heart thumping.

More men arrived, crowding around him, jostling each other while taking care to not impede him. He was concentrating on placing his feet in the shifting ground. They could tell he was weak, but he was alive and ambulatory, and right now that's all that mattered.

He began crossing the half-dug new switchback, and paused to look at it a moment. "You'll never lack help digging, Captain," Allyr joked. Efran glanced at him, but did not reply. After studying the fortress and the gates before him, he resumed walking.

More people were pouring out of the fortress doors. Estes and DeWitt came out to descend the steps as Efran tentatively entered the gates. He stopped to study the design on the gates—a wreath of roses with thorns—placing a hand on it as if to ascertain something. His friends studied his hesitation in mild concern. He glanced at them, still without speaking, then looked up at the white fortress rising high above him.

Minka came out of the doors, descending the steps slowly. "Efran," she whispered. Grinning, the men fell away to clear a path for her to her husband. He saw her and paused.

"Efran!" she cried, flying to jump on him.

He stepped back, raising his hands in mild alarm, and everyone stilled. Releasing him, Minka studied his tentative, somewhat disapproving expression. DeWitt, watching, said, "Efran, this is your wife Minka."

Efran's eyes shot to his face, then he looked at her in horror. "My *wife*?" he said. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen," she whispered in shock.

"Oh, I don't think so," he disavowed to utter silence.

Minka looked suddenly unsteady, so Estes put an arm around her to whisper in her ear. DeWitt said, "Efran, do you know me?"

Efran looked at him to answer tightly, "Should I?"

"Perhaps," DeWitt said. "Everyone, as you were. Captain, please come with me." Without touching him, DeWitt raised an arm toward the fortress doors. Efran regarded him for a moment, then lowered his head to follow as DeWitt led into the foyer. Estes, an arm around Minka, followed them. (Cruelly, Bennard was not there to see Efran come home. But when he heard about it, he flopped onto his cot to sleep in vindication for almost 24 hours.)

Efran stopped in the foyer to look up at the faerie tree roots descending from the ceiling down the walls. More men came out to greet him. Doane limped out of his cubicle. "Captain! Welcome home!"

Efran regarded him without recognition. "This is my home?" he barely whispered.

Tiras came up with Joshua, who looked at Efran and began, "Papapapa!" He leaned far out of Tiras' arms, reaching toward him.

Tiras released him to fall on his father, to Efran's alarm. Minka whispered, "Efran, this is your son."

He looked down at her in horror. "My son? By *you*?" He hastily gave the baby back to a stunned Tiras with, "He's wet."

Ella and Quennel came rushing up in glad relief. “Father!” Ella cried.

She attempted to throw her arms around his neck, but he stepped back in shock. “Your—father,” he whispered, staring at her. “I’m your father, too?” he demanded.

She looked mortified, but Quennel steadied her, comprehending that the Captain was not well. Efran gasped, “What kind of monster am I?” Then, confused, he muttered, “How old am I?”

Minka was the only one brave enough to reply, “You’re twenty-nine.” He turned his eyes to her as though she were playing a cruel joke on him, and she added, “It’s complicated.”

Efran’s eyes glazed over. DeWitt said, “All right, everyone, we’ll see to this. We’re going upstairs, Efran.”

Almost helpless, Efran followed DeWitt as he led down the corridor to the stairway. Minka trailed them at a distance.

Estes paused to whisper to Tiras, who nodded, turning to the nursery. Joshua began crying when his father disappeared up the stairs without him.

DeWitt stopped to open Wallace’s door, looking in. “Leese? Is he here?”

“Yes, DeWitt—Lord Efran! I’m so glad to see you!” she said as he stepped in.

“Am I your father as well?” Efran asked, scowling.

“No,” she laughed.

“That’s a relief,” he exhaled.

Wallace came out of an inner room; DeWitt spoke quietly to him as Efran glanced around. Then Wallace said, “I see. Efran, will you step back here for a moment, please?”

Nodding slightly, Efran followed him and DeWitt to a room with a high bed. Estes came as far as the doorway while Minka stood to the side of the door out of sight. “Sit here, please,” Wallace said, and Efran sat tentatively on the bed, looking around.

From the room next door, Cudmore looked up, breathing, “Captain!” He tried to rise, but Estes went in to lay him back down with reassurances.

In the other small room, the doctor was observing his patient closely. “Now. I understand that you were hit on the head with a shovel. Do you remember that?” Wallace asked, feeling Efran’s head.

“No,” Efran replied.

“Did you remember your name before everyone called you ‘Efran’?” Wallace continued as he delicately ran his fingers over Efran’s scalp.

“No,” Efran admitted. Wallace then went around to the other side of the bed to concentrate on the back of Efran’s head.

“What is the first thing you remember?” Wallace asked. He was squinting in concentration as he fingered the back of his head.

“The first thing. . . I woke up in a . . . dim room, lying on a hard bed. There were . . . large, dark creatures around me, running . . . feelers over me,” Efran said with difficulty.

“How did you get out?” Wallace asked. Still examining Efran’s head, he parted the hair in back.

Efran thought hard. “I . . . they helped me up, and put me on some stairs. I climbed to the light.”

Wallace was quiet a moment, then he came around the bed and raised Efran’s face to look in his eyes. Wallace covered Efran’s right eye with his hand and asked, “Can you see clearly?”

“Yes,” Efran said.

Wallace covered his left eye. “Now?”

“Yes,” Efran said.

Wallace stepped back, then asked, “Will you remove your shirt, please?” Without replying, Efran looked down to unbutton his work shirt and take it off. Briefly examining it, Wallace said, “It’s remarkably clean for a man who had been fighting for his life.” Efran blinked at it, shaking his head.

Laying it aside, Wallace looked at his arms, first, then fingered a puncture on the inside of his right arm. “Do you know how that happened?”

Efran looked down at his arm. “No.”

Wallace raised Efran’s chin to feel his neck on both sides, noting the Goulven scars on his shoulder. Then he asked, “Are you hungry?”

“A little,” Efran admitted.

Wallace turned to Estes in the doorway. “Ask them to bring him a plate up here, please.” Estes turned, but Minka was already out the door.

Returning to Efran, Wallace asked, “Do have any pain or discomfort anywhere?”

“Yes, that all these people know me, and that I apparently impregnated a fifteen-year-old,” Efran said bitterly.

Wallace looked back at DeWitt with raised brows, who explained, “He just met Minka and Joshua.”

“Oh.” Wallace regarded Efran. “But do you have any physical discomfort? Headache?”

Efran glanced aside, then said, “No.”

“For having gotten beamed with a shovel, that’s good,” Wallace said, and DeWitt studied him. Efran put his shirt back on.

Shortly, Minka approached the door with a bed tray. “Venison and vegetables, his favorites,” she murmured. Wallace and DeWitt stepped aside for her. Efran scooted back to lean against the headboard so that she could place the tray across his lap. Then she took the mild ale out of her pocket to pull off the top and place it on the tray.

Efran watched her warily as she withdrew to the foot of the bed. “May I sit here?” she asked indifferently. There were no chairs in the room.

“If you like,” he said, guarded. Distracted by the aroma, he began tentatively eating. Minka looked off and Wallace pulled DeWitt to the outer room.

He and Estes listened as Wallace whispered, “He’s got a metal plate in his head.”

“What?” DeWitt mouthed almost silently.

Wallace glanced back to see Efran eating, then said, “A metal plate, about three inches in diameter, fitted to his skull, and a row of stitches down the entire length of his head. I don’t know how it was done, or by whom, but he received extremely skillful treatment for what could have been a fatal injury.”

“In the *hill*?” DeWitt breathed in disbelief.

Wallace raised his shoulders in ignorance. “That he displays no effects from the injury and subsequent surgery except for amnesia is—” He shook his head. “I could not do as much.”

Estes asked, “By ‘surgery’ you mean, the metal plate?”

“It’s *fitted into his skull*,” Wallace emphasized. “Whoever did it must have had to remove skull fragments and then forge a piece of metal to replace them in size and shape perfectly. He appears to be completely unaware of the substitution.”

“And they did that in—*five days*, plus allowing for sufficient recovery time for him to walk the hillside back up,” DeWitt said, looking at Estes. “Who is down there?”

Shaking his head, Estes looked back to Wallace to ask, “Now about the dead man. What happened with him?”

“It appears he was drained of blood,” Wallace said.

“Why?” Estes said.

“I don’t know. Possibly, to replenish what was lost of Efran’s blood during his surgery,” Wallace said.

At that time, another patient with more mundane issues was brought in, to whom Wallace turned. Estes and DeWitt continued talking quietly in the outer room.

In Efran’s room, he ate while Minka made a point not to watch him. “What’s your name again?” he asked.

“Minka,” she said, glancing over.

“Unusual name,” he observed, turning up the ale.

“It was the name of my cat. When you asked my name, that’s what I told you, because I was afraid of you,” she said, lifting moist eyes to look across the room, away from him.

“How old were you when we met?” he asked.

“Almost sixteen,” she said.

“Almost,” he repeated in a hard voice. “Was I bedding a fifteen-year-old?”

“No,” she laughed. “I was of legal age when we were married, and our meeting was entirely accidental. You were in the infirmary, very sick with the fever. You almost died, but, crawled out of the window during a thunderstorm, and found a place to rest in my henhouse nearby.” She gritted her teeth to keep from crying at the memory he no longer had.

He had stopped eating. “That’s it? How did I marry you from there?”

She turned mischievous blue eyes to him, then. “It’s a long story.”

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Chapter 4

Efran leaned his head back. “A story you just now made up?” he asked skeptically.

She almost laughed. “I don’t have the imagination.” And she told him the whole thing, up to the point of their visit to the notary shop to get married and receive the bequest and charter of the Abbey.

He finished eating as he listened, then lifted the tray off his lap. She took it to place on a nearby table. He regarded her for a while, then barely shook his head. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand why I would fall in love with you.”

She flinched mildly at the insult, and he went on, “Not that you’re unattractive, it’s just that I—I’m very careful with underage girls. I can’t see how I would be different with you.”

“I guess you just had to have been there,” she said quietly, noting that this was something he remembered. He looked around restlessly, and she added, “There’s a garderobe right there.”

He got up from the bed to enter it and carefully shut the door behind him. Exhaling gently, she went to the outer room. DeWitt and Estes turned to her, and she offered, “He doesn’t understand why he fell in love with me.”

“Give him a few days, he’ll remember,” Estes said dryly. “Oh—and the doctor tells us that Efran received medical treatment in the hill, or somewhere. He’s got a metal plate in his head.” Minka stared at him, and he related what the doctor told them.

When Efran came to stand in the doorway, DeWitt said, “Your Steward Estes and I—your Administrator—are going back to the workroom. I’d suggest you just walk the back grounds with Minka. It may or may not help your memory, but it’s certainly a nice way to pass the time.”

He and Estes left, and Minka smiled at their encouragement. Barely glancing at Efran beside her, she said, "I'll show you." Then she led him down the stairs to the back corridor.

Here, she stopped at the nursery to look down at Joshua banging on the door. "Papapapa!" He looked up at them, grinning at his father.

While Efran was looking down at him, Minka said, "You're a devoted father, and he's very attached to you."

Felice came up to hand him a clean sling, smiling, "So good to see you, Lord Efran."

Since the three of them made it impossible for him to refuse, Efran leaned down to pick Joshua up, and the baby patted his shoulder in approval. Efran held the sling in bemusement until Minka took it to drape over his head and shoulder, expanding it. "Just drop him in," she said. His arms remembered what to do, even shifting Joshua to his back, and Minka began leading him down the lower corridor.

They stepped out the back door onto the grounds. Efran stopped to look around at the extensive activity back here—the gardening, the fertilizing in the orchard, the archery practice, the fight drills, and farther away, the horse training. Workers paused to smile at him, but no one presumed to approach him with questions.

Minka idly walked over the grounds, looking back as someone let her dog out the door, who began running over to them. "Nakam!" she called.

"Nakham," Efran breathed.

She looked at him quickly. "You remember him?" Thinking hard, he didn't answer. But it was the most encouraging thing she'd heard yet.

He was looking intently toward the archery practice, so she began strolling in that direction. He went with her. As they approached the lines, Quennel looked over. "Would you like to practice, Captain?" Quennel had taught Efran the Polonti method of *aike* shooting—aiming intuitively instead of visually. An expert archer, Efran had made the transition to *aike* with some difficulty. But once he mastered it, he never went back.

The archers on the line paused, dropping their bows in deference, should he choose to practice. Efran's eyes went hazy, then he stepped to the line, holding out a hand. Quennel placed the quiver in his hand, which Efran slung over his right shoulder. Joshua was draped down his left, watching with familiarity.

Then Efran took the bow, feeling it. Something connected and he raised it, whipping an arrow from the quiver inches from his son's face. Efran nocked and fired hard, and heads spun to watch the arrow sink into the center of the target. He kept whipping out arrows to fire without thinking until those crowded in the center began to split.

When the quiver was empty, he slid it off his shoulder to hand it and the bow back to Quennel, who was regarding him in complacent satisfaction. "It's all still there," Quennel murmured.

Efran studied him, then winced, looking over his left shoulder at his teething son. "Oh, I forgot," Minka said. Catching a passing worker, she sent him on an errand to the nursery, and he ran off. When Efran looked toward the training pens, Minka began strolling in that direction, and he followed. The worker then returned with a teething rag, which he handed directly to the baby. Efran looked back as Joshua chomped down on that instead of his dad's shoulder.

At that time, Efran caught sight of the Sea through the orchard, and turned in that direction instead. As he walked toward the south fence, he glanced back to confirm that she was following. This she noticed.

He leaned on the fence to look over the Sea, its gentle waves glittering in the sun. Minka stood at the fence a few feet down from him. Efran looked over at her. She turned her eyes to him, waiting. He shifted to look at the Sea again, exhaling in dissatisfaction. “How long have we been married?”

“Um, about—not quite two years,” she said.

“Two years?” he repeated, pained.

“Not quite, actually about twenty-two months. As I told you, I proved that I was sixteen,” she said.

“And my son is how old?” he asked darkly.

“I’m not his mother,” she said quietly.

“Who is?” he demanded.

She grimaced at the question, impossible to explain. Then she said, “You refused to sign a loyalty oath to the new Surchatain, so he ordered you hanged. But his daughter was in love with you, and promised to save your life if you would sleep with her. You did, and she did, but that was before we were married. And that was when Joshua was conceived. She didn’t want him, but you did, so we took him in, and—she went off to start a new life.”

He studied her. “How am I supposed to believe that?”

“Ask Estes or DeWitt; they know,” she shrugged, unoffended.

“How did they get their positions?” he asked.

“From you. They were the men you trusted utterly,” she said.

He groaned, looking away. “If only I could remember.”

“They believe it will all come back to you,” she said.

He muttered something, then said, “Go away.”

“Of course,” she said, turning to walk off.

A moment later, he said, “Wait.” She looked back, silently inquiring. “I don’t want to be a brute, I just don’t—” He broke off in his inability to articulate his turmoil.

She raised her shoulders indifferently. “If I’m making it difficult for you, I’ll certainly leave you alone.”

“But you love me,” he said wryly.

“Which is why I don’t want to smother you when you’re already gasping for air,” she said.

“Will you stop being so understanding?” he asked tightly.

She laughed. “Will you feel better if I throw fits to confirm that I’m just a child?”

“Maybe,” he said, deeply conflicted.

“Not today.” Smiling, she lowered her head and resumed walking away.

He watched her progress toward the back door for a few moments, then ran over to stand in front of her. She looked up with a pleasantly blank expression. He glanced around, almost distressed. Then he took Joshua in his sling off his shoulder. “Take him back to the nursery.”

She tried to keep her voice level in replying, “He’s too heavy for me to carry. If you don’t want him, give him to any soldier.” She went around him to stalk to the back door. Passing through the corridor, she went to the courtyard to request a horse and bodyguards.

Shortly, Finn and Goss came around with three horses. Finn asked hopefully, “Is the Captain coming?”

“No,” she sighed. “He’s still trying to remember, which is too painful for both of us right now. If you have any important duties waiting, you might better send me someone else. I don’t want to come back for a while.”

“We’re with you, Lady Minka,” Goss said.

And she did in fact keep them out for over two hours. They rode all over the Lands, looking at everything new, then she made them come eat delicacies and drink mild ale in Averne’s lovely outdoor dining area.

It was midafternoon when they finally returned to the fortress. Feeling vaguely guilty, she went directly up to the second-floor workroom. Efran was not there, but Estes and DeWitt looked up. “I’ve been out riding,” she said. “How is he?”

Estes said, “Last I heard, he went back to the doctor’s quarters to rest. We have to remember that he’s just come off a near-fatal attack.”

DeWitt added, “We showed him the bequest and charter while you were gone. The weight of it fell pretty hard on him, I’m afraid.”

“Yes, I imagine so. If he’s resting, then I’ll go check on the children,” she said.

“He’ll be all right, Minka,” DeWitt said.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

She went out back to see the Abbey orphans playing quietly. Catching sight of her at the artichoke beds, Toby ran up. Nakam came with him, jumping up on her legs. “Minka, Efran’s mad at us,” Toby said anxiously.

She knelt to scratch Nakam’s ears and look up at him—the first orphan whom Efran adopted. “No, Toby, he’s not mad at you, but at himself. He took a bad hit on his head, and now he can’t remember anything. But Estes and DeWitt are sure it will all come back to him. We just have to be patient.” She put an arm around him, but he looked over her shoulder.

Minka turned as Efran came out of the back door. He did look angry. “See?” Toby whispered.

“It’s not you,” she insisted quietly. “I’ll talk to him.” Toby nodded, and she rose to go meet Efran.

As she approached, he glanced at her, then pressed his lips together to look around the back grounds. “You left.”

Surprised, she hesitated. “I—”

“And you were gone for a long time,” he added accusingly, lowering his eyes to her.

She needed a moment to realize that even if he didn’t remember her, his need for her was undiminished. Chastised, she said, “I’m sorry; I should have known it would upset you. I will be sure to let you know where I am from now on.”

Breathing erratically, he looked off. “Are you still afraid of me?”

“No!” she said, hurting for him. “You’re a wonderful husband, and father.”

He lowered his head in anguish, pressing his palms against his forehead. “I—can’t—remember.”

“We will help you.” She turned to wave to Toby, watching from the asparagus beds. He came over hesitantly, evaluating. She pulled him to stand in front of her. “Efran, this is Toby. He and I were the first ones you brought here, to our safe place, and he is the first child we adopted.”

Efran went down on one knee to look at him. “Toby,” he whispered. “There was a . . . gallows, and, wolves—”

Toby’s eyes widened. “Yes! You do remember me!”

“Just bits and pieces,” Efran groaned. “And so many blanks in between.”

“It will come,” Minka said, reaching down to brush his hair out of his eyes.

Toby assumed his authoritative air. “I’ll go tell everyone that you’re not angry, just upset at not remembering, and that they need to tell you who they are.”

“That will help,” Efran said, chagrined. Nodding, Toby ran off.

Efran stood, tossing his hair back, and Minka laughed, “Didn’t Routh just cut your hair?”

“I don’t remember,” he said ruefully, then grabbed her up to bury his face in her neck. When he lifted her off the ground, she twined her arms around his head. “We’re married?” he asked again.

“Yes!” she laughed at his persistent disbelief.

“Come show me,” he breathed.

“All right.” She squirmed down to take his fingers and lead him inside. Nakam quickly followed them in. Everyone watching on the back grounds breathed in relief: the Captain would be fine.

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Chapter 5

An hour later, Minka was lying across Efran's chest as he held her lightly in bed, looking up at the whitewashed ceiling. "Are you feeling better?" she whispered.

"Yes," he said. "That was fun." Nakam was curled up on the floor, waiting for them to finish.

She chortled. "Now you sound like the Efran I know."

He put his hand to the back of his head, not for the first time. "What is that? There's a row of—small lumps down the back of my head."

She turned his head to look. Yes, there was a narrow, shaved strip running down the back of his head, in the center of which was an incision, closed with tiny stitches. She noted that his hair had been recently washed. He asked, "Do you see it? What is it?"

He turned his face back to her, and she hesitantly began, "They said that you received medical treatment in the five days you were gone—"

"Five days," he whispered. "I was unconscious for five days?"

"You were gone that long. Do you remember any of it?" she whispered.

He winced. "I'm trying, but it's all—hazy. There were creatures that worked on me. I was aware that there was something—working over me. . . . And the other man who fell down with me." He went silent, thinking. "What happened to him?"

She raised up to start getting dressed. "We'll have to go ask your administrators—Estes and DeWitt."

He watched her. "Then can we come back here?"

"If you want," she smiled from the wardrobe.

He said pensively, "Your name is. . . ."

She turned, brows arched. "You'd better remember that pretty quickly."

"Oh, no problem," he said, looking for his clothes on the floor.

When dressed, they went down the corridor hand in hand, followed by Nakam. Efran started to turn up the stairs, but she dug her heels in, and he looked back quickly. She led him on down a few doors to the nursery. They looked in at Joshua, sitting up, staring vacantly at the closed door. He looked up to see them, and his baby face opened in joy. "Oh," Efran said, stricken.

Felice came out from a back room. "Oh, look who's here, Joshua! Your father's feeling better. Let me get a sling; I just changed him."

She reached back for the cloth drape, which she tossed to Efran before leaning down to pick up the baby. “Thank you, Felice,” he said without thinking, and Minka turned her eyes up to him. He remembered *her* name?

Efran put on the sling to let Joshua lie across his chest instead of his back. Curling his hand around the small black head, he asked, “Does he look like me?” He hadn’t seen a mirror recently.

“Very much,” Minka said. “What’s my name?”

He winced. “Tell me again.”

“Minka,” she said.

“Minka,” he repeated. “Minka. . . .” His face clouded. “Dressed in white, with jewels, and, white curled hair. And you didn’t care that I couldn’t reach you.” His face contorted in pain.

She looked outraged. “That’s what my name means to you? That was a—a lie! An illusion! That wasn’t me at all!” she cried.

He searched his fragmented memories. “That’s right. It couldn’t have been you, because here you are. I found you again.”

She hugged him. “Come, let’s go up to the workroom.”

The three of them went up the stairs to the workroom door. Upon seeing them, Estes and DeWitt immediately raised up. “Ah, he’s feeling better,” DeWitt said perceptively, and Minka lowered her red face.

“I—have questions,” Efran said, studying the faerie tree growing up through the middle of the work table.

As he was looking at the tree when he said this, two faeries appeared on the table beside the trunk, each about a foot tall. (Like the Librarian, they grew with responsibilities.) The little man in a vibrant green suit, with matching top hat and checkered vest, swept his hat in an elegant bow. “We are so delighted to finally hear from you, Lord Efran, that we’re simply falling over ourselves in joy to be of use to you, no matter how paltry. Is that not so, dear Nutbin?”

The squirrel standing beside him, wearing a monocle and green plaid vest, said, “Once again, you have made the point unerringly, dear Ditson! We are thrilled to be requested to give answers, of which we have thousands!” He pulled a scroll from his vest to shake it open. Joshua chortled as one end rolled across six feet of table lengthwise to bound over an empty chair and continue to roll over ten feet of wood floor before stopping abruptly against the north-facing wall.

Nakam, springing to chase the wooden roll, kept trying to catch it in his teeth while it whacked his nose. Temporarily dissuaded, Nakam retreated to sit beneath the table and wait for a better opportunity. Joshua leaned out of the sling in his desire to join him, so that Efran had to catch him quickly and extract him safely. Then he placed Joshua under the table with his buddy.

“Now, Lord Efran, which answer do you wish to see?” Nutbin asked, screwing in his monocle firmly. “Perhaps we should narrow the answers down by topics: Wrong Mathematics, The History of Pamukkale, Famous Illusionists Who Can’t Be Found, Poems by Reat P. Bidelspace—”

For Efran's sake, Minka interrupted, "Sir Ditson! And Sir Nutbin! How positively springlike and festive you look!"

They spread in self-admiration, Ditson saying, "Thank you, dearest Lady Minka, for your kind notice. Today being the fifteenth of March, we are dressing to honor our kindred leprechaun clans as they prepare for the official opening of spring on the twenty-second."

"How exciting!" she said.

Nutbin said, "Indeed it is, dear lady, and all the Fortress faeries are engaged in our own preparations for the unveiling. Still, we must not lose sight of our primary duty, which at this moment is to attend whatever questions our recently restored Lord of the Abbey has for us."

So they intently looked to Efran. DeWitt and Estes watched his bewilderment in amusement. Wiping his mouth, Efran said slowly, "Yes, I—was injured, and, seem to have been attended by something—some creatures in the eastern hillside—"

Ditson and Nutbin gaped at him, Ditson protesting, "Oh, dear, Lord Efran, how dismayed des Collines would be to hear themselves described as 'creatures.' They are so very advanced and sensitive, Lord Efran, that we do earnestly entreat your gracious accommodation of unmatched persons, and their feelings."

Efran glanced at Minka, who looked back at him wide-eyed, indicating that this was all new to her, as well. He replied, "I apologize for giving offense, but it's out of ignorance and not disrespect. What are the—des Collines?"

Ditson said, "They are a very ancient race who were the primary builders of the fortress, Lord Efran, given the blueprints from the architectural angel Aaro, of course." Nutbin nodded in agreement as if Ditson had just asserted the existence of gravity.

Efran blinked at this. "Why . . . would they tend me?"

"Oh dear, Lord Efran, how you tease us," Ditson said, straightening his checkered vest in an attempt to be jocular as well. "You are Lord of the Abbey Fortress. You are crucial to its mission."

Minka, Estes and DeWitt looked at him in steadfast agreement. Efran breathed out a short laugh, scanning the branches covering the ceiling. "How, when I'm handicapped? . . . Can I see them? Talk to them?"

Ditson looked to Nutbin, who removed his monocle to clean it vigorously with a large kerchief also extracted from his vest pocket. The rolled end of the scroll at his feet was bouncing due to Joshua's patting the section that descended from the table. Nutbin replied, "They are very reclusive, being sensitive to the persecutions inflicted upon them due to their appearance. So, whatever you see of des Collines is determined by them alone, Lord Efran."

"I understand," he said. "So, my falling into their—domain was not an accident."

"No, indeed, Lord Efran," Nutbin said.

"And then they released me when they were done," Efran said.

Ditson nodded; Nutbin said, "Certainly, Lord Efran."

“I wish to learn more about them. I wish to thank them,” Efran said.

“They will have noted this, Lord Efran,” Ditson said. “It is a noble desire; whether it fits with their wishes is known to them alone.” He raised his hands as if weighing options. Efran nodded, absently watching the scroll spin at Nutbin’s feet. Efran then looked under the table to see Joshua pulling on the endless roll in delight, watching it mound up around him almost higher than his head.

“Thank you, that is instructive,” Efran said, bending to pick up Joshua and work the wadded-up portion of dense script out of his stubborn fingers. Nakam was wrestling mightily with another portion that had wrapped itself around his muzzle. “I hope to see your spring celebration. That’s—all I need for now.”

“You are most welcome, and you shall, Lord Efran,” Ditson said. Both faeries bowed extravagantly and disappeared, along with the vast scrolled roll. Joshua opened his suddenly empty hands with a cry of dismay. Nakam rubbed his freed nose on Efran’s pants leg.

The amnesiac looked blankly at his administrators and his young wife, who looked blankly back at him. Shoulders raised, she offered, “The spring celebration should be fun to watch.” He looked dubious.

Efran, with Joshua and Minka, went in to dinner as usual that evening, to be warmly (and uncomfortably, for him) welcomed by almost everyone in the hall. As he sat tentatively beside Ella (with Minka on his other side), she smiled at him. “Are you really my daughter?” he asked, wincing.

“Yes,” Ella replied. “And I’ve been received so graciously by everyone here, as have my brothers Cyneheard and Alcmund.”

Efran paled. “Are they mine, too?”

“No,” she assured him while Quennel was laughing on her other side. “Just me,” she added.

“Do I want to know how that happened?” he asked warily, looking up as Dobell put a plate of trout and bottle of mild ale in front of him.

She checked her husband Quennel, who mutely disavowed any opinion, then she replied, “I think I’ll let you remember that on your own.” Minka nodded; that was wise.

Toby brought all the children over to have them tell Efran their names, and made sure he repeated them. It was uncomfortable for him to expose his ignorance so thoroughly, but they were understanding, yet firm in seeing that he had their names memorized by the end of dinner.

When he and Minka fell into bed that evening, and she inserted herself into his side, he lay there awkwardly for a minute. “Do we really sleep like this?”

She raised up. “No, not if you don’t want to.” She scooted away six inches and rolled onto her other side. He exhaled, getting comfortable on his back, and she waited. He did have to lift up to feel the row of stitches along the back of his head again, but readjusted himself on the downy pillow and settled down again. She waited.

His breathing sank into the deep, even rhythm of sleep, and she closed her eyes. Then she suddenly felt herself being lifted and rotated to rest her head on his shoulder, her body inserted into his side. She looked at his firmly

closed eyes and he whispered, “Shut up and go to sleep.” She choked back laughter; again he whispered, “Be still.” So she closed her eyes to snuggle down, and he grunted in satisfaction.

While Minka took Nakam out back following breakfast the next morning (March 16th), Efran retrieved Joshua and his sling from the nursery. Turning the sling to hang on his back so that Joshua could look over his shoulder, Efran quickly remembered the need for a teething rag, which the nursery worker brought him. “Thank you. Your name is . . . ?”

“Cordelia, Lord Efran,” she said, pleased.

“Cordelia. Good,” he nodded. Advancing up the corridor, he noted how pleased everyone seemed to be at his asking their names. While he disliked calling attention to his deficiency, they seemed appreciative of his efforts to overcome it.

At the front doors, he stopped to look at the door guards. “Your name is . . . ?” he asked one.

“Ellor, Captain,” he said saluting.

“Ellor,” Efran repeated, then looked to the other.

“Pleyel, Captain,” he said promptly, also saluting. Efran repeated it, noting that this man was Polonti. Then he went out to the courtyard. He only glanced at the men digging on the new switchback before turning his gaze to the eastern hillside.

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Chapter 6

After deliberating a moment, Efran went to the courtyard gates, which the young Polonti opened to him quickly. One saluted. “I am Jehan, Captain. Hello, Joshua,” he added, patting the baby’s back, who greeted him with a wave.

He seemed self-assured for one so young and relatively small. Efran repeated his name, smiling. “Jehan.”

“And I am Coish, Captain,” his partner at the gates said, saluting.

Efran turned to him. “Coish.” Then his eyes glazed slightly. “You’re two of Minka’s favorites.”

“Yes!” Jehan said in undisciplined exuberance. Coish grimaced at him, but Efran nodded in confirmation. Then he went out the gates toward the eastern hillside.

He heard a whistle behind him, but ignored it until a soldier ran up. As Efran turned, the man saluted. “Shane requesting permission to accompany you, Captain.”

Efran opened his mouth, but another man drew up. “Mathurin reporting for duty, Captain.”

Before Efran could answer him, two more arrived to introduce themselves with salutes as Stourt and Suco. Efran

regarded them, then repeated, “Shane. Mathurin. Stourt. Suco. Ah, very well. I learned a little bit about the residents under the hill here, and I just want to walk around and—see what we find.”

“Yes, Captain,” they said variously. They greeted Joshua, some taking his hand or patting him, then began to move down the hillside, scanning around their feet.

“Watch out for adders and scorpions,” Efran murmured. They acknowledged this, and he raised his eyes in contemplation. *How did I know that? I must spend a lot of time here.* Then he considered, if reclusive residents had their home under the hill here, adders and scorpions—as well as the briars and nettles—would help keep the curious away.

The five of them walked over a wide area, looking, but no doors opened underneath them. Efran was lifting his face to call a halt when he saw one of them—Stourt—bend suddenly to pick something up. The others looked over as he began running back to the Captain.

Efran held out his hand as Stourt said, “Just found this lying on the ground, sir.” And he put a five-inch-long key in his hand that looked to be made of silver. It had a finely wrought, decorative bow and no tarnishing whatever.

The other men came over to look, and Efran said, “Ah! Good. This is what I was supposed to find, then. We’re done.”

They turned to head back to the courtyard, where Efran saw Minka waiting. She did not look concerned, just watchful, and turned to listen to Jehan, who was obviously telling her that Efran remembered them as her favorites. She smiled, looking back to his ascent.

Upon reaching the courtyard, Efran showed her the key. “I don’t know why, but finding this makes me queasy,” he admitted.

She scrutinized it. “Looks like a door key, but I’ve seen none here that are silver,” she murmured. “Yes, when you remember about the Destroyer, you’ll know why you don’t care to go looking for whatever door this key fits.”

“A destroyer?” he asked apprehensively as she handed it back to him. “Isn’t this a rather—violent place to house children?”

“It seems like it, doesn’t it?” she laughed sympathetically. Exhaling, he put the key in his pocket.

There was a scrabbling noise from the northwestern hillside. Efran’s head shot up as he watched a large, black, three-headed creature climb out of a hole on the hillside to flop down on its back, exposing a gray underside. One of its heads emitted a belch of dirty white smoke.

As Efran was endeavoring to form a question, Shane said, “That’s just the snobbles eater, Captain. The children talk to him all the time, but I think he’s full of nonsense.”

Open-mouthed, Efran said, “The—snobbles eater.”

“His name is Jonguitud, Captain,” Suco said.

“Jonguitud. Of course,” Efran said.

“Ungh!” Joshua waved at it.

Looking over his shoulder at his son, who was obviously demanding to go over to it, Efran said, “Let’s, ah, wait for the other children to go hear his nonsense.” Then he asked Minka, “Would DeWitt or Estes know anything about the key?”

“I’d ask them,” she said.

“I know where they are, at least,” he said, taking her hand to lead her up the fortress steps.

He paused suddenly, looking to the left of the steps. “Efran?” she murmured.

“Walking stick,” he murmured. It was not there now, so Efran took her and Joshua inside and up the stairs. As they entered the workroom, Estes and DeWitt looked up. Standing with DeWitt, conferring over a worksheet, was—“Pieta,” Efran murmured.

“Yes, Captain; good to see you,” she said with a broad smile. Minka glanced away, piqued that he seemed to remember all the women’s names except hers.

“You as well,” he replied to Pieta. “I’m remembering bits and pieces,” Efran said vacantly. Pulling the key out of his pocket, he set it in front of Estes, asking, “Do you know what that might open?” DeWitt looked over.

Estes picked up the key. “It’s about the size of a door key, but I don’t know any fortress doors this would fit. All the keys I’ve seen are iron. Besides, silver is too soft; just turning it in a lock would likely bend it. So, I don’t know. Any ideas?” he asked DeWitt.

Regarding it, DeWitt said, “That strikes me as the type of thing to ask the Librarian about.” Nodding, Estes handed it back to Efran, who looked at Minka.

“Oh, yes, he’s so often helpful—not always in ways you expect,” she murmured.

“All right.” Efran turned to go back down the stairs. Minka glanced down, surprised to see Nakam following—not her, but Efran. Specifically, Joshua, his playmate.

In the first-floor corridor, Efran stopped, looking around. “The library . . . ?”

“Right here,” Minka said. They went up the corridor a few steps and turned in the library door.

Efran gazed in wonder at the books before turning his eyes to the Librarian, with his shock of white hair, intensely black suit, and dark eyes. He waited with head slightly bowed until Minka said, “Dear Librarian, I’m not sure that you heard, but—Efran suffered a bad blow to his head, and has lost his memory—temporarily, we’re sure. But, anyway, his men found this key on the eastern hillside, and we hoped you could tell us something about it.”

She took it from Efran’s limp hand to extend it to the Librarian, who took it to study it. “Very interesting, Lady Minka. Made of unalloyed silver. Therefore, I would guess that it is not a key to be used in a normal door in the fortress, but in a door between realms.”

“Realms,” Minka repeated. “I’m not sure I understand.” Efran was watching silently.

“Well, Lady Minka, you are aware that various realms occupy the physical space of the fortress. There is the visible realm, which we are inhabiting here as we speak; there is the faerie realm, to which your sister Adele was confined for a short period of time, that also intersected this physical space. There was the realm of the battle of the Peloponnesian War which the deposed faerie king Alberon entered here, in this library. There may be—probably are—numerous other realms of which we are unaware that may manifest themselves in the fortress.”

Minka looked at Efran. “So the des Collines who took care of you don’t live in the dirt; they’re occupying a different realm that intersects the eastern hillside. How can we find the doorway, then?” Minka asked the Librarian.

“I would suggest, Lady Minka, that whoever is looking should keep this key on his person. When he encounters the door, he will know it.” And he handed the key to Efran, who took it to place in his pocket.

“Thank you,” he said.

The Librarian inclined his head. “You are most welcome, Lord Efran.”

Exhausted, Efran barely made it through dinner that evening. By the time Minka had taken Nakam out for his evening evacuation, and had a soldier take Joshua to the nursery, Efran was asleep. She crawled into bed beside him without scrunching up to him or waking him.

When Minka awoke the next morning, March 17th, she sleepily looked over to see Efran awake, lying on his back. She reached over to brush the hair out of his eyes, and he jerked his head slightly as though irritated. She withdrew her hand quietly. After a moment, she rose from bed to begin dressing.

He looked over to her. “When is breakfast?”

“Whenever you want. All you have to do is go to the kitchen; Dobell will bring you a plate,” she said amiably.

“Dobell?” he asked.

“The kitchen assistant who served you at dinner last night, and practically every night. He knows what you like,” she said.

“Which I don’t,” he muttered.

As she started to leave the bedroom, he said, “Wait.”

She turned, smiling. “I’m just going to get Nakam’s breakfast and take him out.”

He got up to put on the clothes from the floor. “I’ll go with you.”

As he dressed, he paused to look at a large crèche sitting on its own small table in the corner of the room. It was about a foot in length, width, and height, finely detailed with the wise men, the shepherds, and the holy family surrounded by animals. But Efran was focused on the commanding figure of an angel atop the shed. “I’ve seen that angel,” he whispered.

She barely avoided asking, *When?* So she kept silent. Searching inwardly, he murmured, “He looked at me, and I thought I was going to die.” Shaking his head, as he could remember no more, he finished dressing.

Then he, Minka and Nakam went down the lower corridor. Leaning into the kitchen (which entry was immediately before the dining hall), she asked the closest worker, “Are there scraps for Nakam this morning, please?”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” a woman said, reaching over for a bowl.

A man at a nearby work table looked up. “Are you ready for breakfast, Captain?”

Minka whispered, “That’s Dobell.”

Efran raised his head. “I’ll be right back for it; thank you, Dobell.”

“Very good, Captain,” he replied, pleased to be remembered.

Efran nodded, then walked out with Minka. She carried the bowl of scraps while the eager dog followed at her feet. Pausing to look into the nursery, she saw Joshua still asleep, so she progressed to the back door. Efran walked with her blankly.

Outside, while Minka fed Nakam and picked up his droppings with leaves, Efran gazed around at the early morning activity—the gardening, the maintenance, cleaning, drills, practice. Many workers or soldiers nodded to them or saluted him, which he hesitantly acknowledged.

Since the children weren’t out here yet, Nakam desired to go back inside to wait at the door of the nursery until Joshua should wake. When the nursery workers saw him waiting, they often let him inside to curl up beside his playmate.

Efran and Minka went on to the dining hall for breakfast, then, which he ate quickly and silently. The moment she was finished with her eggs and cobbler, he stood. They returned to their quarters to wash up.

Wiping his wet face on a hand towel, he glanced at her again, as he had been doing all morning. Then he reached over to caress her tousled curls. “I don’t understand why I’m so bound to you,” he said tightly. She waited, trying to not cry.

Groaning, he stepped back. “I need to know. I need to understand what happened to make me so obsessed with you. I need to know about Joshua’s mother. I need to remember my coming here—why I ever felt capable of being lord of this place. The men here—men who served under me, who salute me with respect when I can’t even remember their names,” he said in anguish. “Somehow, I have to remember or I will lose my mind.”

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Chapter 7

Minka bit back the assurance that Efran would eventually remember—first, because she didn't know if it were true, second, because it didn't comfort him at all.

"The roof," he murmured. "I haven't seen the roof yet." He fingered the silver key in his pocket.

"I'll take you up, if you like," she said.

"Yes," he exhaled. "I have to find—something. And I don't know what that is," he muttered.

"I understand. Let's go." She turned out of their quarters to lead down the corridor to the stairs. On the stairway, she led him past the third floor, past the crenelated walkways around the upper fortress, to the highest level with the faerie tree and the bell tower.

He paused in astonishment at the vast, spreading crown of the faerie tree. "This—is what's growing up from the workroom on the second floor?"

"Yes," she laughed. "Isn't it amazing?"

"Something else that I don't know how it came to be," he said through gritted teeth. "How can I do anything when I understand so little?"

Trembling, she said, "The only other thing up here is the bell tower. You'll hear the bells ring occasionally."

"We have bell ringers?" he asked, following her around the tree. Faeries peeked out of its branches, watching in concern.

"Yes, bell faeries," she laughed lightly. He looked away glumly. Everywhere he turned, there was something strange and unknown to him—all of which he was responsible to protect.

As they came around to the bell tower, he immediately saw its door with the silver escutcheon and lock. That was it. That's what he needed to open.

He quickly looked at her, but she apparently didn't see it, as she was looking around. She turned to look directly at the door, then, and said, "I don't particularly want to go in the bell tower; a lot of bad memories there—" She broke off upon realizing what she had said.

"It's not necessary. But, I want to stay up here a while longer," he said.

"Can I wait with you?" she asked apprehensively.

"No," he said, looking at his feet.

"Efran, will you—come back down?" she asked, trembling.

"Yes," he said, looking up at her now. "I promise you that I'll come back. Have I ever broken a promise to you?"

"No," she said.

“That’s good to know.” He almost smiled. “Go on down now.”

Shaking, she turned and walked away. He waited until he heard her open the stairway door and go in. Then he turned to the bell tower door with the silver lock. He pulled out the key to insert it in the lock and gently turn it. The door swung open to the inside, where directly in front of him was a stone stairway leading down. Efran entered and began to descend, turning back to watch the door close behind him. There was no handle on this side of the door.

Efran looked back down the stairs at a faint light below. Steadying himself with a hand on the wall to his right, he continued to descend thirty steps, until arriving at a broad corridor lit with lanterns along both walls. He slowly advanced down this corridor, pausing at the first door on his right to try the handle. It was locked, so he went on, trying every handle on both sides of the corridor until he came to the end, where there was one more door. If this one were locked as well, he was trapped.

Efran took a breath, then reached out to turn the handle. It yielded, so he pushed the door open to glance between two creatures standing on either side of a raised table. “Good morning, Lord Efran,” one creature said.

Raising his eyes to the one that spoke, he dimly remembered it. The creature was about six feet tall, with the shape and coloring of a giant slug. In the area of its head were about twenty stalks, each ending with a human-like eye, with eyelids that extended from the stalk. From the general area of its neck stretched another twenty-odd stalks ending in humanoid fingers, collected in groups like hands. Across the approximate abdomen were fringed extensions of skin which seemed to undulate.

“You are des Collines,” Efran whispered. “You healed me.”

“We worked on you, yes. How are you feeling?” It was the one on the right speaking again, but the eyes of both creatures were extended toward him. Moving independently, the eyes took in his form, his stance, his face—every aspect of him, it seemed.

“Physically, I am whole, for which I have you to thank,” Efran heard himself say. “What are your names?”

The same one said, “You may call me Nonesuch; my companion is Asmuch.”

“Nonesuch. Asmuch,” Efran repeated. “I am grateful for your saving my life. But I—can remember nothing of the fortress and its people, who are under my care. And, I can do nothing for them in this condition. I must remember or die.”

The two seemed to communicate with each other, then Asmuch said, “We believe that this is a result of tiny bone fragments remaining in your brain. We did not attempt to remove them all, as doing so might impede your muscular control. If we go in again to remove them, it may restore your memory, but will almost certainly cripple you.”

“How? In what way will I be crippled?” Efran asked. He was distracted by the movement of their fingers, which seemed to be tracing patterns in the air. Then he realized that this is what enabled him to understand them.

“We cannot know beforehand, Lord Efran,” Nonesuch said.

“If you do nothing, will I recover my memory over time?” Efran asked.

“Probably not,” Asmuch answered.

Efran looked away, thinking. Then he looked back to ask, “Did you leave the key out for me to find?”

The two des Collines communicated again, then Asmuch said, “No, Lord Efran. We believe that would have been Nakham.”

“Nakham,” Efran breathed. He did not remember who this was, but he was connected with the walking stick, that was not by the steps anymore. And this Nakham was—was— “Do it, if you will. I will abide, whatever comes of it.”

“If you are certain, Lord Efran,” Nonesuch said. They moved apart from each other, extending their many fingers toward the table between them. Efran walked over to sit on the table, then lie down.

Minka waited hours for Efran to come back down. When he did not, and the men began asking after him, she went up to the rooftop to look for him. He was not there—not in or around the faerie tree, nor the bell tower, nor on any crenelated walkway: nowhere. So she went back to the second-floor workroom.

When she came to the door, DeWitt and Estes looked up, then Estes rose to come over to her. “Minka? Where is he?”

Unsteadily, she said, “I believe he used the key on the rooftop. I took him up hours ago—he said he would come down, but, he’s not there anymore.”

DeWitt came over, saying, “We’ll go look with you.” He spoke quietly to the door sentry, who nodded.

Then Minka, DeWitt and Estes went up to the rooftop, where she stood by the stairway door while they looked around thoroughly. Finding no trace of Efran, they quietly went back to the workroom. Estes sat her in Efran’s chair while DeWitt stood thinking. “Did he ask the Librarian about the key?”

“Yesterday,” she said, and told them what the Librarian had said.

“So, after he thought about that, he asked to go up to the roof,” DeWitt went on.

“Yes,” she said. “While we were there, he told me to go back down, that he wanted to look around some more.”

“And he found the door,” DeWitt concluded.

He and Estes studied each other, then Estes said, “He’s gone back down to des Collines for more treatment.”

DeWitt said, “That must be why they put the key out for him.”

“Which means he’ll be back, Minka,” Estes said. She put her head down on her arms.

DeWitt called in the sentry to have the men watch the eastern hillside again for the Captain’s second return.

That evening, Minka went in to dinner without Efran for the first time—ever? No, she had also eaten alone when he had ridden to Eurus to defend Auntie Marguerite’s estate from Master Crowe. Other than that, as far as she could remember, he had always been at her side for dinner, until this whole episode. But the children needed one

of them here. So Quennel brought in Joshua, sitting with him on his lap as Efran always did. Then Minka and Ella talked quietly, as they always did, except without laughter.

They did watch, however, as Trina, Challinor, and a few other wealthy Lands women sashayed into the hall wearing Trina's extravagant fashions. A few of the former Featheringham slaves—now business women—also wore their gorgeous dresses. So heads were fairly spinning between the competing fashion camps. Felice also entered in another lovely dress that she was paid to wear by whoever made it. Koschat did not object, however, because she sat with him and his regiment buddies.

Observing all this, Minka leaned to Ella to whisper, "Frankly, I'd rather not fight in the dress wars."

"Me neither!" Ella cried softly, and they did laugh.

Toby, Noah, Ivy, Hassie, and Alcmund all sat with Minka to eat. They were very concerned about Efran's absence, but she quietly explained that he was hoping the des Collines would help him recover his memory, and he promised to be back when they had finished with him. This satisfied them, so that they ended the evening ranging over the hall for uneaten desserts, as usual.

For Minka, the worst part of all, of course, was going to bed without him. But because she had expectations of his return, she dug out the hooded cloak that he had worn as a boy walking from Eledith to Westford. After putting it on and curling up in bed with Nakam, it only took her about three hours to fall asleep.

Efran did not return the next day, or the day after that (March 18th and 19th). Still, the fortress carried on; the construction in the Lands was ongoing, while the number of people claiming homesteads in the far eastern Abbey Lands, the Northwest Sector, and the Northeast Sector exploded. Estes, DeWitt, Pieta, their assistants, and their assistants' assistants worked twelve-hour days to get families situated just on the Lands. To help manage the two sectors outside the Lands which the Notary Ryal had to handle, DeWitt outsourced ten competent assistants to his shop, besides Soames.

During these days, Minka managed as best she could for the sake of the children, who looked to her in hope that their adoptive father would be coming home. The men stepped up admirably with them and Joshua; Captain Rigdon exempted Connor and Finn from their regular duties just to take up slack with the children, as those men were two of their favorites.

Minka suffered quietly, especially at night, but she never slipped into despair because she also prayed. She couldn't help it; she had to believe he was coming home.

Midmorning of the fourth day, March 20th, the courtyard gate guards Graeme and Krall heard a familiar whistle. "Is that the Captain?" Krall asked. They looked at each other, then looked around, especially to the eastern hillside. They looked down the switchback, which was empty, then over to the northwestern hillside. Jongitud was somewhere in the caverns, and the men were practicing with the slings. But even some of them looked over at the second, louder whistle.

Graeme and Krall both swung to look east again. Graeme shouted, "There's someone crawling over the hillside!"

Chapter 8

“It’s the Captain!” Krall shouted, springing out of the gates. Graeme abandoned his post as well, both of them running toward the prone figure on the hillside who had propped himself up on his elbows to wait for them.

“Captain! Are you hurt?” Graeme shouted as he and Krall skidded to a stop beside him, flat on his front in the dirt.

“I can’t walk. But at least I know who you are. Graeme, Krall—you’ll have to carry me,” Efran said.

They reached down on either side for him to drape his arms over their shoulders so they could lift him. Walking him back toward the gates, they looked down at his feet dragging in the dirt. “What happened, Captain?” Krall asked.

“My legs don’t work any more. But here come Conte, Koschat and Tomer,” Efran said, as if the second statement outweighed the first.

“You remember our names!” Graeme exclaimed.

“What happened?” Tomer cried, skidding past them on the loose dirt of the hillside. Someone now in the courtyard had the presence of mind to start ringing the alarm bell.

“He can’t walk,” Krall explained. Tomer scrambled up, trying to see what he could do to help.

More men ran up to them, passing the new switchback. About sixty feet below them, the diggers paused to watch. Efran said, “Martyn, go get the rolling chair out of the doctor’s office, if he still has it.”

“Yes, Captain,” Martyn said, gazing only a moment at his dangling legs before turning to run.

People began pouring out of the fortress doors—among them, Minka. Pale, she quietly watched Efran being carried by his men through the gates into the courtyard. As they drew up to her, still supporting him, he lowered his beautiful smile to her. “I remember now. Everything.”

“Efran,” she whispered. “What . . . ?”

“I’ll explain everything when I can talk,” he said, looking over the men. “Mathurin. Fennig. Tiras. Cyneheard! Are you learning the sling?”

“Yes, Captain,” he said, saluting, but did not elaborate, his face grave.

But Efran looked happy. “I will still have my Christmas present,” he told Minka, and her eyes widened slightly.

Martyn then came down the fortress steps with a folded wicker chair that had wheels instead of legs. With him came DeWitt, Estes and Pieta. Everyone watched while Martyn unfolded the chair to push it behind Efran, held up by the men on either side. They lowered him to the seat, folding down the footrests to place his feet on them.

“All right,” Efran said in satisfaction, gripping the wheels on either side. “Let’s go in and I’ll—oops.” He was looking at the fortress steps in front of him.

Martyn bent to take hold of the back of the seat while Mathurin picked up the foot rests, and they carried Efran in the chair up the steps and through the fortress doors to let him down in the foyer. “Thank you,” he said, looking at the silent crowd around him. Minka knelt beside one wheel, waiting. “I came back,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said, tears standing in her eyes.

“What happened is this,” he said to everyone standing around. “After my skull was broken by whoever it was with a shovel, two of the des Collines fixed it and sent me on my way. But tiny fragments left in my head caused me to lose my memory. Someone, probably Nakham, gave me the opportunity to go back down to the des Collines, and they told me that they could try to dig out all the fragments, which might get my memory back, but which also might cause me to lose muscle function. I decided to risk it, and I’m not sorry. I can’t be riding out to every threat anyway; that’s what the men are for. I want to remember why I’m in love, and why I’m grateful. I do, and I’m satisfied with the trade-off.”

Minka pressed her wet face to his, and he kissed her.

Since Efran couldn’t go up and down stairs in the rolling chair, he, Estes and DeWitt decided to put him in the small dining room during the day and run messengers between the floors. It also meant that he could not go up to the vacant third-floor room nor the rooftop. In fact, his range was now drastically curtailed, which he refused to think about. But DeWitt ordered ramps to be immediately built on the side of the fortress steps and the back door steps.

The doctor came down to look at him in the small dining room. Standing behind the rolling chair, Wallace bent to examine the back of his head. Efran explained, “There’s now *another* row of stitches to irritate me, but they’ll heal. I wish I knew how to thank the des Collines—or how they knew to snag me when I was rolling down the hillside with a bashed-in head.”

“Amazing,” Wallace murmured. “Very fine stitching, as well. We’re all very grateful to have you back, Efran.”

“Thank you, doctor,” he said quietly. Looking down at his immobile legs, Efran knew that he would soon curse his need of the chair, but he knew he made the right decision, and was unutterably grateful that it worked, even at such a cost.

When Wallace went back upstairs, he paused in the workroom to tell Estes and DeWitt, “I had a patient years ago who lost all movement from the neck down after a mule kicked him in the head. And then a year later, when a fire broke out in his house, he rolled out of bed to fall out of the window beside it. And weeks later he started walking again. Regeneration is possible.”

DeWitt shook his head. “I hope so. I pray so. But don’t breathe a word to either of them.”

“Right,” Wallace said, and Estes nodded.

When Minka came up to Wallace’s quarters to ask him what she could do to help Efran, he told her, “Massage his legs, and exercise them for him. That will help prevent too much loss of muscle too quickly.”

“Yes, I hope so,” she said anxiously.

The rest of that day was spent making adjustments for Efran to use the garderobe, bathe, change clothes, or climb into bed. As it was, his upper body strength was such that he could do these things with only Minka’s help.

And Joshua enjoyed riding on his lap in the chair very much.

Determined to sit in his usual spot for dinner, Efran found that he could pull up to the bench in the rolling chair, set the brake, and hoist himself over the bench by his arms. He could pivot by himself, and only needed Minka's help to bring his feet down to the floor. Without Efran knowing her motivation, she did hug him tightly, hoping that the power of God in the hill would heal him. When nothing happened, she accepted that his condition was meant to be, for reasons unknown to her.

By that evening, he was already, quietly, second-guessing his decision. *I was too impatient. I could have relearned everything within weeks. And I already knew that I loved Minka; I didn't need anything to convince me of that. What did I need to remember about Adele? It was a blessing to forget everything about her.* But Minka curled up beside him, happy and grateful to have him back in any condition.

Over the next few days, the full ramifications of his choice began to sink into him: he could not walk. He had to push himself in the rolling chair to get anywhere. He had to look up to talk to anyone, even some of the children. Minka habitually got down on her knees beside the chair to talk to him, but no one else did; it was too uncomfortable.

He could no longer protect her. That had been his rôle from the beginning, when he had taken charge of her convalescence from the fever. Now, he could only minimally defend himself. This realization drained him of the ability to make love to her. She wanted him to, still, but for the first time since early puberty, he had no desire.

In the broader picture, he was still Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, but not its defender, either. That rôle was now being assumed by Commander Lyte and his Captains. So questions of defense or strategy were now routed around him. None of it was deliberate; it was simply too difficult to send messages about everything down to the small dining room from the second-floor workroom. Either DeWitt or Estes always stopped by to give him updates, but he missed out on much by simply not being in the room when issues were first discussed.

On the third day of his new life, March 23rd, Minka brought in a visitor to him and Joshua in the small dining room. Leaning down to kiss him, she said, "I have to run an errand. I'm taking bodyguards, and will be right back." Efran nodded, then raised his eyes listlessly as the blind Commander Wendt sat across the table from him.

Efran sighed as he watched Minka walk out the fortress doors on her feet, then he said, "Thank you for coming to see me, Commander."

"I'm very sorry to hear of it, Efran. It's a heavy blow to a man who was born to fight," Wendt said.

"Yes, sir, especially as it was my own doing." Then Efran told him about the initial injury and his treatment under the des Collines, then finding the key, and finding how to use it. "I wish to God now I'd never been given the option. I was so—egotistical and stupid, I couldn't imagine a 'muscle failure' that would affect me," Efran said bitterly. He could be honest with the Commander in a way that he couldn't be with Minka. Yet.

"Yes, we proud men hurt ourselves more than anyone else can," Wendt said.

Efran expelled a breath. "You had no hand in your own blinding, Commander." Nakam ran in to join Joshua under the table, and Efran glanced down at them periodically as he talked.

"Actually, I did, indirectly," Wendt said. "When word got around about the loyalty oath that Lightfoot was requiring, the smart men left or went into hiding to watch and wait. I was warned, along with everyone else. Did

I do the smart thing? No, I was too proud to run and hide; I took a public stand without the resources to effectively resist. So they took me out in the most horrifying way possible, as a warning to the other men. And while the others who hid came here to make themselves useful to you, I was sold to Clonmel for fifty royals.”

Efran digested that silently, then said, “I understand. But you are incredibly useful to us now. More useful than I am at this point.”

“*At this point,*” Wendt repeated. “You’re just at the beginning of your advanced training. You don’t know what sphere of usefulness is ahead for you, as long as you don’t give up.” Efran gestured in hopelessness, and Wendt added, “Something I’m not clear about—how did you come across this silver key that took you to des Collines?”

“One of the men found it on the eastern hillside and brought it to me. Ah, Minka and I showed it to the Librarian, who suggested I carry it around to see where it might fit. Oh—the fortress faeries Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin told us about des Collines before we went to the Librarian. So, I realized I hadn’t checked the rooftop, where a lot of strange things happen. When Minka and I got up there, I saw the silver lock right away. She didn’t, so I made her leave. Then I used the key in the lock of the bell tower door, took the stairs down, and, I finally found them—the two who had worked on me. They said Nakham had probably put the key out for me,” Efran related.

“Wait a moment,” Wendt said. “So, the ones who had the most to do with your current situation are, first, the des Collines who saved your life to begin with, second, the faeries who have helped you time and again, third, this Librarian who disposed of Alberon who was trying to rob the Treasury, and finally, the guardian angel of the hill? Who threw that hundred-foot-tall wizard into the Sea?”

“Ah. Yes,” Efran said, shocked into thought. Joshua patted his knee in encouragement.

“With all that considerable help, you’re trying to tell me that your situation is unforeseen and hopeless?” Wendt laughed.

“I—don’t know what to do,” Efran stammered.

“Perhaps you need to look for it. You had to look for the key; you had to look for the lock; you had to look for des Collines. If you look for it, the opportunity will open up for what to do,” Wendt said.

Efran listened open-mouthed. “I mustn’t lie down and die. I must stand on what I know to be true”—this being what he had learned from Nakham after the attack of the water giant.

“I like the way you put that—‘stand,’” Wendt said with a laugh. “It’s like when I see something I didn’t understand before.”

Meanwhile, Minka had asked for the bodyguards Jehan and Coish to ride with her down to Delano’s. “Thank you for coming,” she said when they arrived. “I can’t be gone long, but while dear Commander Wendt is here to talk to Efran, I need to see Madgwick.”

She hopped up on her little mare Rose while they mounted their horses on either side of her. Jehan said, “Thank you for asking for us, Lady Minka. Will I get to see Adele?”

“Ruth,” she corrected him quickly. “Please remember that her new name is Ruth. Yes, I’ll ask.”

“Yes. I’m sorry—Ruth,” Jehan said as Coish looked at him in mild disgust. “Thank you, Lady Minka.”

Once off the switchback, they had to stop at the first crosswalk for extravagantly dressed ladies to flounce across. “Ugh. I’m so tired of the dresses,” she muttered. Her bodyguard watched the display in bemused fascination.

As they pulled up to Delano’s brewery, Minka looked down Main at a scuffle in front of the barracks. “What is that?” she asked.

Both her bodyguards looked quickly down Main. “A few are fighting,” Coish observed.

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Chapter 9

“But they’re all Efran’s soldiers that are fighting. They’re all in uniform,” Minka said uneasily. “That’s—more than a few. There are at least a dozen.”

“That happens, sometimes,” Jehan shrugged. “Captain Barr will crack some heads and they won’t do it again.”

The three of them watched as the altercation abruptly halted and the men involved dispersed. Minka and her boys dismounted in front of the brewery to go inside. Madgwick’s son Wystan was standing at the front counter. “Lady Minka! What do you need today?” he asked amiably.

“Hello, Wystan. I was so hoping to see Madgwick and baby Ruth, if she’s available,” Minka said.

“Wait a moment, please; let me go dig her up,” Wystan said, turning. Minka winced at the wording, but nodded.

Shortly, he returned. “Yes, she asked you to come on back, please,” Wystan said with a slight jerk of his head toward the back rooms.

“Thank you. I hope you don’t mind my bodyguard coming along. They were with us when the baby was dropped off, and wanted to see her, too,” Minka said.

“Sure,” Wystan agreed.

The three visitors were brought to the same back room in which they had seen the baby before. Madgwick, with the child in her arms, looked up from the rocker with a warm, motherly smile. “Thank you for coming, Lady Minka! And you brought the boys again,” she said fondly.

“Oh, Madgwick—she looks wonderful. Full and happy,” Minka breathed. Her young bodyguards studied the infant.

“Yes, we’re satisfied with the weight she’s gained. She’s just over three weeks old now,” Madgwick said contentedly.

“Oh, I’m so glad. May we hold her?” Minka asked.

“Certainly. I have to go send a message to our gruit supplier; I’ll be right back,” Madgwick said, standing with the baby, which she handed to Minka before leaving the room.

Minka looked down at the little bald thing in her arms, blinking sleepily. Then she opened her tiny mouth in a great yawn. “You can see how much she’s loved just by how quiet she is,” Minka breathed. “Oh, I am so glad for her to have found the security she always wanted.”

Jehan said nothing; made no request as he looked at baby Ruth, but Minka turned to put her in his arms. “What do you think? Can you believe that’s really her?” she asked quietly.

Coish studied him as Jehan said, “Yes. I can tell by her eyes.”

“Sixteen years is a long time to wait,” Coish said. “You’ll be thirty-one by then—older than the Captain is now.”

“I know,” Jehan said quietly.

“Oh, Jehan,” Minka said in understanding. Sometimes you just knew who you were destined to love; she had known at once that the man lying damp and weak in her henhouse would be hers. And her heart broke for Efran’s brokenness now.

As Madgwick came back into the room, Minka took the baby to hand her over. Eyes watering, she said, “Madgwick, I have—a favor to ask, please. Please pray for Efran. He’s lost the use of his legs; he can’t stand or walk, and he’s suffering.” She let the tears come now so that she could hold them back when she was around him.

Madgwick said, “Of course, dear. I’m so sorry. I did hear something of that, and I will remember him.” Minka nodded, greatly relieved, then Madgwick added, “Perhaps I could ask a favor of you.”

Minka quickly looked up. “Yes, certainly, anything. What is it?” She saw a tentative, troubled cast on the woman’s face.

“The soldiers are demanding free ale in the barracks. We’re supplying them, but, it’s putting quite a dent in our reserves. Perhaps you could ask Lord Efran about it?” Madgwick said.

Minka gaped at her. “Free ale? That’s—absurd. Efran would never allow that; the Fortress pays for everything for the men. From which barracks? Down here?”

“Yes,” Madgwick said hesitantly. “It must be; they don’t take them up hilltop for sure. At any rate, I hope you can resolve it for us. If it continues, it’s liable to put us out of business.”

“It will stop at once,” Minka said darkly. “Come,” she ordered her bodyguard, turning out in a swirl of her plain brown riding skirts.

They remounted to ride the short distance to Barracks #1, housing Captain Barr’s unit. She entered, her bodyguard behind her. Barr’s scribe Numan looked up from the front desk. “Lady Minka! Good morning; what can I do for you?”

“Find me Captain Barr, please,” she said mildly.

“Certainly, Lady—I believe he’s conducting inspections,” Numan said.

“I’ll only take a moment of his time,” she said, unsmiling.

He evaluated her. “All right.” He got up to leave the office. She looked at her bodyguard, who looked back at her warily. Something was screwy, for sure—the Captain was conducting inspections? What about the fighters?

In a little while, Barr entered from the adjoining door. “Minka! What is it?” he asked in concern, glancing at the silent Polonti with her.

“Barr, I’ve just talked to Madgwick. She says the soldiers down here are demanding free ale, and it’s about to drive them out of business,” Minka said.

“What?” Barr’s face registered genuine shock. “Are you sure? *Our* soldiers?”

“She’s not the type of woman to be confused about who’s extorting her,” Minka said. “Please investigate.”

“Yes, of course,” he said.

“What was the fighting about just now?” she asked.

Barr’s eyes shot back up to her. “Fighting? Who?”

“Men in uniform, out front here. Just minutes ago, fighting each other. We saw it,” Minka said. The boys behind her were disturbed by his reaction. It was a black mark for a captain to lose control of his regiment—especially a Polonti.

“I’ve been in back,” Barr said thoughtfully. “And this was not reported to me.”

“Barr, something is going on,” she said.

“I will do some digging. Don’t worry, Minka,” he said.

“Good. Thank you,” Minka said. She and her bodyguard turned out again.

After a silent ride up Main, they entered the switchback under the faerie trees and Minka said, “Come in with me to tell Efran.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Coish said.

As they reentered the fortress, looking to the small dining room, they saw Wendt beginning to rise from his chair opposite Efran. Minka hurried into the room. “Oh, Commander, I’m so glad I caught you.” She turned down to Efran to kiss him on his lips. His eyes flicked up in fleeting appreciation, but lowered again in pain. He remembered when he had to pick her up for her to reach his lips.

“What have you done now, Minka?” Wendt asked in amusement.

“Well, I—” She paused abruptly, glancing at movement outside the open door. She reached over to shut it, then began in a softer voice, “I ragged on Barr a little, I’m afraid. Jehan and Coish will tell you why,” Minka said, sitting definitively beside Efran, who looked up at the boys. Nakam demanded to be picked up, so she put him on her lap. Joshua stood, holding on to her knees.

As Wendt sat again, Coish told him and Efran about the fight they had witnessed and what Madgwick had told

them. Efran's eyes glazed over, and he looked at Wendt. "Have you heard anything of this?"

Wendt snorted mildly. "No. But I'm fairly easy to deceive."

Efran looked back up to the boys. "Which barracks is it that's making the demands?"

Coish looked questioningly at Jehan, who shook his head. "She didn't say, sir."

"Who's your Captain?" Efran asked.

"Captain Rigdon, sir," Coish said.

Efran said, "Go upstairs and give this report to DeWitt and Estes. Then go tell Captain Rigdon, and tell him I asked you to be excused from duty today. First, I want you to find out from Madgwick how much money they're out, and I want DeWitt to reimburse them. Tell Madgwick I want to know which barracks is making the demand, if she knows. Then I want you to go back down to the barracks and ask quiet questions among the men you know and trust. Tell them we've been informed, and when I find out who's doing it, there are going to be bad things happening," Efran laid out quietly.

"Yes, sir!" Coish said, and they saluted.

"Dismissed. Go," Efran said, looking off in anger. The boys opened the door to run out. Nakam started to run after them, then came back to Joshua under the table.

As Wendt rose from his chair again, Efran said, "Thank you for your counsel, Commander. Please keep your ears open, but don't say a word about this."

"Obviously," Wendt said wryly, then paused to add, "That kind of thing happens when you get enough men together."

Efran looked away, jaw tight. "But it didn't happen here until I became too weak to stop it."

"You think so? Someone's about to be surprised," Wendt said, feeling his way to the door. "Is Willis out there?"

Minka glanced around the foyer. "I don't know. But I want to walk you down." She took his arm to leave with him.

Still distressed, Efran picked up Joshua to put him on his lap and wheel out of the small dining room. Nakam followed as Joshua happily rode in the chair down the corridor to exit the back door. Grudgingly, Efran did appreciate the new ramp back here.

Jehan and Coish made their report to the administrators on the second floor. DeWitt and Estes listened gravely, then DeWitt told him, "Go do as the Captain said, and keep him apprised." Estes nodded in concurrence; the boys saluted and hurried out again.

While DeWitt received an updated list of families wanting land, he muttered to Estes, "I'm trusting Efran and his Captains to handle this; we can't do a thing about it right now." Estes mutely agreed as an assistant approached with a question about apportionment.

Finding the small dining room empty, Jehan and Coish went back to their hilltop barracks to report to Captain

Rigdon, who quickly gave them leave to do whatever Captain Efran had told them. So they took horses back down to the Lands to stop at Delano's, first.

With Joshua chortling on his lap and Nakam trotting along beside, Efran wheeled his chair rapidly over the back grounds. Unable to bear the sight of everyone walking around him, he kept his head down, cursing himself roundly, again, for his stupidity and impatience. He did smile a little at Joshua's waving in superiority at all the people who didn't have such a great conveyance to zoom around in.

Approaching the sparring grounds, he turned the chair aside with a groan. He remembered when he had taken down the fight master Nares for grabbing Minka in the corridor. He ruefully considered that if she hadn't stopped the second fight, Efran would have been incapacitated a long time ago.

Since there was nowhere else on the back grounds to go, he stopped at the training pens to watch Tess work with another new horse. Lorient was here at the time, offering guidance which she quickly followed. Efran lifted his face in renewed pain, then a question occurred to him. Dubiously, deeply considering it, he lifted Joshua from his lap to place him on the ground, then Efran hauled himself out of the chair by means of the railing.

He hung on the railing until Lorient saw him and came over, saluting. "Captain?"

Efran looked at him for a while. "Do you think I can still ride?"

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Chapter 10

"I don't know. You should try," Lorient said. Tess came over to listen.

Efran contemplated the horse presently in the pen, and asked, "How do I mount?"

The three of them looked at the solitary horse for inspiration, then Tess said, "Build a ramp to the mounting block."

The men thought about that. Straightening his great frame, Lorient looked back to the stables. "Go saddle Gaunter," he told her, and she ran off. This was a placid gelding who was untroubled by inexperienced riders. Lorient himself climbed over the railing to walk across the grounds. Efran watched him disappear around the corner of the fortress, then reappear carrying the ramp from the back door with one hand.

"Come around to the gate." Lorient pointed to the gate on the north side of the pens. Tess came out from the stables leading Gaunter, saddled and bridled.

"The gate. Yes," Efran agreed. But as he sat abruptly in his chair and picked up Joshua, he said, "Oh—dirty wraps here. I've got to take him to the nursery, then I'll be back."

"Tess." Lorient nodded to the baby. Unquestioningly, she hopped over the fence to come to Efran's chair with outstretched arms.

Efran hedged, “I’d better take him in; he’s dirty.” He didn’t entirely trust her.

“I’ve mucked stalls,” she said dismissively, taking the baby to hold him out prone, dirty side up. Efran watched dubiously as Joshua was swept away, laughing. Then Efran wheeled himself around to the gate, pushing it open to roll in before turning the chair to close it. He was appreciative that Loriot didn’t try to help him do anything.

As Efran rolled up to the horse, he saw Loriot disappear into the stables. He emerged again with the mounting block, which was broad enough to accommodate the chair wheels—barely. This he positioned beside Gaunter, then pulled the ramp up to the tall side without the step. The ramp was about an inch higher than the block. “See if that works,” Loriot said.

Efran evaluated the setup, then rolled the chair over to the ramp to push the wheels up it, lips tight with the effort. Gaining the block, he quickly stopped the wheels before he could roll down the step. Then he set the brake and regarded the horse beside him on his right. Tess ran up to watch.

Loriot looked on silently as Efran evaluated the situation, then raised himself by pushing up on the arms of the chair. He reached over with his right hand to grasp the pommel, his left hand quickly following. He pulled and pushed himself up until he was lying on Gaunter’s neck with his hips over the saddle. He pushed his right leg over the horse with his right hand. Then he cautiously raised up in the saddle—and fell off.

Landing with a thud, Efran laughingly moaned, “I forgot that I can’t hold on with my knees.”

“Can you control your hips?” Loriot asked, lugging the chair off the block to bring it over to him.

“Yes,” Efran said. He sat up, bringing the chair seat to rest against his back. Then he placed his hands on the seat behind him and pushed himself up into the chair. Releasing the brake, he rolled back over to the ramp, wheeled up to the block, and pushed himself up to grasp the pommel again.

When he pulled himself over Gaunter’s neck this time and pushed his right leg over, he lay there for a moment to feel his location on the saddle and center himself. Before raising up, he used his hands to shove his feet into the stirrups. Then he sat up, straight backed as always.

Glimpsing movement, he looked over to the railing where Minka stood watching, hands clenched in excitement, eyes adoring. “You didn’t see me fall off, did you? Wait a moment and I’ll do it again,” he said sardonically.

Others had come over to watch, as well. Connor, beside her, was holding Joshua (with clean wraps). Ella had stopped working with her yearling in a neighboring pen to watch. A few other soldiers and fortress workers had paused at the sight of the Captain on a horse.

He lowered his head to concentrate on his placement, then turned the reins and nudged his hips forward lightly. Gaunter turned as instructed to walk the perimeter of the pen. Efran kept looking, assessing, repositioning as he gently urged Gaunter to trot, then lope. Whenever he felt himself losing his balance, he concentrated on regaining it with his abdomen and hips instead of his legs.

For the next hour, Efran practiced riding: loping, turning, stopping and starting again. He did not fall again, though a few times he had to grab the pommel or lean forward. Loriot and Tess, seeing that he needed no further help, went back to their duties.

Finally, Efran turned Gaunter to align him close to the gate. He pushed his feet out of the stirrups, lay forward on the horse’s neck, and swung his right leg back over to the left using his hips. Then he dropped down to sit hard

on the ground. Turning, he lifted himself on the railings as Minka ran around the pen. Connor followed with Joshua.

Jasque, the head trainer, walked up dragging the wheeled chair. “Right good form, Cap’n,” he said, taking up Gaunter’s reins.

“Thank you,” Efran laughed. “Especially when I fell.”

“Once,” Jasque noted. “Hello, Lady Minka.”

“Hello, Jasque,” she said, beaming. They watched Efran lower himself into the chair, then Jasque departed with a salute, taking Gaunter back to the stables.

“Cap’n,” Connor said in greeting, placing Joshua on his lap.

Nakam tried to jump up, too, but Efran said, “You’ve got four good legs; use them.”

“Captain!” Connor blurted, and Minka gasped.

As Efran looked up, startled, Minka asked, “Do you have feeling in your legs, Efran?”

“Ah, yes, some. Why?” he asked.

“Captain, you moved your foot when I put the boy on your lap,” Connor observed.

“Well—yes, because he moved my leg,” Efran said.

Minka said, “No. You lifted the top of your foot a little.” Connor nodded in agreement.

“Oh,” Efran said, restrained.

Connor saluted and went to resume his duties; Efran and Minka were quiet as they returned to the back door. Faced with the steps, they both looked back to the training pen where the ramp still rested against the mounting block. “I want to leave it there,” he said.

So he put Joshua on the ground and lifted himself from the chair to sit on the top step. Minka was able to take the chair up the steps into the corridor as Efran leaned over for his son. Then he also put Joshua in the corridor and scooted back to the chair to hoist himself up into it. Nakam, having trotted up the steps on his own feet, supervised all this from beside his playmate. Joshua pulled himself up on Efran’s knees, and he lifted the baby back onto his lap.

As they went up the corridor toward the small dining room, Efran paused. “Do you think . . . you can ask the doctor if he has the braces and crutches Doane used—?” Before he could finish, Minka was flying up the stairs.

A little later, Wallace, with Minka, brought the braces and crutches to Efran in the small dining room. “The problem with the braces, Efran, is that they lock the knees, so that you can’t walk normally in them. So they’re for the short term. But that’s what you need, isn’t it? If you’re already displaying movement, then these will help prevent atrophy, so as to hasten your recovery, we hope.” As he talked, Wallace was laying out the braces—essentially wood slats secured with buckled straps.

Efran leaned over to put Joshua on the floor. When he started to roll out of the chair himself, Wallace said, “You had best stay seated, Efran. Let us get the braces on you.” Minka watched as the doctor pulled Efran’s right leg straight, then fastened the brace on it, beginning with his thigh. Watching, she did the same on his left leg.

“Make sure it’s tight,” Wallace grunted, refastening the top strap that she had buckled.

When they had the braces strapped on him, Wallace and Minka stood back to observe. Efran, legs stretched out straight before him, looked at him dubiously. Leese suddenly appeared at the door of the small dining room. “Wallace, a man’s come injured from sparring. His arm may be broken.”

“Ah,” Wallace said. “Carry on, Efran,” he nodded, turning out with Leese.

Efran and Minka stared at each other, not knowing what to do now. Efran suddenly raised his eyes. “I needed this—this crippling,” he whispered. “I don’t know why, but—this was a wake-up call.”

“If you say so,” she said, unsure.

Inhaling, he looked around. “I’m going to see if I can push up out of the chair.”

“How can I help?” she asked.

He said, “Put Joshua under the table so that I don’t fall on him. Then you can hand me the crutches.”

“Yes.” Dropping to her knees, she scooted the baby underneath the table, and Nakam followed. “You stay there,” she warned Joshua. He didn’t crawl out, but did bend to look at his father.

Efran began hoisting himself up on the braces. Minka stood before him, holding the crutches ready. He reached out for one, the grip of which she put in his hand. He thrust it under his arm, and she gave him the other. With his weight on the crutches, he struggled to balance.

She glanced down at Joshua peering out from under the table, then Wallace reappeared at the door. “I have only a moment,” he said, surveying Efran. “All right. Don’t lean on the crutches in your armpits; bear the weight on your hands.”

Efran raised up off the crutch pads to hold the grips. Then Wallace asked, “Can you stand at all? If your legs can’t bear any of the weight, you’ll have to use the rolling chair.”

“I understand,” Efran whispered.

Behind them, Leese said, “He’s ready, Doctor.”

“Yes, I’m coming,” Wallace said to her before turning back to Efran. “I’ll check back with you as soon as I can.”

Efran nodded, and Wallace left.

Efran glanced tensely at Minka, then he slowly straightened. She could hardly bear to watch his once-powerful legs tremble at the demand to stand. He stood upright, fists tight on the grips. Then he slid his right foot forward a few inches, bringing up the left crutch to balance. He followed with his left foot, bringing up the right crutch.

As Minka walked backward in front of him, he slowly walked half the length of the table—about six feet—

before turning to sit on the table to rest. While he breathed, sweating from the exertion, he looked to her for an opinion. She said, “Show-off.”

He leaned back, laughing, to drop the crutches and take her in his arms.

Between the riding and the walking, Minka decreed that to be enough work for the day. So she took off the braces for him to ride in the chair to dinner. He did not object.

The children had not seen his riding Gaunter today, but they had heard about it, and were anxious to be let out of class tomorrow to watch him ride. Efran laughed, “There’s nothing special about it because I hope to not fall off again. So you’ll just have to see it when your schooling’s over for the day.”

The children were disgruntled. Turning away with them, Toby said, “I warned you that he’s stern about lessons.” Efran nodded; Minka leaned into him, sighing.

Jehan and Coish came into the dining hall to report on their day’s findings. Coish knelt behind their bench to tell Efran, “Captain Barr went to talk to Madgwick, Captain. She told him they’re out about twenty-four royals for ale, so he repaid her on the spot from a sack of stolen royals that Serrano had found about a month ago, and no one ever claimed. And he told her that if anyone comes demanding more, she’s to take her time getting it and send a messenger to him at once, so they can catch the man in the act. He also found out who was fighting, and demoted the duty of five men who started it. They’re from Eurus, and they hate Polonti. Captain Barr warned them that a second offense could get them expelled from the Lands.”

“Ah, I see. Good, Coish. You and Jehan may resume your regular duties tomorrow,” Efran said.

Jehan, who had been listening, knelt to ask, “Did you really ride today, Captain?”

Efran snorted, “If you can call walking Gaunter around the pen ‘riding,’ yes. But I believe I’m making progress.”

“Good,” Jehan breathed. “We need it, you see. We need to see the Captain riding down the switchback to defend the gates.”

Efran looked back at him quickly, but he was entirely serious, and Coish nodded.

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Chapter 11

For the next several days, Efran worked hard learning to walk and ride again. Since his progress seemed so slow, he complained to the doctor, “I don’t understand why it’s taking so long. The muscles are there; why aren’t they working?”

Wallace said, “Because the injury is in your brain, Efran. It’s tremendously gratifying to see that the lines of communication to your legs are working, just not all of them. So your brain needs time to forge new lines. For heaven’s sake, do you know how badly you were hurt? You’ve got a metal plate in your skull!”

“A metal plate,” Efran breathed, feeling the back of his head. “So, if I got hit again, it wouldn’t break.”

“Don’t push your luck,” Wallace grunted.

When Efran told Minka what the doctor said about his brain needing time to forge new lines (which he didn’t quite believe), she said, “Yes, of course you need time, but you’re healing. Madgwick is praying.”

“Oh,” he said. That was encouraging.

Since he was spending less time in the rolling chair, the engineer Gerard had his crew build a small wagon for Joshua to ride in that Minka could pull. This, to him, was almost as good as riding on Papa’s lap, because when Minka had her hands full and couldn’t pull him around, any number of children were happy to do it. They only had to be cautioned not to go as fast as Joshua wanted, because then he fell out.

When the fortress faeries saw the Captain’s progress in healing, they decided that their Celebration of Spring could commence, as it had been postponed due to his crippling injury. So on March 26th, the celebration began with a sudden explosion of blossoms everywhere in the Lands. (The following tidal wave of decorating took days to crest; therefore, incidents described below are not necessarily in order.)

Garden bulbs bloomed overnight. The peach and apple trees in the orchard bloomed together, all at once. Wildflowers in the meadows sprang up, and even the flowers in the children’s garden that they had forgotten about burst open. The massive grapevine running along the southwestern fence turned white for all the little blooms, even though it had borne fruit in January. (It had grown from a small cutting of vine that was a faerie gift from the barge, of course.) Also, it blocked the gate in the fence, which was just as well.

The rooftop bells rang to greet the sunrise every morning and accompany each spring shower, even those that grew tumultuous. Several listeners suspected that Ino was timing her thunder for appropriate moments in the ringing.

The ewes and goat does all bore twins; cows that the herders didn’t even know were pregnant bore calves. Newly planted fields turned green with shoots everywhere on the Lands. Every tree on the Lands budded, even those that their owners thought were dead. The faerie trees sported wildly colored blooms in addition to their little white nutmeg-scented blossoms.

Pia’s woods on the hilltop were transformed into a wonderland of twayblade orchids, spotted orchids, wild garlic, broad-leaved helleborine, herbs Paris, primroses and bluebells. The white doe and her fawns, who were about six weeks old, were decorated with garlands of primroses, which they ate.

Not content with all this, the Abbey Lands faeries overdid it, as they do everything. So the black iron fencing around the hilltop was temporarily painted pink, as were the wall gates. Minka, a favorite target for faerie decoration, was seen with golden hair—not just strands here and there. This did not bother Efran too much, as Alberon could no longer touch her.

To not play favorites, the faeries also streaked Ella’s black hair with copper highlights. Her husband Quennel was unsure about this, but after the first shock, Ella loved it. And when Minka and Ella needed to go riding down on the Lands, their horses emerged from the stables with manes and tails braided with beribboned daises. (As their bodyguard refused to ride horses so decorated, the faeries left theirs unadorned, grudgingly.)

Since all this was STILL not enough—because spring is the faeries’ favorite season—Efran’s braces and crutches were painted bright green, and his work shirts sported tiny pink flowers on the collars and yokes. He sighed, but no one questioned his masculinity, as he had (unknowingly) fathered a child when he was about 11. (That is a long story that he would have preferred to forget, though he was proud of Ella and glad to have her.)

After having decorated Ella, Minka and Efran, the faeries spread out to others. Because pregnant women represented the fecundity of spring, Cyr, Tera, and Kelsey woke up one morning with silver, gold and copper highlights in their hair and clothes. That was so well-received that the faeries moved on to the men. Lorient, the largest and probably oldest of Master Crowe's lieutenants, married to young and adoring Tess, was seen walking around with light blue hair with silver sprinkles.

Upon his placid acceptance—as he knew that it was temporary—the faeries became untethered. And since a man's head was too small a canvas for their creative impulses, they began targeting their red uniforms.

First, iridescent sprinkles appeared on the helmets and shoulders of the gate guards. As they always worked in pairs, the next set of guards were decorated with rainbows that traversed the backs of their uniform jackets from the shoulder to the opposing bottom hem. Seeing themselves so adorned, that pair took care to stand so that their rainbow halves formed a complete arc.

Well, that just opened the dam. The faeries decorated many jackets with glistening raindrops, clouds, or swirling water that moved. Sleeves became the wings of hawks, eagles or kites. The men had great fun with this, trying to fly. A few of the more enthusiastic flappers were granted to levitate or actually fly for a short distance. But the Abbey Lands Faerie Queene Kele nipped that in the bud, as it was interfering with their duties, which would displease Lord Efran.

Surprisingly, the stoic Polonti acclimated with grace to this frivolity. Captain Melchior, adorned with a crown of laurel leaves, bestowed an Efranesque smile on anyone who stopped to stare at him. Captain Barr had more difficulty when his uniform jacket was replaced with a translucent gossamer tunic right before he was to make a report to Commander Lyte. It was quite beautiful, with a beaded trim that gave it proper weight, but—not entirely appropriate to the occasion. Since he requested changes with utmost courtesy, he was permitted to wear his jacket underneath the tunic.

Inevitably, the native Eurussians who had migrated to the Abbey Lands were also decorated, which they tolerated not at all. Some of them took off their painted jackets in disgust only to find their underclothes or bodies painted. Those who got ugly or started swearing discovered (by the reactions of others) that their faces had been painted, some with pouty red lips or long black eyelashes.

The Polonti laughed hysterically at this, which naturally led to fights. And before long, the entire area of the wall gates was filled with men fighting. The courtyard gate guards dutifully rang the alarm bell, but the men responding didn't know what to do, as Abbey soldiers were fighting each other.

Efran hobbled down the fortress steps on crutches with the braces. Seeing the melee below, he turned to shout, "Get me Gaunter!"

One of the courtyard gate guards, Verrin, ran around the corner of the fortress to shout at the stables, "Gaunter for the Captain!"

"Coming!" shouted a stablehand, Tuffin, the only one in the vicinity at the time. But he was new, a Eurussian whom Captain Melchior had rejected for the Abbey army, but Greves had accepted to muck stables. Angry and humiliated, Tuffin had been watching the exalted Captain Efran—a *Polonti*—learning to ride Gaunter like a child, and despised him.

As Tuffin went back to the stalls, his eye lit on Kraken, who raised his head at him. And Tuffin paused at the idea that streaked across his embittered brain. So the Captain needed gentle Gaunter to show off his riding skill? How

about the stallion Kraken instead, that Jasque had decided was untameable? In fact, the horse was still saddled and bridled from his last training session because no one wanted to risk a hoof in the rib cage.

The crazy thing about Kraken, the reason they kept trying with him, was that he would be docilely saddled, led out to the pen, and ridden nicely for a while—more than that, he displayed beautiful form loping, trotting, or walking. Then in a few minutes or a half-hour—no one knew when—he would lose his mind and buck off whoever was on him. Following that outburst, it would take another hour before he calmed down enough to let himself be unsaddled. The trainers had had enough of him; he was to be put down for his hide, which was a silken black.

So Tuffin untied Kraken's reins and led him out to the courtyard. No one seemed to recognize the horse. Captain Efran, having taken off his braces, was hanging on the pink gate, waiting. When he looked over to see a horse other than the one he had called for, his eyes shot to the man leading him. And Tuffin said, "Sorry, sir, Gaunter seems to be out." He threw the reins back over the horse's head and waited, a hand on the bridle.

Studying the blank-faced stableman, Efran was aware that this might be a lie, but he didn't want to wait for them to find Gaunter. At the same time, he couldn't afford to fall off—not only would he lose any credibility in controlling the men, he could reinjure himself worse than before.

As he was struggling with what to do, he seemed to hear Nakham say, *Go ahead*. Efran paused dubiously. Was that really Nakham or his own pride talking? *Ride him*, Nakham said.

"God of heaven, strengthen me, or don't let me ride," Efran breathed. Then he hauled himself up on the gate railing and reached over to pull the horse toward him by his bridle. Tuffin released it and stepped away, smiling.

While the guards were focused on the Captain with Kraken, Tuffin slipped out of the gates, traversing the upper switchback. Unseen, he settled down on the northwestern hillside to watch what would happen. (Jongitud was fishing in the caverns, or Tuffin might have seen more than he wanted.)

Verrin nudged Kraken close to the gate so that the Captain could sprawl across the saddle. He pushed his right leg over, laying on the horse's neck to center himself. Then he pushed both feet into the stirrups and slowly raised up to find his balance. Verrin turned the horse to the open gates. Efran nudged Kraken forward with his hips to begin trotting, then loping down the switchback. The incline made it difficult for Efran to keep himself centered. So he clutched the pommel with one hand until his sweat made it slippery.

He glanced up to see the brawl at the gates growing because those who ran out to stop it got embroiled in it themselves. But Efran had all he could do just to keep his seat on the switchback's sharp curves. He let go of the reins entirely to wipe his hands on his pants and hold on to the pommel.

Men on duty at the hilltop gathered in the courtyard to watch him in growing concern. Several called for horses to follow him. But no one was near the stables to comply; Tuffin was sitting on the hillside, watching and laughing. If anyone on horseback could have helped the Captain, that moment had passed.

Coming off the switchback under the trembling faerie trees, Kraken picked up speed. Efran didn't like the feel of it, especially as they were rushing toward a mob of angry men. As he approached the first crossing, Efran checked anxiously for entitled ladies emerging from Elvey's. But everyone who needed to cross was aware of the now-galloping horse and didn't challenge him for the right of way.

At the top of the switchback, Squirt, the stable boy, ran into the courtyard from helping Greves corral a new batch of horses. "Who took Kraken?" he cried. "He's not to be ridden!" Verrin and Tourle, the other gate guard,

stared at him with slack faces. Then everyone in the courtyard looked down the main road.

As Kraken galloped down Main toward the fighting, Efran saw his ears flatten, and thought, *Ohh, that's not good. God of heaven, I'm in Your hands.* He had no thoughts of how he would restore order once he arrived at the chaos; he was only trying to see how he could safely get off a wild horse.

The men who saw him coming shouted and pulled others away. Kraken slowed at the obstruction of bodies, but knocked several men down as he lowered his head to begin bucking.

Efran felt it coming, so threw himself forward to wrap his arms around Kraken's neck. Prostrate on Kraken's shoulders, he at least escaped the worst of the bucking. He couldn't allow himself to be thrown, for his left foot was stuck in the stirrup, and he'd be trampled if he fell.

While Kraken was twisting and bucking in the midst of the men, they stopped fighting and fell apart to get out of the way. People emerged from shops and houses along Main to watch. Efran was pressing himself as hard as he could into the horse's neck and upper back, but he knew he couldn't hold on much longer.

Barr ran straight up before him to strip off the gossamer tunic and toss it toward the horse's head. Being of faerie make, it landed over his eyes, wrapping itself around his head to stay there. No longer able to see, covered with the calming influence of faerie, Kraken stopped bucking and stood still, trembling. The men were silent and just as still as he.

Efran raised up, exhaling. He scooted back to the saddle with, "Thank you, Captain Barr. Now. What seems to be the problem?" Commander Lyte appeared from around the barracks, having been summoned; Captains Neale and Melchior also came out to look.

Barr surveyed the silent, sullen, abashed men, all disheveled, some bleeding. Then he said, "Captain, I am resigning my rank. I have failed to keep order and discipline in my regiment."

"It's not your fault, Captain!" Chee shouted. One of Master Crowe's former lieutenants, he was the senior-most Polonti in Barr's unit. "It's the men who've come down to the Lands with no allegiance to it, nor respect for the Law or for any Polonti!"

Efran asked, "Who's been extorting Delano's for free ale?"

No one said anything at first, but several men glanced at the same man, who looked indifferently to the middle distance. Efran looked down at him and said. "You. You look at me." The man looked up with hard eyes, and Efran said, "What is your name?"

The man said nothing, but others said, "Maruda." "That's Maruda, Captain."

Efran said, "Chee, you and Truro take him down to Delano's; see if they recognize him."

Those two came forward, but Maruda said, "That's not necessary. I'm the one."

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Chapter 12

“Who helped you? Who knew about it?” Efran asked Maruda.

Maruda shut his mouth and looked off again, but Efran saw several men glance around. “Who knew about it?” Efran demanded of the group as a whole.

“I did,” another Eurussian said dismally. “I didn’t know he was stealing them, but I helped him drink them.”

“What’s your name?” Efran asked.

He sighed, “Callops, sir.”

Truro said, “Anything Callops knows, Kronbach knows. And he was drinking with them.”

“Kronbach,” Efran said, looking around. Kraken continued to stand quietly under him. A man sheepishly raised his hand, and Efran directed, “You and Callops come over here to stand by Maruda.”

They did, and Efran asked, “Who else is in this circle?”

The men, especially the Polonti, began pointing out others: “Rugg. He drank with them every night.”

“Protch, Captain. He made sport of Captain Barr behind his back.”

“That one, Captain—Owsin. He sabotaged Salk’s space right before inspection.”

Some of the men accused denied it; others had nothing to say. When Owsin accused Lambdin, who had been Reinagle’s bodyguard, his face flushed in anger. But Numan told Owsin, “Yes, you’re saying that because he refused to drink with you.” Numan’s word carried weight: he was a Southerner, not Eurussian, and Barr’s scribe.

While this was shake-out was ongoing, four men rode down from the hilltop to arrange themselves quietly behind Efran. He did not notice them at first, but the men who were being set aside saw judgment pending.

Finally, Efran settled on seven Eurussians who seemed to be the foremost troublemakers (Lambdin was not among them). Turning Kraken, who obeyed the tug of the reins, Efran saw his backup behind him. As they saluted, he instructed, “March these seven up before you into the dining hall. I will follow.” The hilltop men then began herding the seven up Main toward the switchback.

Efran glanced at Barr, then told Goss, “Go get us five horses.” Goss saluted, gesturing several other men to run to the lower stables with him. Efran looked back down at Barr. “I am denying your request to resign. I require your presence in the dining hall.” The Polonti looked at each other in vindication; Barr saluted.

Efran raised his face to say, “Commander Lyte, if you, Commander Wendt, Captain Neale and Captain Melchior would accompany us to the dining hall, I would appreciate it. I am going to leave to you what to do with those men. I’ll only observe; the decision is yours.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Lyte said, saluting. He turned to ask for Wendt, then saw him standing in the doorway of Barracks #1 behind them. Turning back to Efran, Lyte asked, “Do you have any further word for the men remaining, Captain?” The brawlers lowered their heads; there were all kinds of punishments for fighting.

“No,” Efran said, looking off.

So Lyte told them, “You’re dismissed to your duties.” In relief, they saluted him, Efran, and their own captains before quickly dispersing.

While the remaining officers waited for horses, Efran absently stroked Kraken’s neck. Efran didn’t see, but Barr looked hard at the remaining wisps of tunic around the horse’s eyes. Whether it was blowing away in the wind or simply disintegrating, the beast could see now, and was looking back at the man sitting on him. Barr debated mightily with himself as to whether to suggest another horse, or whether that was presumptuous and demeaning. In the end, he kept quiet.

When the horses were brought, Efran watched Wendt mount ably, once guided to the horse. Seeing the other officers mount, Efran nudged Kraken up Main. Onlookers both above him in the courtyard and behind him on Main watched apprehensively, but Kraken was behaving for now. He stopped as instructed at the two yellow crossings which were in use by pedestrians, then loped sedately up the switchback. Efran, preoccupied, seemed to have no difficulty balancing in the saddle.

As he drew into the courtyard through wide-open gates, he turned Kraken to the side to watch the officers ride in behind him. He did not see Minka come out of the fortress doors, trembling.

When all had entered the courtyard, Efran slipped down easily from the saddle, unconsciously landing on his feet. He shook his head, stroking Kraken’s nose as he muttered, “I’m still shaky from that wild ride down. What was that about?” Kraken nosed him vigorously before placing his head on the Captain’s shoulder.

Minka gasped quietly; everyone else watched silently. Tuffin, rising on the northwestern hillside to see the triumphant ending, was torn as to whether to flee for his deception or come back to take credit for the success.

Efran released Kraken’s bridle, turning to walk toward the steps where Minka waited. He looked up as though to say something, then paused, regarding her face. Kraken, jerking his reins free of Squirt’s grasp, followed Efran to rub his face insistently on the human’s shoulder blade. And when Efran mounted the steps to stand in front of Minka, looking down at her, Kraken followed, his front feet on the second-highest step, his back feet in the courtyard.

She was speechless, looking up at her husband with tears in her eyes. He contemplated her, then looked back at the pink fence where his bright green braces remained. “I’m still shaky,” he hedged, and she gasped out a laugh.

Lyte was leading Wendt up the steps around them as the other captains followed. “Any time you’re ready, we’ll begin the hearing,” Lyte said.

“Yes, I’ll be right there,” Efran said. Taking Minka’s arm, he started to cautiously move forward, but Kraken continued to follow directly at his back until they were all standing in the foyer.

Arne, on door duty, asked in mild disapproval, “First dogs, and now horses in the fortress, Captain?”

Efran expelled a half-laugh, but Kraken was looking fixedly at him. It must have had something to do with the faerie tunic, for stirrings of *aina* reawakened in Efran, and he heard, *You’re my human*.

“Will you stop bucking?” Efran asked.

When you ride me.

“That’s good, then,” Efran breathed, taking up the loose reins. Then he corrected himself lest Arne misunderstand. “No, I’m taking him to the stables. Tell Commander Lyte to go ahead and start without me,” he told Arne, who saluted but watched to see that the Captain led the intruder back down the steps. Minka walked beside them.

Efran glanced frequently at her, then muttered, “I don’t understand how—it happened.” He was afraid to say, *that I can walk now*, lest his legs crumple under him again.

“Should I go ask Wallace?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m going to groom him, then meet you at the dining hall,” he said. Then he stopped to lean down and kiss her. He had to *lean down* to her, raising up again with his chest tight in gratitude.

She ran back toward the fortress. As Efran unsaddled Kraken and began running the curry comb over him, he asked, “Why do you buck?”

Efran had to wait for an answer, but Kraken finally answered, *They took me from my tribe.*

“Ohh,” Efran said in sympathy, pausing with the curry comb.

Squirt ran up beside him. “You gonna ride him, Captain?”

“Yes, though not right now. Tell Jasque to leave him be,” Efran said.

“Right,” Squirt said, turning to relay the message.

Efran told Kraken, “That’s bad, that you were taken. But when you don’t want to be ridden, don’t buck. Just stand still.”

I will stand, Kraken promised.

Efran patted him, asking, “What do you want me to call you?”

The horse snorted, *The humans call me Kraken. I do not know this word.*

“It’s a monster,” Efran told him. “Would you prefer ‘Blossom’?”

I will be Kraken, the horse conceded.

Snorting, Efran caught Squirt on his way back to tell him to give the monster oats.

Efran returned to the fortress, feeling his legs weak and shaky. Coming down the corridor, he saw Minka at the door of the dining hall, waiting. When he stopped at the door of their quarters, she ran back to him. He whispered, “My legs are still weak; I’ve got to sit down.”

“Yes.” She took his hand to lead him into their quarters, where they sat at the small table in the outer room.

“Did you talk to Wallace?” he asked, tentatively rubbing his calf.

“Yes.” Taking off his boot, she lifted his foot onto her lap to begin massaging his lower leg inside his trousers.

“Oh, that helps,” he sighed, leaning back. Raising his head, he said, “Well?”

“Yes,” she said, concentrating on his leg. “He said several things could account for your regaining movement: first, the stimulation of the hard ride and the bucking, as well as your instinctive efforts to hold on. Then there was the mental shock and your intense concentration, which was also stimulating. Finally, he believes your efforts to ride and walk over the last several days simply paid off.”

“That’s encouraging,” he murmured. “Oh, God of heaven, I can’t believe—thank You.” He leaned back, covering his eyes.

She inhaled in like gratitude, putting his foot back down to the floor to pick up the other. “Oh,” he remembered, and she glanced up. “When I was trying to decide whether to take the horse that was brought out, that was *not* Gaunter, I thought I heard Nakham telling me to go ahead and ride it.”

“You did?” she cried softly, grinning.

“I think so. It must have been,” he said. “If Wallace is right, then that’s what helped me get use of my legs back. Not only that, but a wild horse was probably the only thing that could have stopped that many men fighting.” She nodded, and he closed his eyes. “There are some things I’ll never take for granted again.” He sat up abruptly. “Joshua,” he said, looking toward the corridor.

“Oh, I guess we’d better go get him,” she said, putting his foot to the floor. He put back on his boots to stand a little tentatively, then follow her out. He stopped at the nursery door to look in, but she passed it by. “He’s not in there.”

“What?” he said in alarm, trailing her to the back door.

“Out here,” she said, stepping out.

He almost tumbled down the steps. “You left him out here alone?”

“No. With the other children,” she said. And he looked out at Joshua in his cart, surrounded by Toby, Almund, Hassie, Noah, Jera—and Nakam, of course. They were playing some kind of tag and run game; Toby tagged Almund, who tagged Jera, who tagged Joshua, who then reached out for Noah, who let him tag him. Standing watch over them was Finn, who glanced over to the Captain to salute.

Efran looked back at her, smiling. “I don’t know if he’ll want to leave this to come listen to a boring disciplinary meeting.”

“No, but he probably needs fresh wraps and a bottle,” she observed.

“Let’s see.” He began walking out. The children, seeing him, screeched and ran over.

Joshua was waving, “Papapapa!” When he tried to stand up, he fell out of the cart, of course. Efran went over to pick him up while Minka explained to the children that Efran’s hard exercise had helped him regain his ability to walk.

“I knew it,” Toby said intently, and the other children confirmed that he had been insisting the Captain would walk again.

“How did you know?” Efran asked, holding a wet baby.

“Nakham told me,” Toby said. “He found me crying in the orchard, and told me you’d walk again.”

Efran narrowed his eyes. “Why didn’t Nakham tell *me*?” he asked Minka.

“Didn’t he tell you to take the wild horse?” she asked. He paused dubiously.

At any rate, he and Minka left the children to play, dropping Joshua off at the nursery before going into the dining hall to sit in on the hearing. Nakam elected to stay outside.

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Chapter 13

Efran and Minka slipped into the dining hall to sit toward the back so as not to disrupt the hearing. A number of soldiers were sitting around the hall, observing. Taking notes were Captain Barr’s scribe Numan and Captain Melchior’s scribe Earnshaw. The hilltop Captains Rigdon and Towner were not here, but Efran noted men in their regiments who would no doubt report to them.

Efran leaned forward on his elbows on the table to listen as one of the Eurusians, Rugg, said that Maruda started leaning on Delano for ale when he saw (so he said) how they favored the Polonti, and Maruda just wanted to even things up. Efran idly considered that tension between the Southerners, especially Eurusians, and Polonti had been ongoing even in the army at Westford—so, yes, it would continue here, and Lyte’s Captains would just have to deal with it.

Having settled that matter, Efran let his thoughts detour to a topic of more immediate interest to him: *What just happened to me?*

He had definitely been hit on the back of the head with a shovel. He reached a hand back to feel the metal plate under the skin and the double row of stitches. But everything after that—no, he remembered nothing about falling through the doors in the northeastern hillside or his first surgery. His memory from that episode began only with the walk up the hillside to the gates, and how beautiful the white fortress looked in the morning light. He also remembered how stunned he was to hear that this place was his home.

The fortress is beautiful, he admitted. *But what makes it valuable are the people it shelters*. He looked at Minka, and she turned her large blue eyes to him. He was glad to see that the faeries had subdued the gold of her hair, so that it was now just an undertone, not so garish. He blinked, looking again, and realized that what he was seeing was her natural hair color. She returned a mildly questioning look to him.

He turned to face front again, resuming his recollections, particularly his alarm at discovering that he had a very young wife and a 16-year-old daughter. He recalled his bafflement at strange terms, unfamiliar faces, unknown names belonging to people who acted as though they knew him very well. The discomfort of being suddenly thrust unprepared into an incomprehensible environment made him leap at the chance to regain his memory,

even at the cost of muscle function—a cost he couldn't apprehend at all, until the des Collines, Nonesuch and Asmuch. . . .

Nonesuch and Asmuch. Medically advanced slugs living underground who nonetheless needed a bunch of human eyes on stalks—with eyelids!—and human hands. And facilities for brain surgery.

Exhaling, he leaned back, almost toppling off the bench. Minka caught at his arm and a few men glanced at him. Grasping the table edge to right himself, Efran stuck to his line of thought: *Come, that's ridiculous. At least Jonguitud is adapted to his environment, as are the faeries to their trees, and Symphorien to the cavern waters. But semi-human slugs—that's absurd. Comical.*

He heard the rooftop bells tolling lightly, as though laughing. Minka looked upward with widened eyes, hearing them as well.

Since there appeared to be nothing comical about the hearing, Efran took that to mean he was following the right tracks: Nonesuch and Asmuch were comical. Now he remembered hearing those names before. Where had he heard those names?

Ditson and Nutbin had told him about them. But—only as des Collines. Their names were not mentioned. When he had used the key to gain entrance to the (apparently) subterranean stairwell, and found them in the room at the end, they had introduced themselves to him. So that was the first time he had heard their names.

No, it wasn't. It was long before then.

Efran closed his eyes, casting back, listening for the voice that had said those names. Wait. One more point: they said it was Nakham who had left the silver key on the hillside for him to find. They knew Nakham.

And Efran's eyes sprang open at the realization that it was *Nakham* who had spoken those words, the first evening that Efran had invited him into the fortress for dinner. He had said he wanted to see Nonesuch and Asmuch—the comedy team. And he had said, *You never know where they'll turn up.*

I need to get back down in that hillside to talk to them, Efran thought. Commander Lyte came to the back table to salute him. "Well, there's our decision, Captain. What do you think?"

Looking up at him, Efran said, "I think that's a very good idea."

"Thank you, Captain." Lyte turned to give orders, and Minka studied her husband.

In bed that evening, Minka stretched out Efran's legs to massage them again. "Thank you; that feels so good," he breathed.

"I'm glad and grateful that you're back," she murmured. "We need you so."

After a moment, he said, "I'm going to walk the eastern hillside again tomorrow."

She cautiously raised her eyes. "With Joshua?"

"Not this time. I'm glad to see that he can play outside with the children, though I'd like for you to keep an eye on them while I'm walking," he said.

“Of course,” she said, almost offended that he felt he had to ask. “What do you expect to find?”

He looked down the length of his body at her. “Couldn’t I just be walking for exercise?”

“Yes, but you’re not. You were thinking all during the hearing. Are you going to try to find des Collines again?” she asked.

Rather than answer, he observed, “Nakham told me about them, just in passing.”

“When?” she asked quickly.

“The first evening he came to us, almost—three months ago,” Efran said. “He said they were a comedy team.”

She stopped massaging him. “A *comedy team*? Who does surgery?”

“Strange, isn’t it?” he laughed.

“Take bodyguards,” she said warily, resuming his massage.

“All right.” He reached down to haul her up onto him.

Late that evening, Kraken was working on his stall door. He had discovered earlier that bumping the door lightly with his chest made the latch bounce in its cradle. So he kept bumping, looking over the door to see where the latch landed.

After the twentieth or so bump, he looked down to see that the latch had landed outside the cradle, so he nudged the door open and walked out. Ambling around the northwest corner of the fortress, he looked up at the faerie tree beyond the fence. The starlight faeries looked down at him, and he told them where he was going. So they agreed to help him. From their places in the tree, they tossed little starbursts halfway down the switchback.

The courtyard gate guards saw them at once. “Hiya! Who’s there?” Teschner shouted.

Pleyel said, “Let’s check.”

“Right.” Teschner flung open the gates and they began descending the switchback with lanterns and weapons.

Upon their departure, Kraken ambled through the courtyard and up the broad steps to work on the fortress door, specifically, the scrolled door handles. They were large and broad, requiring only a downward thrust to unlatch. Kraken nudged one with his nose until the latch sprang free of the strike plate. Pushing his nose into the crack of the door, Kraken opened it wide enough to walk in.

He passed Arne, who was sleeping on his feet because his replacement had not arrived for the evening shift. Kraken clopped into the foyer to start smelling doors, and had only passed two before stopping at the third, which was the first room off the corridor.

This door was equipped with another, smaller scrolled handle, which Kraken easily lipped to open (as Minka and Efran had forgotten to lock it). Passing through the outer room, which was small (for him), he knocked over a chair before arriving at the door to the bedroom. Fortunately, it was partially open, so Kraken had only to insert his nose to fully open it.

Inside, he snuffled his human, who had another human wrapped around him and a small canine perched on top of him. The dog lifted up. Finding nothing alarming about the visitor, he lay down again on Efran's stomach. Meanwhile, Kraken lowered himself to the floor, grunting, and stretched out as best he could in the space.

"Efran, there's a horse beside you," Minka murmured.

"All right," he sighed, shifting to rest his chin on the top of her head. And that was all that was said about it that night.

Early the next morning, March 27th, the door guards Serrano and Gaul watched their sleepy Captain, in misbuttoned trousers and boots sans socks, lead a black horse by his halter out of his quarters and out the front doors. Unfortunately, they were too astonished to salute, but he apparently didn't notice. Likewise, the courtyard gate guards Tomer and Skalbeck turned from watching the switchback to see the Captain leading Kraken down the fortress steps toward the stables.

They, however, had the presence of mind to salute: "Good morning, Captain." "Fine morning for a ride, Captain."

"Yes, thank you," he yawned.

He located Kraken's stall to reinsert him into it. *I want to run*, Kraken said.

"I'll ride you later today if you cooperate with the trainers," Efran said. Kraken snorted, but nodded. Then Efran found his way back to the bedroom to get dressed.

After breakfast, Minka followed Efran as he carried Joshua out to the back grounds to set him in his cart. Taking up the handle, she asked, "Who are you going to take with you to the eastern hillside?"

"Whoever's available. I'll come report to you," he promised.

She looked skeptical, but he kissed her while Joshua rocked the cart, urging it to go: "Ungh!"

Efran returned to the courtyard with the intention of asking for volunteers, but Stites and Krall were already there, having heard whispered that the Captain was going to do something this morning. (Cudmore had healed to the point that he could get out of bed for desk duty, but the doctor disallowed riding or active duty. So Cudmore had to be content with his commendation. Bennard's Captain Towner wasn't willing to go as far as a commendation for him, but poor Bennard did recover much credibility after his debacle with Adele.)

Krall and Stites saluted; Krall said, "Reporting for duty, Captain."

Efran regarded them hesitantly, feeling that their regular work was probably more profitable than this assignment. But he nodded toward the eastern hillside. "I'm on the hunt for a comedy team."

"I'm fairly quick with the one-liners, Captain," Stites said.

"Yes, I know," Efran said, and the gate guards smiled as they opened the gates for the three. Efran paused to tell the guards, "Don't be alarmed at whatever you see; I'm looking for friends who tend to spring surprises."

“Yes, Captain,” Skalbeck saluted. The young Polonti Tomer looked anxious to tag along, but had to be content with watching.

Efran, Stites and Krall walked from the old switchback on the landing path to the new, which was about three-quarters dug with retaining walls completed along the upper half. So Thrupp, the structural engineer, was bringing in the paving crew for the top portion while the lower quarter was being dug. At the lowest point, it would meet up with the new northbound road.

As Efran and his bodyguard walked past the second switchback to the eastern hillside, Efran paused to look out over the lands. The fencing of new plots and the construction of new homes dotted the Lands as far as he could see, almost to the east branch of the Passage, which marked their eastern border. This explosive development, after only 22 months from the day Efran and Minka gained the bequest and charter, filled him with continual wonder. And it all came like a waterfall, a flood, overrunning all obstacles.

Efran continued to traverse the upper hillside, his men following until they were facing due east. He slowed, toeing the slippery white dirt and gravel with its occasional brier bush or nettles. “What I’m looking for, is, possibly, a silver key—”

That’s all he got out before the ground opened under his feet. As he dropped straight down, Stites and Krall leapt into the opening before it could close over their heads. Tomer and Skalbeck saw all this from the courtyard gates. They stared at each other, then Skalbeck said, “I’m glad he thought to warn us about surprises.” Tomer nodded dubiously, and they did not ring the alarm bell.

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Chapter 14

Below ground, Efran, Krall and Stites landed on a large cushion. While it was a soft landing for Efran, Krall landed on top of him, and Stites crashed onto Krall. So it was a few minutes before the three of them were able to disengage from the cushion. Meanwhile, the des Collines Nonesuch and Asmuch were standing patiently to the side, watching the men stagger up individually only to lose their footing on the cushion again.

Finally, the three of them made it off the cushion to the stone floor beside it. Stites and Krall looked wordlessly at the large gray-brown slugs with the many lidded eyes on stalks and the groups of waving fingers.

Efran exhaled, “I would have preferred to use the stairs.”

“We didn’t want to tax your newly regained ability to walk, Lord Efran,” one of them—Nonesuch?—said.

Weaving slightly, Efran demanded, “Show yourselves.” This command usually forced a cloaked or disguised faerie to revert to his normal appearance.

The two des Collines directed their eyestalks to each other, then spread their many fingers to say, “TA DA!” just as they were.

Stites stifled a chortle, but Efran said irritably, “This slug nonsense is a costume. Nakham told me you were a comedy team.”

“Well, that was uncalled-for,” Nonesuch said, but suddenly Efran and his men were looking at two normal, middle-aged men who might have been hoteliers or florists. Nonesuch wore a work apron while Asmuch sported a vest with nice large pockets for hand tools.

Blinking at them, Efran asked, “Why did you feel the need to disguise yourselves?”

Asmuch said, “This is a disguise as well, Lord Efran. We’re just trying to accommodate your lack of imagination.”

Nonesuch said, “Here, now. Have a seat, you three.” He gestured with a normal-looking hand to a table for five set with fruit, cheese, pastries and flatbread. There were also goblets and bottles of Delano’s Mild Ale.

“Is that real?” Stites asked, assessing the food.

“Did you pay for the ale?” Krall asked darkly.

“Polonti are so suspicious. Sit,” Nonesuch said. When Efran took a chair, his men did, and their hosts sat as well. Asmuch leaned over to begin pouring ale into the goblets (which the Polonti considered a frivolous show of refinement). But Efran nodded at them to accept the hospitality offered.

“What can we do for you, Lord Efran?” Nonesuch asked, taking a swig of ale.

Efran almost didn’t know where to start. “The—faeries Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin said you were an ancient race who built the fortress according to the plans given you by the engineering angel Aaro—”

Nonesuch spewed his ale, turning to his partner. “I told you to be careful creating a history for them!”

“But they enjoyed it so! They added it to their scroll and everything!” Asmuch protested.

“Nonetheless, that’s mostly fiction, Lord Efran,” Nonesuch said firmly.

Efran exhaled, “All right, then, let’s discuss reality. I want to know what happened to me, and why you’re here. Did you really operate on my brain? Is there really a metal plate in my head? Is that why you came? Who are you, really?” Krall and Stites showed themselves capable of eating, drinking and listening all at the same time.

Asmuch and Nonesuch looked at each other, then Nonesuch said, “The answers to your first three questions are yes, yes, and no. We are tracking the Destroyer.”

“The Destroyer,” Efran whispered. He sat back, suddenly weak.

“Yes,” Asmuch said. “We were passing through when we saw you struck with the shovel. We received authorization to treat you, but now that you’re on your feet with your memory intact, we must resume our original objective.”

Heart pounding, Efran recalled, “Nakham said that the Destroyer was getting restless, but he was not in the fortress. It was almost—eight months ago when I released him. Is he here now? Is he coming back here?”

When the des Collines did not immediately reply, Krall said, “Captain, I remember some urgency about your finding the doors, and the conservatory wall falling, but I was never really clear on the Destroyer.”

Efran told him, “I had three days to find where he was locked in the fortress and release him, or he would bring it all down to get out. My understanding is that he had been confined there about two hundred fifty years ago because of how many people he was killing. He was on a mission to kill the evil unrepentant, but Barthelemon made a deal with him to gain time so that he could preach repentance. He promised the Destroyer release by a certain date—which happened to be August fourth of last year. And then . . . I found the doors, and the Destroyer left. We heard that some people died, but only a few on the Lands.”

There was a heavy silence while Efran wiped his sweating lip. He asked Nonesuch, “Have you found him?”

“We are looking,” Nonesuch said evasively.

“Where?” Efran asked.

“Where the ambitious congregate, Lord Efran. They seem to like Crescent Hollow and Eurus,” Nonesuch observed.

Efran was silent a moment, then asked, “Is he killing again?”

Nonesuch lowered his head as if listening, then said, “He’s working up to it.”

“Will you warn me if he’s coming this way?” Efran asked.

“You will know,” Nonesuch said.

Stites asked, “Captain, how do we defend ourselves against this Destroyer?”

There was further silence as Efran looked between Nonesuch and Asmuch for the answer. They regarded each other, then Asmuch said, “Repent.”

After a moment, Krall said, “I can only repent for myself.”

“That is correct,” Asmuch said.

Nonesuch observed, “And Time glides on under your feet.”

Efran drew in his breath as he suddenly saw two silvery, chiseled, wind-swept figures seated across from him. They looked like Nakham in his giant angel mode, when he picked up the 120-foot-tall wizard to toss him far out over the Sea. Nonesuch (or Asmuch?) said, *This is also an appearance, so that you will know we were sent.*

Efran lurched up. “How do we get out?”

Step to the pad, one said.

While Krall and Stites were rising from their seats, Efran went over to the pad as instructed, and they watched him being flung up through the stone above their heads.

At the courtyard gates, Tomer and Skalbeck, who had been keeping an eye on the east hillside, suddenly saw the Captain rolling on the ground. His companions appeared immediately afterward, also sprawling. One of them rolled into a mass of briars. The gate guards continued to watch as the three got up and began walking back toward the gates.

Picking brier spines out of his jacket, Krall was saying, “Captain, I repent for calling many of my fellow soldiers idiots, shiftless, worthless, dishonest—”

“Yes, yes,” Efran said.

“—and for the fact that I don’t really repent for it because I meant it and it’s true,” Krall finished in disgust.

Stites said, “If that’s the worst of your sins, you’ll be laughing over the rest of our dead bodies.”

“No, that’s just the one I’m willing to admit,” Krall groused.

Efran said, “All right. Krall, go down to Delano’s, tell Madgwick what’s coming and ask her for prayer. Stites, find Earnshaw and do the same—he’s Captain Melchior’s scribe.”

“Yes, Captain. Where will you be?” Stites asked.

“Riding,” Efran said.

At the courtyard gates, Efran told Tomer and Skalbeck, “These two will need horses; also get me Kraken and Gaunter for Lady Minka.”

“Yes, Captain.” Tomer saluted and Skalbeck ran to the corner of the fortress to call for horses, specifically, “—and Kraken for the Captain, Gaunter for Lady Minka!”

Tuffin, hearing, considered himself vindicated, so he told Squirt in a bossy way, “You get the horses for the men; I’ll get Kraken and Gaunter.”

“Yeah, and don’t you mix ’em up this time,” Squirt said with narrowed eyes. Tuffin glanced at him uneasily.

Meanwhile, Efran went through the lower corridor out to the back grounds, where he looked around for Minka. As the children were in class at this time, she was pulling Joshua in the cart while Nakam trotted alongside. Joshua was fine with that, although he occasionally rocked in attempts to make the cart go faster. He saw Efran approaching before Minka did, so raised a hand to call, “Papapa!” Minka looked over, then.

Efran picked up Joshua to put him in one arm and take her in the other. She murmured, “It’s so wonderful to see you stride again. I’m so grateful.”

“Yes,” Efran said vacantly. As that crisis had passed to make way for a new one, he promptly forgot about it. “Horses are coming; let’s get him in clean wraps and we’ll be off.”

“Wonderful!” she agreed, taking Nakam up. So they went in, and while Efran handed Joshua to the nursery attendant to be changed, Minka took Nakam to the bedroom to nap until they returned. He expressed a desire to patrol the dining hall, which she denied him.

They three arrived in the courtyard, Efran carrying Joshua in his sling. Efran looked down the switchback to see Krall and Stites already riding down to their assignments. Minka went over to pet Kraken’s nose. “Oh, you are a beautiful boy. Are you the one who came to visit us last night?” she purred. Kraken, smitten, turned his side to her in an invitation to mount, looking back at her.

“Ho, I don’t think so. You’re going to have to be flawless to earn her on your back,” Efran told him, guiding Minka over to Gaunter instead.

While he lifted her to the saddle, she asked with mild anxiety, “Will Joshua be all right on him?”

“Yes. At this point, I could probably let Joshua ride alone,” Efran grunted, holding him upright with his right hand while gripping the pommel with his left. He noted that his legs were still weak, but brushed off that concern.

She looked over quickly. “You wouldn’t.”

He considered that. “In the pen, with me walking alongside. Why not? He sits up well by himself.”

She groaned faintly while Joshua chomped down on the teething rags.

As they began down the switchback at a walk, Efran told her about his, Stites’ and Krall’s dropping in on des Collines. “It seems that Asmuch misled our faerie friends, but, he and Nonesuch don’t live in the hill or in a realm intersecting the hill; they’re just passing through, tracking the Destroyer.”

“What?” she gasped.

So Efran told her all he knew, which was not much. “They said that the Destroyer was in or near Crescent Hollow—or Eurus—but they had to go find out. Which I don’t believe. I think they were reluctant to tell me everything, but he said we’d know if he’s heading this way.”

“Why?” she whispered. “He was just here months ago; why would he come back to judge us again? That’s not right, or fair.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. But he did privately acknowledge that there were many, many more people on the Lands now than there had been eight months ago. As he rode, he noted that Kraken was behaving, though he kept looking back at Minka on Gaunter.

Proceeding down Main, Efran glanced aside at the combatants in the Dress Wars. There were now three factions: Empress Trina’s, Elvey’s, and the new Lands Clothing Shop run by the former Featheringham slaves.

Trina’s group, supported by her great wealth, was clearly dominant both for its number of foot soldiers and the visibility of their armor. Efran had never seen nor imagined the styles and color combinations these ladies wore. Accessories were on full display, beyond hats, bags, and outerwear to matching horse, carriage, and pet livery. There were coordinated umbrellas, as well as sunshades held over the ladies by a quartet of attendants also dressed to match. It was beyond gaudy to—well, if anyone other than Trina were behind it, Efran would suspect parody. The builder Lord DePew (as well as his house sales representative Rimbault) wore Trina’s creations for men, almost as extravagant as the women’s. DePew was looking downright imperial these days.

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Chapter 15

Elvey's faction in the Dress Wars was less extreme but still determined. While she didn't have Trina's money, she had greater resources in designer skill, taste, fabrics and knowledge of her customers. So ladies who wanted to make a statement but couldn't rise to Trina's level of exhibitionism found comfort in the more restrained, tasteful, but still eye-catching ensembles that Elvey's produced.

The Lands Clothing Shop's styles were far more subdued and practical, especially their designs for men who had become wealthy or notable due to their Abbey Lands' businesses. Firmin was a prominent customer, wearing their suits as he mingled with customers. The jeweler Whately, the moneyer Lord Meineke, and the furniture merchant Walford also preferred the Featheringham ladies' handiwork. Sadly, their sales of women's dresses were disappointing—while the embroidery was beautiful, it was not flashy, and it took too long to produce. Minka treasured her dress, but seldom wore it, having reverted to her linen work/riding dresses and her pants.

When she and Efran passed the side street on which the Lands Clothing Shop was located, he glanced toward it to see a carriage and horses out front, indicating customers inside. For that, he was glad.

Minka looked in the same direction, only at Foliott's house right next to the clothing shop. It had been almost three weeks since Adele had abruptly disappeared, and Foliott genuinely missed her. In fact, he had sent a message to Minka just a few days ago asking Adele's whereabouts. Minka reluctantly told him, as DeWitt had earlier, that she had gone off to start a new life.

Somewhat embittered by this second rejection (after Trina had divorced him), Foliott drank for a few days, then abruptly decided he was worth a girl's attention, dammit, and he would find one who appreciated him. So he cleaned himself up and began a search for—not exactly a job, as he had plenty of money, but, a venue to make himself visible to women and also occupy his time.

After purchasing several new suits from the shop next door, Foliott began making the acquaintance of the most prominent men on the Lands. Unfortunately, he quickly discovered that they were more interested in what he could do for them rather than in giving him an opportunity to be on display. And he had no building experience to offer DePew, Lemmerz, or Ernst, no jeweler's experience to offer Whately, and no knowledge of furniture construction to offer Walford. Moreover, Croft, Firmin, and Averno wanted waiters and cooks, which jobs were beyond his skill and below his perceived status. Everyone else wanted cleaners or manual labor. Shurtleff laughed at him.

Foliott paused by Bowring's house, just thinking he might need to go in and see him, or something, since he was all alone now. But Foliott didn't want to.

So he returned to his empty house in frustrated anger. Remembering the faeries who had helped him with that ridiculous scheme to get Trina safely out of Eurus to the Lands, he vented, "Why can't I just have magical powers instead?" Unseen by him, a board in the washroom floor popped up minutely.

Dismally, he undressed in his lonely bedroom and went back to his washroom to clean up. Hauling up the half-full bucket of water, he stubbed his toe on a loose board. "OW! Ow ow ow!" he cried, jumping around the room on one foot while holding the other. Looking in fury at the board sticking up, he said, "Poor construction! I'll sue!"

Then he noticed the scratch marks on the end of the board. Curious, he lifted it to look at the scratches, and saw the space underneath the flooring. In it were a pouch and a small book. Taking out the pouch, Foliott saw it was

filled with royals. At first he burned with anger: “So Livy—Adele—decided to help herself from my wealth.” But then he realized that she hadn’t taken it with her.

He didn’t understand why she wouldn’t, so he put the pouch aside to pick up the little book. Opening it, he read the title page: “A Small Book of Secret Potions.” Follriott was not much interested in potions. Shrugging, he started to put the book aside, but then more words appeared below the title: “Also, Spells and Other Magic for Those Who Are Interested in Learning It.”

“Oh?” Unconsciously, Follriott sat on the wash stool to begin reading, and he read for the next two hours.

Efran, with Minka and Joshua, rode clear out to the east branch of the Passage—the eastern border of the Abbey Lands—finding spots of construction and fenced land all the way to the border. The tent that Follriott had erected in his scheme to get Trina here was still standing over a well, and an enterpriser had put up a sign that read, “Water Bags and Jugs 5 pieces. Flat cakes 1 piece each.”

Looking beyond the branch toward the Northeast Sector, Efran saw still more evidence of settlement. The extremely deep hole that Symphorien had burned in vaporizing Nephilim had been surrounded by a stone wall, topped with a roof and wheel pulley for use as a well. Nearby teams of horses and mules were dragging large sections of trees down for milling in Venegas or for construction of log buildings on the spot.

“Efran, look at all this,” Minka breathed. “Can you believe it?”

“No,” Efran said. But he was thinking, *All these people pouring in . . . which makes that many more for the Destroyer to find fault with.* Also, all he saw were men. He assumed they had families, but, he only saw men.

Disturbed, he turned back to the west, Minka with him. They loped part of the way, Joshua lying prone on Efran’s left arm. He rocked easily, chewing on the teething rag while looking over Efran’s arm to the construction filling the western horizon. Minka kept looking over to Efran, whose face was troubled. She didn’t understand why, but it was no use trying to talk while they were loping. Kraken was striding smoothly; Gaunter a little clunky, but there was no bucking.

Follriott, meanwhile, closed the little book thoughtfully. It was intriguing, but he didn’t really believe it possible. Was it so easy to alter someone else’s actions, perceptions or thoughts? He had seen what the faeries did with Trina’s setup, and how successfully they persuaded Efran and his men that she was in imminent danger, requiring rescue at once. So what could Follriott do? He decided to put his newfound knowledge to a little test.

Redressing, he pocketed the book and went out. Crossing the new northbound road, which did not have as much foot traffic, he went on to Main. Here, there was the usual early afternoon crowd in the food district. Across the street from the dominant eateries, Follriott scanned their customers. Seeing a woman parading in one of Trina’s outlandish outfits, Follriott grinned. He withdrew the little book to check the particular wording of a spell, then replaced it in his pocket.

He turned away from the woman while watching her sidewise—oh, she made such a lovely target! Snootily ignoring those who were not dressed likewise, nodding royally to an acolyte who approached to admire her, she simply begged for a comeuppance. Peering at her intently from the corner of his eye, Follriott murmured certain words, then watched in joyful unbelief as she took a step and sprawled on her face on the sidewalk.

Several passersby stopped to help her up, but her hat was now over her eyes and the flares on her dress askew. She looked ridiculous, so that a few onlookers snorted. One uncouth youngster bawled outright in laughter.

To not appear overly interested in her plight, Folliott idly moved on. Catching sight of Whately the jeweler, who had been rather rude in turning away Folliott's inquiries, the new magician muttered the words again, and Whately's cane simply flew from his hand. He did a marvelous two-step attempting to regain his balance before colliding with a young woman who had a basket full of produce. They both went down, her cabbages and apples rolling into the street to be flattened by hooves.

In excited wonder, Folliott looked next at a handsome young man who was talking to a shy but interested girl. Grinning, Folliott had only to focus on him for his pants to suddenly fall to his ankles as though weighted with lead. In astonished embarrassment, he pulled them back up, only for the back center seam to rip. Red-faced, he excused himself to awkwardly walk away from the guffaws.

This is amazing, Folliott thought. *I don't even have to say words; I need only direct my thoughts to someone.* Then he caught sight of Delano's wife emerging from the brewery with a bag on her shoulder and a baby in her arms. Although he didn't recognize her away from her counter, he disliked her at once, intensely. So he narrowed his eyes at her, willing her to drop the baby.

The woman did fumble the child, but caught her again and looked quickly in his direction. Folliott turned to innocently saunter away. *Just a lucky save*, he thought.

Then he saw Lord Efran with his brat on his arm and his wife beside him, both loping easily up Main. Due to the traffic, they slowed to a walk, and he turned to say something to her. She nodded, smiling, and Folliott hated the fact that she was so transparently in love with him.

Wasn't that a wild horse he was on? Folliott directed a command to the horse, who snorted and shook his head. So Folliott directed his gaze to the placid animal she was riding, and clenched his fist.

The horse suddenly bucked; thrown forward, Minka stayed on by grasping the pommel. Efran's head jerked toward them in astonishment, then he slid off Kraken with Joshua on one arm. But his weakened legs failed him, and he sat abruptly in the middle of the road.

Gaunter continued bucking, and Minka was thrown, landing hard on the paved road. Carts and horses were yanked to a stop. Leaning on Kraken, Efran struggled up, glimpsing two men in Abbey uniforms on the sidewalk laughing. Seeing him focus on them, they melted away before he could identify them.

But his primary concern was his wife, who was pushing herself up slowly. He made it over to her to lift her away from Gaunter, who was still bucking. Feeling an intense wash of bad faerie magic, Efran swung to Folliott.

Perceiving that he was in danger of discovery, Folliott turned away and Gaunter stopped bucking. Traffic cautiously resumed around them as Efran clutched her in one arm. "Are you hurt?" he whispered. On his other arm, Joshua reached to her.

"No," she lied. "But, I can't imagine—"

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"Yes, of course." She turned to the reins hanging loosely on Gaunter's neck.

With his free hand, Efran collected Kraken's reins, who was standing still. Then the dismounted riders walked their horses slowly until turning off at Ryal's notary shop.

Watching them from behind a crowd of onlookers, Folliott thought, *Now I have something to offer a powerful man: more power.*

Efran, Joshua and Minka entered the notary shop to the tinkling bell, and he was surprised to see it empty of customers. Shortly, Ryal and Giardi came from the back room to lean wearily on the counter. He said, “Well, hello, Efran. Minka. How are you? Hello, Joshua.”

Efran studied him. “What’s going on? Where are your applicants? We just saw a great deal of construction in the east Lands and Northeast Sector.”

“Yes, I’m sure you did,” Ryal said, “all of which I have no control over. Applicants simply stopped coming here to register; they’re just going out to claim land.”

Efran objected, “But—the surveyors—”

“—quit for the unreasonable workload. There are no surveys, no applications, no registrations. People are simply taking the land they want and building on it,” Ryal said placidly.

“Because we can’t make them do it right,” Efran ended.

“That’s correct. There are far too many, and none of them see any reason to abide by our little rules,” Ryal said. Then he looked at her. “Minka? Why is your sleeve torn?”

She said, “Gaunter started bucking for no reason. But I am all right. How are you, Giardini?”

“Worried about Ryal,” she sighed, smiling. “At least we’re catching up on our rest. And Joshua has grown so much.”

“Yes, I can’t even carry him any more,” Minka said proudly.

They were silent for a few moments, then Efran broached, “Ryal, I want to correct my title on the charter and the bequest.”

“What do you mean?” Ryal asked.

“‘Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands,’” Efran said in mild contempt. “I’ve never been comfortable with ‘Lord Sovereign,’ but now that it’s simply untrue, I want to drop it, at least the ‘Sovereign’ part. I’m not sovereign over any of this, and seriously doubt whether I merit a title at all.”

Minka sighed in dismay, leaning on his arm. Ryal said slowly, “I don’t even know if that’s possible, Efran. The title is a legal part of the charter; I don’t think that either of us has the authority to change it. But since I now have the time, I’ll research it.”

“Thank you,” Efran said. Then he looked at Giardi—Henry and Sophie’s child, who had been given the gift of helping. “Pray for us, please, Giardini. The Destroyer is on his way back.”

“What?” Ryal gasped, and she looked shocked.

“Yes, the des Collines told us,” Efran said. At their blank faces, he had to tell them about getting hit in the head

with the shovel, getting a metal plate in his head, losing his memory, regaining his memory while losing his legs, and finally learning to walk again only to see the Lands slipping away. “I have to check with Estes and DeWitt now,” he ended pensively.

“Yes, let me know if—they’re experiencing the same thing with the Lands,” Ryal said. Efran nodded, taking Minka’s elbow to guide her out.

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Chapter 16

After remounting, Efran and Minka walked their horses up the switchback. He paused to look at the ongoing work on the new switchback to the east—the digging on the lowest portion, the smoothing, grading and installation of the retaining wall on the mid part, and the paving on the upper portion. There were many men working on it, none of whom he recognized.

The courtyard gate guards Goss and Mathurin, both Polonti, saluted him. Goss asked, “Lady Minka, do you need to see the doctor?”

“No,” she said in surprise.

Mathurin said, “We saw you bucked off from here, Lady Minka. What happened? It looked as though someone was hurting him.”

“I don’t know. He’s a very gentle horse,” she said.

As Squirt came up to take the horses back to their stalls, Efran told him, “Ganter’s all right, Squirt. He was provoked.”

“Right, Cap’n,” the boy said gravely.

Efran turned up the fortress steps with Minka as she studied him. “How do you know?” she whispered. He glanced at her inquiringly, and she said, “About Gaunter.”

“I felt faerie magic,” he whispered, glancing around.

“Who?” she asked, outraged.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. It was not the good kind,” he said.

They took Joshua to the nursery for fresh wraps and a bottle. Then Efran looked at the abrasion on her arm. “I’m taking you up to Wallace,” he told her.

“Don’t be silly,” she said, pulling away. “I want to hear from Estes and DeWitt.”

“Yes,” he exhaled reluctantly.

They went up the stairs with his cautiously placing his feet, testing his unsteady legs. As they turned into the workroom, DeWitt and Estes looked over. DeWitt said, “Good to see you, Efran. Hello, Minka. Your sleeve is torn.”

Efran looked around the otherwise empty room, then back at his administrators relaxing with their feet up. “Are you not registering any leases either?” he asked them.

“Not for a week now,” DeWitt said.

“Not even on the Lands?” Efran asked.

“Nope,” DeWitt said. “The applicants got tired of waiting for a spot, and see no reason why they should have to register with us or pay us anything.”

Sitting at the table with Minka beside him, Efran exhaled, “Ryal said the same thing. But I hoped that on the Lands. . . .”

Estes said, “They don’t know or care that it’s ‘the Abbey Lands’; all they see is miles of acreage waiting to be taken.”

“How about the army?” Efran asked uneasily. “The fights? The discipline?”

“They don’t report to us. I would assume that Commander Lyte reports to you,” DeWitt said.

Efran mused, “I haven’t heard from him since . . . the disciplinary hearing for the men who were fighting. How was that resolved?” He forgot that he was there for at least part of it, but hadn’t paid attention.

Estes shrugged. “We don’t know; we assumed you were informed.”

Efran turned his head to whistle at the door. Stephanos stepped in, saluting, “Captain?”

“Yes, Stephanos—the disciplinary hearing over the men who had been fighting, especially those who had taken ale from Delano’s. How was that resolved? Do you know?” Efran asked.

Stephanos looked at him blankly, then checked the corridor behind him. He turned back to say in a low voice, “Permission to speak freely, Captain.”

“What? Of course. Come in and close the door,” Efran said.

Stephanos did so, but still hesitated. He was a Southerner, one of the Forty—the bravest, most loyal of Efran’s men. “Yes, Captain, the ones on trial were found guilty of theft and insubordination and . . . penalized with three days off duty.”

“What?” Efran asked, shocked, while Estes and DeWitt stared at the soldier. “Three days of vacation as punishment for insubordination?” Efran repeated in disbelief.

Stephanos said hesitantly, “Many of the men, especially Polonti, were very unhappy about it. It resolved nothing, and made cooperation between Southerners and Polonti harder. The split has only gotten worse. There used to be more Polonti, but with the great number of new men coming in without screening, the Southerners outnumber them. And they have . . . the man at the top.”

His listeners required a few moments to understand what—or whom—he meant. Efran finally asked, “Lyte? You mean Commander Lyte?”

“Yes, Captain. Some of the men believe he’s favoring Southerners, especially Eurusians,” Stephanos said. Lyte, a Eurasian himself, had been a survivor of that first attack who had asked to join the Abbey army. He had won the Meritorious Cross for his rôle in disposing of the fireballs planted at the foot of the southern hillside by Arenado.

“We’ll talk to him,” Efran said. “Ask him to step up here, please.”

“Yes, Captain.” He saluted, leaving the door open as he departed.

Efran glanced around for a moment, then asked quietly, “Am I losing control of the army now?”

The others just looked at him. Inhaling, Efran glanced at the faerie tree growing from the middle of the table, and paused. “What . . . what happened?”

DeWitt, Estes and Minka looked between him and the tree, at which he was staring. “What do you see, Efran?” she asked.

“The tree! It’s—shriveled. I used to have to ask Kele to slim it down, but it’s shrunken. It’s probably half the girth it used to be,” Efran complained.

“I hadn’t noticed,” DeWitt said softly.

“Queene Kele, may I have a word with you?” Efran asked. He waited, but nothing happened. “Kele?” he repeated. “Kele?” As a resident of the Abbey Lands, and especially Queene of the Abbey Lands Faerie, she was obligated to respond to his summons.

Finally, she appeared, distraught and disheveled. “Yes, Lord Efran. I am here.”

“Kele, what has happened?” Efran asked.

“Oh, Lord Efran, many faerie are leaving the Abbey Lands. There is—darkness rising which frightens us,” she said, distressed.

“Kele, who was using faerie magic on Gaunter to make him buck?” Efran demanded.

“Well,” she said reluctantly, “that was Folliott. But he’s only a—bit player. He is not the uprising we fear.”

“Uprising,” Efran repeated. “By whom?” *The Destroyer?* he wondered.

“Oh, Lord Efran, many are caught up in an evil wind; I cannot say who or what is behind it. Only that faerie are not able to turn it back,” she said. Her appearance was wavering.

“I see. Thank you, Kele. Go in peace,” he said. She immediately vanished, and Minka blinked back tears.

Efran turned to his administrators. “You need to leave. Take your wives and get out.”

DeWitt shook his head. “Many in the fortress have already left; I don’t know what they’re hearing that’s

frightening them—sometimes we're the last to hear these things on the second floor. If you think it's necessary, I will order an evacuation of those who are still here, again." Less than two months ago, the whole hilltop had been evacuated for the oncoming tsunami. DeWitt concluded, "But our lot is with the Fortress, Efran. We have to see to the children."

"The children." Efran closed his eyes. "Some of them are infants. What do we do with them? I don't know who to trust anymore."

There was a moment's silence, then Estes said, "Put them in Pia's woods." Efran and DeWitt thought about this, and Estes continued, "They'd still be on the hill, under the protection of the guardian. But they would also be under the protection of her Polonti and her animals."

Efran looked at Minka. She nodded, so he rose. "Minka and I will go see to it. Let me know when—or if—Commander Lyte comes up."

"Yes," DeWitt said. Estes nodded.

Downstairs, Efran and Minka were looking in the nursery. Joshua immediately saw them. "Papapa!"

But Efran was looking for an attendant. "Hello?" he called.

Felice rushed out, flustered. "Oh! Lord Efran. Lady Minka. I'm the only one here! I can't understand—"

Efran gently interrupted her. "How many children do you have here now, Felice?"

"Joshua and three others," she replied. "One infant and two toddlers. The older children are in class now."

"Good. Where is Koschat?" he asked. This was her husband.

"He should be on duty," she replied.

Efran repeated. "Good." Then he looked toward the back grounds, wiping his mouth. "Felice, we're going to temporarily move the children. Gather up all the supplies they normally need—wraps, and cleaning wipes, tallow, whatever—pack it all up. We'll come back by for the children. After we get them moved, I want you to find Koschat and do whatever he tells you."

"Yes, Lord Efran," she said in subdued alarm.

He looked down to tell Joshua, "I'll be right back." The baby watched him.

In the suspiciously empty corridor, Efran told Minka, "I'm going to talk to Pia or her Polonti. Check for Ella, please." She nodded and they parted.

When Efran exited the back door onto the grounds, he looked around tensely. The garden crews were not out here. But the children were here, running and playing, Nakam right with them. Efran found Toby to ask, "What are you doing? I thought you had classes now."

"We were let out early," Toby said. "Where is everyone?"

“I don’t know, but you children are going to have a special camp lesson. Is this all of you?” Efran asked, looking around. Besides Toby, he saw Noah, Ivy, Alcmund, Beischel, Chorro, Elwell, Hassie, and Jera.

Toby scanned the children, counting, then turned back to say, “Yes.”

“Good. Take them back to your rooms; collect all your things, then meet me at the back gate to the woods here, and do it quickly,” Efran said. Toby looked at him sharply, but nodded. He ran off to call the children together.

Efran was looking at the sparring and archery groups. They were still here, though they were not practicing. They were all watching him. As he walked toward them, they came over to meet him. He glanced over them, observing, “You’re missing some men.”

“Yes, Captain,” Wyeth said. “Many of the Southerners haven’t shown up today.” The only Southerners that Efran saw right away were Bennard, Earnshaw, Fennig, Caswall, Finn, Connor, Mohr, Soames, Cyneheard, Henris, Stourt and Tourse. Seeing these groups collect around Efran, the head horse trainer Jasque came up, as well as Loriot and Tess.

When Efran saw her, he quickly looked around for Ella. Quennel was there, so Efran asked him, “Where is Ella?”

“At my mother’s house, Captain. I don’t like what I’m seeing,” he said.

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Chapter 17

“What are you seeing?” Efran asked Quennel.

“A lot of Southerners walking away without leave, Captain,” he replied.

Nodding, Efran told the others, “Something’s up; I don’t know what. I’m taking the children out of the fortress to hide them in Pia’s woods.” He nodded to the hilltop woods; including the gentle western slopes, they comprised acres. “Wyeth, you and Martyn go tell Pia they’re coming. I want you all to disperse as well, preferably in the woods. If worse comes to worst, I don’t want you fighting to defend the fortress. There are other agencies involved, and its defense is out of my hands.”

The men looked at each other. Nyland asked, “Who is leading a rebellion against you, Captain?”

“I don’t know,” Efran said, smiling tightly. “But it makes no difference; the Destroyer may be back, and I don’t want any of you fighting him. You’ll die.” They listened, remembering Nares. Wyeth and Martyn saluted, then ran to the back western gate. To avoid being seen from the Lands, they kept clear of the front gates.

Efran instructed, “Connor, Earnshaw, Finn, Mohr—I want you to go to the kitchen and get supplies for an expedition. Get as much as you can; bring it all to the woods.”

As those four left, the men saw Toby leading eight children, all with packs (and Nakam as escort). With them were Felice and Onfroi, the women’s cleaning supervisor, also Polonti. She was drawing Joshua’s cart, laden

with supplies. Between them, they also carried two babies, one of whom was Joshua, and walked two toddlers. Efran nodded toward them, telling his men, "They all need to go to the woods."

Soldiers ran over to unburden the two women, and Efran started to walk off. He paused upon seeing Minka come out of the western exit to the back grounds. She ran to him, panting, "I can't find Ella or Sudie."

"Quennel has her somewhere," he said, holding her shoulders lightly. "We're going back to our quarters to get a few clothes, maybe your makeup [obviously joking]. I don't think we'll need much. Something tells me it will be over quickly."

"As long as I'm with you," she said. He gathered her up to him.

They went back through the western door to raid their quarters for necessities. Efran took weapons because he felt naked without them. Upon leaving, he paused, and she stopped. Then he backtracked to the lower corridor to look in the library. Minka went with him.

The Librarian turned to them with a bow. "Lord Efran. Lady Minka."

Efran sighed, "Librarian, I don't know what's about to happen. But if anyone can defend the treasures here, you can."

"Thank you for your confidence, Lord Efran. All will end well," the Librarian replied. He was large, about eight feet tall, his suit as black as the abyss, his hair white fire, his eyes fathomless pools of knowledge.

Efran straightened, his eyes watering. "I believe you, though it may be painful getting there." He took Minka's arm protectively to lead her out . . . of their safe place.

He took her to the gate in the fence separating the back grounds from the woods. But she turned quickly when he didn't follow her. "I'll come," he promised. "But I've got to check with DeWitt and Estes."

"You'll come sleep with me here?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yes. I promise," he said. So she watched him reenter the fortress by the western door.

Still not quite able to trot up stairs, he walked up to the abandoned second floor to look in the workroom. His stomach knotted to see his administrators there, working as usual. "What are you doing?" Efran breathed.

DeWitt glanced at him over his spectacles. "Just tidying up for the new management," he quipped.

"The children are in Pia's woods; everyone else is leaving. I want you out of here," Efran said.

"Oh, we'll go," DeWitt assured him, then looked over as Estes asked a question about a form.

"How can any paperwork be important right now?" Efran demanded.

Estes inhaled, sitting back. "Efran, our lives are bound up in the fortress. Before we leave, we intend to make sure that an illegitimate lord can't plunder it. Oh—you should know that I had several copies of the signet made and hid them in obvious places here and there."

Efran exhaled, "You are the best administrators, and the best friends, I could ever hope to have." Then he

remembered to ask, “Did Commander Lyte ever come up to explain his actions at the hearing?”

DeWitt said, “No. Did you really expect him to?”

“I had hopes,” Efran muttered.

“Fortunately, Estes and I are more practical. Go to Minka, Efran,” DeWitt said, opening an invisible hiding place in the floor.

“Where are Kelsey and Tera?” Efran demanded.

Estes said, “Safe on the grounds, Efran. And we’ll go to them shortly.”

Efran sighed, turning out.

After his footsteps had faded down the stairs, his administrators eyed each other. Estes asked, “Should we have told him we’re spending the night in the hidden library?”

“Nah,” DeWitt said, looking over another parchment which he began shredding.

But Efran went out to Minka in the woods, as he had promised.

Late in the night, Efran was awakened by Stites whispering, “Captain . . . Captain.” He was being very quiet in his effort to not waken Minka, asleep tight in Efran’s side.

Efran turned his head. “Yes.”

“Come look,” Stites whispered.

Delicately, Efran extracted himself from Minka, leaving her asleep on the blanket under the oak and hickory trees. There were a few pines and dogwoods in the area as well, their light fragrances intermingling in the still night air. Efran left his boots behind in order to follow Stites soundlessly through the detritus.

They silently entered the grounds through the western gate, then went around the northwestern corner of the fortress to cross to the empty courtyard unseen from below. By the light of the waxing gibbous moon in the lightly clouded sky, they looked down on Main Street filled from end to end with armed men—hundreds of them. And at the end of Main, directly in front of the wall gates, was a newly erected gallows.

“So there it is,” Efran whispered.

“You will not be hanged. We are going to fight, Captain,” Stites said.

“With how many men?” Efran laughed.

“Almost two hundred,” Stites said.

Efran said, “There’s at least four hundred down there already. What do you suppose those numbers will look like in the morning?” At least the second switchback wasn’t ready for use, yet.

Stites argued, “Polonti die fighting, Captain.”

Efran agreed, “Yes, but I’m not going to allow you to die defending me, and leave the children unprotected. We’re going to let that army take me down to those gallows. Meanwhile, you will protect the children here. This is their safe place; but keep them in the woods until you see how it plays out below.”

Stites said, “We don’t have to let you be taken, Captain; we can fight them from the woods.”

“I expect you will. But I’m going to keep as many of them as I can busy down there,” Efran said, nodding to Main.

“Captain—”

“That’s an order, Stites. Do you still follow my orders?” Efran asked, surveying the scene below. Groaning, Stites saluted and returned to the woods.

Efran waited till a roving cloud passed over the moon, then he slipped up the fortress steps into the foyer. There, he crossed into the keep to look affectionately on the ten-foot-tall crucifix and the Scripture engraved on the wall opposite it: “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him.”

“Here we are again,” he said, “facing impossible odds, over and over, yet I live to walk in and cry to You again. I don’t expect to survive tomorrow; I’m fairly sure that my time has come. But now I know that this place will endure. It is holy—a holy place for children. I know that You will save my Minka and my son with them, and that enough of these men will survive to fight for this place, and hold it, because Your purpose endures.”

He was quiet a moment, then said, “I remember the first time I came in here to pray to You when Adele led Loizeaux’s thousands against me. I thanked You then for enabling me to die with a clear conscience—or so I thought. I’ve only recently understood that I wasn’t clean at all. I just didn’t know it, but You, in Your mercy, kept me alive to keep working on me. If I die tomorrow, forgive me for the sins I know about, and the ones I don’t.”

He thought a while longer, then said, “Give my Minka joy in You. Give her utter joy. Give Joshua a kind, attentive father, who will treat him as his own son.” This line of thought was getting too painful, so he cut it off: “I look for mercy tomorrow, when, if the gallows fail, the Destroyer comes to examine my soul again. I’m not ready for that; I don’t know that I ever will be. So—have mercy on me.”

Then he left the keep to go sit at the open fortress doors.

It was closer to daybreak than he had realized. With the lightening of the eastern sky, he watched the men in Main below rouse themselves from cots or blankets or—more ominously, the barracks. He hadn’t noticed until yesterday how many Southerners had swarmed to the Lands, but it was evident that they overwhelmed the number of Polonti here. He saw some Abbey red uniforms mingling with the invaders, and he grieved for Barr and Wendt. Efran was very sure that Barr would not join them, and they’d have no use for the blind Commander.

When more men in red uniforms began pouring out of the barracks—not just Barracks #1, but also #2, #3, and #4—Efran realized that these probably weren’t his men at all, but invaders dressed as his men. But—how did he know this? If his own Commander betrayed him, how could Efran be sure that his men wouldn’t, as well?

He wondered, *How could I have lost control of the army so completely?* Part of that was because his control was informal, especially in the beginning, when they had a few hundred men. When their numbers approached

thousands, Efran delegated control to a Commander—a man he trusted, but, a EurAsian. And then, when Efran had suffered the loss of his memory followed by the loss of his legs, the usurpers had to feel the time was ripe.

Hearing footsteps behind him, Efran turned on the top fortress step where he sat. And out of the fortress doors emerged Commander Lyte, an unknown captain, and—Neale. Captain Neale. In Abbey red. Efran stood.

They were all in Abbey Red. In the back of his mind, Efran realized that they must have simply come up the switchback and walked in during the night to look for him. They just never looked in the keep.

“Captain! I appreciate your making yourself so readily available,” Lyte said. Efran almost didn’t hear him, as he was still staring at Neale.

Neale had been with him from the beginning as a member of the Red Regiment, one of the Forty. Efran had trusted him utterly, had leaned on him frequently. He was one of the first men Efran had designated as Captain, and had never given him a reason to doubt him. Lyte was a EurAsian, but Neale was a Westfordian.

The knife thrust of this betrayal almost made Efran collapse where he stood. Neale looked back at him unblinking. Other men in Abbey red poured out behind him. They were Neale’s soldiers, but not Efran’s.

Given this killing blow, everything else seemed unreal. Suddenly aware that Lyte had spoken, Efran asked in faint curiosity, “What are you doing?” It was a ghost speaking; Efran, as a soldier and a Captain, was dead.

“We’re taking over your fortress, Captain,” Lyte said pleasantly.

“And the charter?” Efran asked.

“Yes, that too. Lord DePew is the new Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands,” Lyte said.

“DePew,” Efran repeated. The builder. “How does he justify that?”

“He’s very wealthy and he has a great many more men than you do, Captain,” Lyte said. A number of these men were collecting in the courtyard in front of them.

Lyte’s continual use of Efran’s old title—when Lyte had never served under him at Westford—was irritating, but Efran assumed that he meant it to be. Efran said, “But the charter is a legal document. He can’t just walk into the fortress and declare himself Lord Sovereign.” He aired this trivial fact as a theoretical proposition unrelated to reality.

“Oops. He already has,” Lyte said.

Behind him, DePew appeared in regal robes that had almost certainly been designed and made by Trina’s shop. He said, “All right, come now, Efran. Let’s get this over with.”

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Chapter 18

“Bind his hands, there,” DePew said as if ticking an item off a list.

Neale turned Efran, unresisting, to tie his wrists together with what felt like a silk sash. DePew added, “Trina does make the most adorable accessories.” Yes, and if Efran hadn’t put his hands together with his knuckles facing, the silk binding would have cut off the circulation to his hands.

In the morning light, Efran saw for the first time the malicious faces of the ex-Abbey soldiers filling the courtyard around them. They hardly registered with him, dead as he was. So before he knew what was happening, they had surrounded him to begin beating him with their fists.

They landed a few body blows, but concentrated on his face, splitting the skin on their knuckles with the force of the blows. They elbowed each other aside to get their hits in, and splattered their own faces with his blood. After a few minutes of this, his weakened legs gave out and he sagged, blood running from his nose, his mouth, and the cut above his eyebrow.

They held him upright to keep hitting him, but DePew said, “There, enough of that. I don’t want him beaten to death up here; it’s got to be on the gallows where everyone can see. Now—you three, go open the Treasury. You know where it is. Here, now, Commander Lyte has the key.”

In front of Efran’s face, Lyte took a signet ring from his jacket to put it in one man’s hand. Efran closed his eyes in appreciation of Estes’ foresight to have copies made—which, of course, would not open the door. DePew ordered fussily, “In the library, you know. Go on!”

Efran chuckled, which sounded as though he were spitting up more blood—which he was. “Take him down now,” DePew ordered his captains. To the other men, he said, “Go see that everything is ready.” The soldiers then went on down ahead of them, spitting on Efran as they passed. He didn’t look to see who did it. Whoever they were, they weren’t his.

So the two captains began dragging Efran down the switchback while the three men doomed to the library went in. The loyal men on the hilltop were watching this, of course, some crouched in the courtyard and second-floor balconies. Most of them wanted to rush out with the weapons they had, but as the Captain had forbidden it, there were objections.

They all agreed, however, that they needed a plan by which to retrieve him before DePew got him up on the gallows. Engrossed in their argument, none of them noticed Minka slipping through the western gate onto the fortress grounds. Nor did they see her run out of the courtyard gates until it was too late to go after her.

She was trotting down the switchback after the captains who were dragging Efran, being led by DePew. They turned in surprise upon her approach. She did not scream, cry or fight; she merely inserted herself between Neale and Efran to shove her little shoulder up under his armpit. Efran looked at her through swollen lids; Neale, appearing stunned, stepped back. But he did not interfere, so Efran raised up to walk with her support.

Because it was difficult for her to get under his arm with his wrists tied behind his back, she yanked one loop of the silk binding off his hands, enabling him to pull one hand free, then the other. No one moved when he let the binding drop behind her, but she was then better able to brace him. Neale watched, perspiring, while the other Captain asked, “Lord DePew? What about the girl?”

He looked back at stubborn little Minka clinging to Efran, and said indulgently, “That’s all right; she’s Eurasian.” Which meant that he intended to marry her after Efran’s death, making himself legitimately Lord Sovereign. Apparently, he failed to see that Efran’s hands were loose. Also at this time, almost no one noticed the dark clouds rising in the east.

So the short parade continued down the switchback, Neale to Minka’s left and the other captain to Efran’s right. Somehow strengthened, Efran walked on his own bare feet. As blood continued to drip down his face, soaking his shirt, she gripped him all the tighter. She knew Neale, but ignored him.

The sun was fully up; the morning of March 28th had broken. While the Polonti were castigating themselves for letting her run out like that, DePew led the condemned off the switchback to begin down Main.

Then Earnshaw—Captain Melchior’s scribe, and a Southerner—ran out of the courtyard gates. He was aflame with righteous indignation, but he was unarmed, just one man, so the soldiers on Main watched in amusement as he stopped on the third bend of the switchback to shout, “This is wrong! This is evil! How can you think to profit from something that destroys your soul?”

They heard him, even to the wall gates. There was something about the construction of the switchback on the hill that amplified sound. He went on, crying in rage, “The Abbey Fortress is a sacred place! Do you really think to escape the judgment from murdering its rightful lord? Is God blind and deaf to what you’re doing? STOP AND THINK!”

He had their attention; some men were wavering, but one lifted his bow and sent an arrow into Earnshaw’s chest. With a strangled cry, he fell to his back and lay still. So the usurpers quickly forgot what he was saying and cleared a path down the center of Main to the gallows. Ryal and Giardi were watching from the front window of their shop, knowing that once Efran was dead, Ryal would be next. Croft stepped out, seeing the man most responsible for his success being hauled to the gallows like a criminal—and his little Minka by his side.

Others emerged to look in dismay, but no one else cared for an arrow in the chest. Elvey was crying bitterly; Firmin was wringing his hands. Delano, Madgwick, and Wystan had come out of their brewery to watch in disgusted anger. But Madgwick was looking up at the sky, waiting.

Folliott was in a state of high excitement at the spectacle of Lord Efran’s debasement. With bad faerie magic burning his fingers in an almost sentient desire to flame out, Folliott thought of something very funny and pointed at Efran as he stumbled past, breathing and bleeding.

And suddenly Efran was wearing one of Trina’s most exuberant creations of flaming pink and saturated yellow, with layers of skirting, mutton sleeves, and a standing ruffled collar. Folliott issued a high-pitched giggle at the sight, but for some of the men who had at least a passing acquaintance with the Captain, it crossed a line.

Minka reached up to rip off the collar because it was in her way. Then she continued to press upward in Efran’s armpit, her left hand holding his left arm draped across her shoulders and her right arm encompassing his back as far as she could reach.

One of DePew’s men, Callops, had all he could stomach of this. He went back to one of the barracks where the Polonti (and a few loyal Southerners like Verrin and Coxe) were crammed in the holding cells. There weren’t enough of them to interfere with the hanging, but—Callops threw the keyring into a cell, ran out, stole a horse, and began riding north to Eurus alone. He glanced up warily at the gathering storm clouds.

Meanwhile, the trio whom DePew had sent into the fortress to open the Treasury seemed to be having

unaccountable difficulty finding the library. They knew it was on the right-hand side of the lower corridor going down from the foyer, but they came to the end of the corridor over and over without seeing it.

While they were thus engaged, the Librarian knocked on the bookshelf which doubled as a door to the secret room. “Steward Estes, Administrator DeWitt, there are three conspirators who are searching for the library in order to gain the Treasury. I intend to let them in. Do you wish to supervise the proceedings?”

DeWitt immediately swiveled the bookcase open. “We’d enjoy that very much, Librarian. Thank you for alerting us.”

“You are most welcome, Administrator. If you will sit in these chairs, I will obscure you from view,” the Librarian said.

“Excellent,” Estes smiled. Closing the bookshelf door, they sat as offered.

In the corridor, Rugg, Protch, and Owsin were deliberating. Rugg said, “Listen, the library’s got to be here, but it’s shielded by a spell. Polonti do that. So, we’ll walk up the corridor one step at a time while I command, ‘Open.’ Then we have to see it.”

“‘Open’? Why not ‘Show’?” Protch asked.

“Because I know spells, halfwit,” Rugg vented.

“Sure, you do,” Protch muttered. “Here we go, then—”

And the three took a step in unison as Rugg commanded, “Open!” They took another step. “Open!” And a third step. “Open!”

Upon the fourth command of “Open,” the three exclaimed together, “There it is!” “It worked!” “Wide open!”

“I told you,” Rugg grunted, and they entered the library together, falling silent at the sight of the Librarian with his dark eyes and white hair.

He bowed. “Good morning, gentlemen. I am the Librarian. How may I assist you?”

The three grinned at each other, and Rugg said, “We’re here to have a look at the Treasury, my good man.”

“Very well,” the Librarian said, turning to extract a book from the shelves without appearing to touch it. “Before you enter, I must show you a map of where you will be. You must memorize this map so that you are able to find your way out again.”

“Oh?” Rugg said.

The three of them crowded in together to look as the Librarian opened *Treasures of Ancient Civilizations*. “It’s buried? How deep is it? That looks complicated,” Owsin said warily.

“What are you, a coward?” Rugg sneered.

Studying the drawing, Owsin said, “No, but, we were told it’s upstairs, not deep in the earth. The land in the map doesn’t even look like the Lands—there’s no hill.” Owsin fell silent. “And—the book is getting big—!”

“The better to help you memorize it,” the Librarian explained.

“It’s—” Protch began, turning in a circle. “It’s all around us! I don’t even see the door to the corridor any more!”

“Look!” Rugg shouted “Look at all the *gold!*”

The three gaped at the splendor before them—crowns, ornaments, jewels, and mountains of gold coins, all irresistibly glittering. The men shoved each other to leap through the doorway.

DeWitt stood. “Is it safe for us to come look?” While he and Estes saw the men disappear, they were unable to see the book’s pages from where they sat.

“Yes, Administrator,” replied the Librarian.

So DeWitt and Estes came to stand beside him and watch the three hoot in joy over the riches filling the room. They fell down to swim in piles of gold coins, put crowns on their heads and chains of gold with diamond pendants around their necks. Protch decorated all ten fingers with massive gold rings.

Owsin paused, taking the signet out of his pocket. “We were told we needed this to open the Treasury. Why did we not need it?” he mused.

Rugg stood, tossing a handful of coins at Protch as he reclined on a golden chaise. “Here, now, we’ve got work to do.”

After a brief search, the men found piles of canvas bags with which they stuffed all the gold they could carry. Then they looked around. “One, two, three—four passageways,” Protch muttered. “Which one leads out?”

Owsin turned in a full circle. “This is nothing like the map,” he breathed. Raising his eyes to see DeWitt and Estes standing with the Librarian, he quietly noted, “We’ve been tricked.”

Rugg hoisted his bag over his shoulder, not hearing him. “All right, Owsin, you studied the map. Which passage do we take?”

Owsin tore his eyes from the three outsiders to look at the doorway, shaped like a page, through which he saw them. Attempting to put his hand through the doorway, he felt only rock. Then he looked up to ascertain the source of the light, and started laughing maniacally.

Rugg demanded, “Which tunnel do we take?” Protch started shaking.

“It doesn’t matter!” Owsin cackled. “As soon as he shuts the book, the light goes away!”

Upon the Librarian’s gesture, the view of the treasury robbers surrounded by gold disappeared. The book emitted a tremendous flash of white light before it shrank and snapped shut, falling to the floor. There was left a sprinkling of dirt and an old, dead, musty smell.

After uncovering their eyes from the flash, DeWitt and Estes blinked at the Librarian as he picked up the book to replace it on the shelf. In the silence, DeWitt said, “I believe I’m ready for a drink. How about you, Estes?”

“Lager,” Estes replied.

“Prudent,” DeWitt agreed. “Librarian, what’ll you have?”

“A mild ale, if you would be so kind, Administrator,” the Librarian said, inclining his head.

“Two ales and a lager coming up,” DeWitt said, walking out.

Meanwhile, defying orders, Jehan and Coish had crept out through the hilltop kitchen gate. Avoiding both switchbacks, they picked their way down the treacherous northeastern hillside. Cautiously, they stepped onto the main east-west road to progress to Main Street. In their red Abbey uniforms, they were indistinguishable from the usurpers—as long as they kept their hats down low to cover their black hair and Polonti features.

Passing Delano’s, Jehan glanced aside at Madgwick. She saw him, recognized him, and smiled. He smiled back, then looked ahead at DePew and two officers leading the Captain, supported by Minka, to the gallows. “Is that Captain Neale?” Coish whispered in alarm.

“No, it can’t be,” Jehan said.

Arriving at the tall wooden structure, Efran was required to climb steps in a long dress, the layers of which flapped in the rising wind. Minka held the dress up so they could progress six or seven steps. But her presence created a dilemma for the guards, one of whom tried to pull her off him. She clung so tightly that Efran fell to his knees on the steps. He whispered, “Let her be.”

DePew waved magnanimously. “Let her help him.” She couldn’t alter the outcome, and DePew was enjoying the show. Nice little bit of drama, there. Primarily, however, allowing her to help him before seeing him hanged would sufficiently break her in for her new husband. So DePew thought.

The guard let go of her, and she struggled to raise Efran to his feet. Seeing that he still wore his work shirt and trousers underneath the dress, she ripped out the buttons in the back to pull it over his head and fling it away. The man on whom the clingy dress landed had to fight it off. DePew watched Minka in pleasant anticipation—she was feisty little thing; he’d enjoy her. Folliott pouted upon seeing the dress flail in the dirt.

Grasping the side rail, Efran continued climbing. The guards fell several steps below him and Minka, then stopped altogether. As long as she was making him climb, there was no reason for those following to go on up and risk falling through the trapdoor.

He and she reached the platform with the trapdoor squarely in the center, then everyone looked toward the fortress on the hill. It was momentarily lit up from the inside with a light so bright, the white stone looked translucent. It looked especially eerie against the darkening clouds. Efran vaguely smiled, wondering which book the Librarian had found for the Treasury robbers.

When the light died down, the crowd looked back to the gallows. One guard ascended to the platform while his partner hung back on the steps below. Rattled by the light—and perhaps the defiant gaze of the girl clinging to the Captain—the man on the platform carefully avoided the trapdoor to fit the noose around the neck of the condemned.

Then the guard and his partner hastily descended, each berating the other that the condemned man’s hands weren’t tied. It was *established hanging protocol* to tie the prisoner’s hands. Their part done, they quickly merged with the crowd well away from the gallows.

From the street, DePew called up, “You must come down now, Minka.” His personal bodyguard drew their bows off their shoulders to nock arrows and aim upward.

She looked up at Efran as he turned to her. Having seen the archers, he knew it was over. He brushed back her tousled curls and moistened his swollen, blood-encrusted lips. In a slur, he said, “Our story had a good run, didn’t it? I don’t know how many chapters there are, but almost a million words! Wasn’t it worth it?” She did not reply, but her eyes remained fixed on his beautiful, battered face.

“It will be all right,” he promised. “I will love you forever.”

She smiled. “I know.” Reaching her arms as far as she could around his chest, she looked down to make sure that she was standing on the platform—not the trapdoor. Then she raised her impish face to say, “I will not let go.”

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Chapter 19

Exasperated, DePew shouted at two men beneath the gallows, “Get her down! *GENTLY*.” And therein was their dilemma—they would have to pry her off him without hurting her. At least the noose was good and snug beneath his bloody chin.

Those two, Maruda and Kronbach, tentatively mounted the steps. Efran dropped his hands, unresisting. But Minka, tucked in his left side, lowered her arms to his waist so that she could clench her hands at his right side. While he was half on the platform and half on the trap door, her feet remained solidly on the platform at the corner of the trap door. He looked down at her in dismay; she responded with a defiant, lifted eyebrow.

Attaining the platform, the men were momentarily stymied. Maruda leaned over to pull her from behind while Kronbach went around to unclench her hands at Efran’s side. After a struggle, they succeeded in dislodging her grip on him, but she fought so unexpectedly, so wildly, that Maruda stumbled into Efran, who fell back against Kronbach, who toppled over the side rail. As he hit the paved street twelve feet below, bystanders sprang away, hearing bones crack.

When Maruda grabbed her by the arm and reached for her neck, she raked her fingernails across his face so that he lost hold of her. Squirming away, she fastened herself onto Efran again while he still had one foot on the platform and one on the trapdoor. The gallows operator below, unable to see clearly but intent on doing his job, pushed the lever to open the door.

But Minka was already shoving Efran off the door into the corner post, where she stepped on his bare feet. The door dropped open behind her as he held the side rail with one hand and her with the other. She reached up with both hands to work the noose off over his head. Arms flailing, Maruda fell through the opening with a cry, landing on the lower crossbeam. The impact caused the whole gallows to minutely rock.

DePew, his patience stretched beyond reason, shouted, “Shoot him!” His archers raised their bows as Jehan and Coish began a desperate sprint toward the gallows.

Efran turned Minka to the corner post to shield her with his body. He would be her guardian to the end.

As the archers released their arrows at the easy target above them, a gale roared in from the east. It flattened everyone around the gallows, which rocked. Clutching the corner post, Efran started as one arrow hit the post next to his face, above Minka's head. Another few whizzed through the support beams past his right arm. Caught in a crosswind, the gallows righted itself with a jarring thump. Dark clouds with a sick greenish hue spread over Main.

DePew and his men were picking themselves up when piercing laughter mingled with cries of anger filled the air. Everyone looked up at two large golden faces hanging in the sky against the eerie backdrop of clouds. One face resembled the classic mask of tragedy, the other of comedy. But they were animated, mouths moving and eyelids crinkling around empty sockets that gave view to the dense clouds. "What HAPPENEDDD?" Tragedy roared.

"A MALFUNCTIONNN!" Comedy screamed. "It's so annoying when things don't work right."

"You just can't get good help nowadays," Tragedy fumed.

"What do you DO?" Comedy cried in laughter.

Everyone was transfixed by this bizarre show. The giant faces moved in the air as though supported by invisible bodies. Meanwhile, Barr led his men from the lower barracks on the north end of Main as more Polonti—and Southerners—streamed down the switchback on the south end. Lwoff and his assistant Evrard at the hilltop armory had seen that Efran's men were well armed, and the two of them joined the counterattack now.

Descending the switchback, the ranks separated in respect around Earnshaw's pierced body. Captains Towner and Rigdon were at their head, but deferred to Lieutenants Wyeth and Nyland. Leading them off the switchback, Wyeth raised a hand to halt on Main, blocked by an invisible barrier. The show would permit no distraction, regardless how well-intentioned. Barr and his men were likewise held up.

Jehan and Coish, however, were now at the gallows steps, calculating how to get the Captain and Lady Minka down. Despite the open trapdoor swinging in the wind, Efran could not see who or how many were directly underneath the gallows.

So while everyone's attention was fixed on the aerial performance, Jehan climbed the steps to hiss at the Captain. He turned, then brought Minka forward to descend to Jehan's outstretched hands. Efran followed, and the four of them slipped through the mesmerized men to the sidewalk unhindered. And there they stood watching from the midst of the insurrectionists. Shurtleff edged his way over to stand in front of Minka, blocking DePew's view of her. Patting Shurtleff's back in appreciation, she still leaned around him to see the show from under Efran's arm. The clouds were dark and roiling, but the wind had subsided.

The great masks were circling in the air above DePew. He was craning his head to look up at them. Seemingly fixed in place, he pointed up at the faces which bore down on him, singing a silly song that filled the onlookers with fear:

"What do you do when you can't make it happen?
What do you do when nothing works?
What do you do when the rain falls upward?
What do you do whennn darknesssss lurksss?"

Upon the last line, which slowed ominously, many of DePew's men threw down their weapons and began running for their lives. They wrenched open the wall gates to run north as hard as their feet could carry them.

Horses stood saddled nearby, but the fleeing men never even looked at them.

Folliott, dazzled by the performance above them, raised a hand to see how his magic could affect it. He was promptly changed into a large slug with many blinking eyes on long stalks and many gathered fingers. With long brown digits, he felt himself all over, trying to discover what had happened. No one knew that right then, the little book in his house exploded into flames, burning a hole in the floor.

Seeing the slug suddenly appear across the street, Efran whispered, “Nonesuch and Asmuch. The comedy team.” As he watched, he raised the back of his hand to his throbbing, blood-encrusted face. Jehan and Coish stared in repugnance at the creature across Main.

Minka, secure in Efran’s side, regarded Folliott’s new look complacently. Catching sight of movement farther away, she whispered, “The switchback!” Efran and the two young Polonti quickly looked over to where Earnshaw was sitting up in bemusement, tossing aside an arrow. Some of the soldiers stuck on the switchback ran over to help him up.

Meanwhile, Tragedy and Comedy continued their creepy serenade of DePew:

“What do you do when the end is upon you?
What do you do when all doors are closed?
What do you do when the last option fails you?
What do you do when youuu arrre expooooosed?”

“The Destroyer is coming,” Efran whispered, trembling. His arm tightened around her, but Minka was not afraid. She was silly and impetuous, but her Father was kind, and good, and compassionate—the proof of which stood beside her, holding her in his arms. Comedy raised his laughing face; Tragedy wailed, his empty eyes streaming tears that fell like rain.

With fear thick in the atmosphere, trapped by the heavy green clouds, more men poured out of the gates to escape, and Lands residents ran into their homes. Madgwick remained outside to watch. When Ryal and Giardi came out to stand on the top step of the shop, Efran nodded toward them, so those with him crossed Main (at the crosswalk) to join the notary and his wife. Coish asked, “Captain, what is the Destroyer?”

Ryal’s head jerked toward Efran, who whispered, “Watch,” looking at something gathering to the west of the golden airborne faces. For a moment, Ryal could only gaze at Efran’s bloody face. Tears in her eyes, Giardi reached a hand toward him. Upon the touch of her fingers on his head, cracked teeth and bones became solid again; swollen flesh subsided. Efran startled, looking back at her.

And then the Lands grew dark. The masks of Comedy and Tragedy vanished.

There was a dense shadow blocking the sun, yet no one could see what it was. It approached Main Street from the west like a cloud of pestilence, or a silent swarm of locusts. The closer it came, the more men fled down Main to escape out of the wall gates. When the darkness encroached too closely to the gates, men fled east—anywhere any from it.

Terror rode on the shadow, though there was nothing definable. Efran remembered that fear as if it had fallen on him yesterday, not eight months ago. And he also remembered how not to react.

Disengaging gently from Minka, he stepped down from Ryal’s door into the deserted street to look to the right and the left. The Polonti who were gathered at each end of Main watched him. “Don’t fight it!” he shouted to

one group and then to the other, “No *koa!*” Fighting the Destroyer was an invitation to die.

Part of the shadow which resembled a hooded head turned toward him. Efran stood in the middle of Main, still barefoot, watching the darkness change coarse to drift toward him. The closer it came, the harder Efran’s heart pounded, and the tighter his chest squeezed. When it was upon him, he closed his eyes, awaiting the horrible sensation of being laid bare to eyes that saw everything.

Suddenly it moved away, releasing him. Efran sagged, opening his eyes. For whatever reason, it had passed over him without the searing glance of inspection he remembered. He looked aside at the group on Ryal’s step. Minka was holding Jehan as he covered his head, trembling; Coish had found refuge in Giardi. The shadow seemed to barely take note of these four; when it came to Ryal, it paused, drawing up in an arc over him as if—greeting him? Acknowledging him? Efran couldn’t put a label to what he just saw.

It turned to the men remaining around the gallows, then. A number of Southerners, all DePew’s men, dropped as if flattened by a tidal wave. But DePew’s new Captain Shuldberg took his stand in front of the gallows to shout, “And what are you?” Efran couldn’t help but admire his stupid courage.

Something in the hood seemed to open, and there was an exhalation of cold, very cold air. It wafted across the ground to Shuldberg like morning fog in the valley, and he froze—literally froze. He became a solid block of ice, the crystals in his hair and beard glistening in the midday darkness.

The Destroyer turned his hood toward the Polonti collected behind Captain Barr. Efran saw that he had taken a beating as well; Barr was unlikely to simply surrender to a new Lord of the Abbey Fortress. Lowering his head, Barr drew his sword to thrust it into the ground before him. And he stood in a posture of submission, repugnant to the Polonti, especially one who had been enslaved as Barr had been.

His men behind him followed his example, some less readily than others. But all of them laid down their weapons because the Captain had told them not to fight.

The Destroyer surveyed them with a movement of its hood. Some of them gasped or recoiled, a few fell to their knees, but no one was struck to the ground. Then it leaned far back as if folding on itself to appraise DePew’s men on the other side of the street. Captain Neale stood at the head of this group. As the shadow approached him, sweat began pouring down his face, and he grimaced in fear or pain. Then he threw back his head to collapse with a cry—not unconscious, but unable to stand.

The men behind him, most of whom were Southerners who had been part of the Abbey army, reacted in strange and various ways to the inspection. A few laughed maniacally, and seemed unable to stop laughing. Some dropped either unconscious or dead—it was hard to tell. Others tried to run, but were invisibly bound in place, so they wrenched and contorted, doing everything they could to flee. One man choked himself until he passed out.

Then the shadow stopped over DePew, who was still looking up, pointing at the sky. A tiny golden stream dropped from the shadow like a thread of honey. It descended to DePew’s pointing finger to wrap a golden thread around it. Then it continued wrapping his hand, his forearm, his shoulder.

At this point, a separate strand issued from the shadow to begin wrapping the top of DePew’s head, progressing downward to his neck. From there, it merged with the first strand to cover his shoulders, his chest, his hanging arm. The lines and folds of the gorgeous robes were faithfully reproduced in the gold that coated them. Finally, with the gilding of his feet, the issue ceased. And a golden statue of Lord DePew stood motionless in the middle of Main Street.

With that, the shadow rose and abruptly spread, encompassing practically all the settled Lands. Judging from sudden cries or exclamations, it seemed as though it were conducting numerous trivial inspections all at once. It looked down upon Madgwick, who was watching intently, and hovered over her for a moment. Then it drew away from her in what almost looked like deference. She was neither paralyzed nor driven mad, just attentive.

The Destroyer regathered itself to regard the Polonti and loyal Southerners who had descended the switchback from the hilltop woods. Earnshaw was standing before them, obviously whole, though the front of his shirt was torn and bloody. For some reason, the shadow did not inspect Earnshaw, nor did it go around him to test the men behind him. It merely took note of them, then withdrew to the air to swiftly glide east.

With the Destroyer's withdrawal, the clouds lightened and lifted to allow a benign springtime sun to shine on the Lands.

For a few moments, the men remaining sane on their feet stood motionless. Then when the rooftop bells began pealing, they realized there was no reason left to fight, and no barrier to their movement. So they converged from the north and the south upon Efran in the middle of the street, not far from the new golden statue. Sturdy veterans were weeping as Efran was shaken and embraced until he almost passed out. But they took care for Minka beside him.

Barr finally whistled, shouting, "Sit him on the notary's step there and get Coghill to look at him!" This was the doctor who primarily treated the Lands' patients, as opposed to Wallace, who worked in the fortress.

"Wait! Earnshaw!" Efran cried. "Have him treat Earnshaw!"

Men were calling, looking, until someone finally found Earnshaw, who walked over with an ale in hand. Efran gazed at him, whispering, "Who healed you?"

"Well, no one really, Captain. I'm going to be sore for a while," Earnshaw said, opening his shirt to show the bruising around a shallow hole in the center of his chest, caked with blood. "Good thing the archer was so far away, so it didn't pierce my breastbone."

"Your breastbone," Efran whispered, staring at the perfect shot in the middle of his sternum.

"Blunt arrow hit dead center and just kind of fell away," Earnshaw said. Embarrassed, he admitted, "I, uh, fainted." Efran exhaled, embracing him. Earnshaw patted his back self-consciously with his free hand. "Thank you, Captain. Good to see you and Lady Minka whole, as well."

While Coghill was brought, messengers were sent up the Abbey hill and around the Lands with news of the insurrection's collapse. As workers and residents returned to the fortress in a continual stream up the switchback, DeWitt and Estes rode down to hear the events firsthand.

There was so much to sort out, however, that Main was chaotic for the remainder of the day. First, Croft sent over a mild ale and plate of beef for Efran, along with tea and cobbler for Minka. She sat beside him on Ryal's step while Coghill cleaned his face and assessed his injuries. "Well, you've got all your teeth intact and your nose isn't broken, so we've that to be thankful for," Coghill said. Ryal hugged Giardi, and she smiled, patting his arm.

Fingering his face, Efran muttered, "Polonti noses are too flat to get a good break." The men around him laughed in agreement. But he glanced back in mild suspicion at Giardi again, who mimicked Minka's innocent look. Then he eyed his plate that Minka was holding until Coghill had finished stitching the cut over his eye.

While Efran was being patched up, he asked Barr painfully, “How did this happen? How did DePew do it?”

Barr said, “I don’t know entirely, only that he had a lot of money to spread around. And, many of the Southerners who came lately, who didn’t serve under you or Wendt, couldn’t take being under Polonti command.”

“Where is Lyte?” Efran asked.

“I don’t know,” Barr repeated. “We’re still looking for a number of men. We found Melchior—Doctor, when you’re done with the Captain, go look in on him in Barracks Four, please.”

Coghill glanced up to nod, and Efran asked anxiously, “What happened to Melchior?”

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Chapter 20

“Melchior took an early stand against DePew, and got beaten badly for it. Then they tossed him in a holding cell and left him there for days,” Barr related.

As Coghill cut the stitching thread, Efran raised a hand. “That’s enough; go look at him now.”

“You need a cleansing agent on the stitching,” Coghill argued, searching his supply bag.

“I’ve got that,” Minka said. She poured a little ale on her napkin, which she daubed on Efran’s stitches. He winced but smiled at her, taking the ale and the plate of beef. With a nod, Coghill got up to go find Melchior.

Meanwhile, Estes and DeWitt were hearing about the weird faces in the sky and the Destroyer, who had not visited them in the fortress. Then they told everyone about the Librarian’s successful defense of the Treasury. “Yes, we saw the fireworks,” Efran mumbled.

DeWitt turned in angry disbelief toward the gallows. “But this contraption!” he exclaimed, waving at it. “Did no one question why he was building a gallows?”

Tourle, a Southerner, one of the Forty, laughed, “It’s a construction scaffold, Administrator!”

“Oh,” DeWitt breathed, and they all looked over to the new inn going up.

Tiras added, “It’s built on a wheeled platform. So last night they just wheeled it over here and added rope.”

“You mean they were actually using it on site?” Efran looked over his shoulder, but couldn’t see the construction from where he sat.

Several men nodded. “Yes.” “Yes, Captain.”

“Well then, take off the rope and wheel it back over there,” Efran said. “I want that inn finished.”

Another man, Stourt, came to report with a salute, “Captain, there are forty-two of DePew’s men dead.”

In the silence around him, Efran stopped eating, dropping his head. “Any who served under me?” he asked in a low voice.

“Not that we’ve seen yet, Captain,” Stourt said. “We’re still looking; there are a lot of men missing.”

“Wendt?” Efran asked, anguished.

Barr said, “I hid him with a friend on the Lands, Captain. He’s being brought.”

Efran closed his eyes in relief, then asked, “Cutch? Gabriel?” Cutch was Commander Lyte’s Second; Gabriel his Aide.

Another man, Shane, said, “Cutch was found dead, Captain, murdered. We don’t know who did it, but he defied Lyte.” Efran set his half-finished plate and ale on the step beside him. Cutch, a Southerner, was one of the Forty. While Efran’s heart bled at another loss, Shane added, “Ah, I don’t think they’ve found Gabriel yet.”

By this time, Efran was incapable of hearing any more. So he stood, taking Minka’s hand to walk unsteadily up the switchback to their safe place. Joshua had already been returned to the nursery with the other little ones. Efran greeted the children, implying that the stitches on his forehead were just for decoration. Some accepted that, but Toby, evaluating Efran’s black eyes and swollen lip, knew better.

That done, Efran staggered back to their quarters to fall into bed with Minka beside him. And he was out until twilight. When he finally came to, he looked for Minka, but she wasn’t there. Sniffing, he looked over the side of the bed to see a black horse stretched out on the floor beside him.

Over the next several days, the administrators received more reports as they struggled with what to do from here. First, the Destroyer had made a broad, devastating sweep over the eastern Abbey Lands and the Northeast and Northwest Sectors. Hundreds of people—overwhelmingly men—were dead. But Efran was greatly relieved to hear that the five families with cattle or sheep had been spared. These managed hundreds of head of livestock that were quickly becoming essential to the Lands.

Why the Destroyer had targeted the areas being newly settled was a question that Efran, DeWitt, Estes, Ryal, and the scouts debated for days. However, subsequent inspections found more than one military compound, plus evidence that, given the lack of children, the settlers were disaffected soldiers from Crescent Hollow, Eurus—and the Abbey Lands. And they were not allied with DePew.

Captains Barr, Rigdon, and Towner identified the bodies of numerous soldiers and former residents who had been evicted from the Lands due to criminal conduct, among them Hengst, Geibel, Snearl, and—Luetngen. After he had disappeared from his job at The Lands Clothing Shop, none of the women mentioned it to the administrators because they didn’t want him back.

The Abbey leadership finally realized that the renegades, based in camps that were far enough from the Lands to escape scrutiny but close enough to attack, could have overrun them entirely, given a few months’ preparation. DePew’s insurrection—and the Destroyer’s visit—aborted their plans, as well. “No wonder they didn’t want to register with us or Ryal,” Estes observed.

So Efran's men scavenged equipment and then left several large funeral pyres burning in craggy ravines. The residents on the developed Lands had little idea of the turmoil within the army until the gallows was brought out and Efran marched to it.

Gabriel was found injured but safe, recuperating in his sister Geneve's house. A few of his friends had brought him to her after he had been knocked out defending Cutch, then they left bodyguards with him while looking for her husband. After the doctor Coghill had treated Melchior, he was also brought to recuperate at home, to Geneve's sobbing relief.

It was fortunate that few residents were disturbed by the Destroyer. Trina had suddenly developed such a severe allergic reaction to silk and satin that she had to give away many of her dresses and start wearing cotton again. After Comedy and Tragedy vanished, Folliott had reverted to his normal appearance from being a slug. He drank heavily for a day or so, then applied to Rimbault as a housing sales associate, and was accepted.

Rimbault, DePew's top assistant, had a job on his hands convincing the Abbey leadership that he knew nothing of his employer's plans for insurrection. But after interviewing all of his associates, DeWitt was convinced of his innocence: DePew had kept him in the dark, both to protect himself (as Rimbault was a great talker) and to continue receiving the business he brought in (as Rimbault was a great talker). So Rimbault succeeded DePew as head of his construction empire, and projects were continued, including the new inn.

DePew's gilded form remained in the middle of Main Street because it was conspicuously valuable, extremely heavy and difficult to move. Also, because the residents thought it simply a nice tribute to the deceased builder, they wished it to remain. So it did.

Commander Lyte was not immediately found, nor were about twenty Southerners who had been Abbey soldiers. The new man Lambdin had been locked up with the Polonti for refusing to join the insurrection, so his son Henris was unquestionably retained as an honorable member of Captain Towner's unit, as was his idol Cyneheard. Likewise, the former Featheringham guard Leneghan, in Captain Rigdon's unit, was one of the first to urge riding down in defense of Captain Efran.

Many unanswered questions remained, but they took days—some weeks, or months—to resolve. And Efran took far longer to recover from the deep wounds of betrayal.

On April 1st, four days after the attempted insurrection, Efran was sitting with Minka on the bench under the walnut tree on the back fortress grounds. They were watching Toby pull Joshua in the cart with Nakam running alongside, barking. Efran murmured, "You saved my life on the gallows."

Eyes on Joshua, she countered, "I saved my own life. I would have been so hateful to DePew he would have tossed me into the Sea by the second day."

He laughed a little, then observed, "You're a lot stronger than you look. You pushed me off the trapdoor."

She squinted, trying to remember. "Did I? What I recall is that you stepped off as it opened so that the other man fell through."

He grinned at her. "No, you pushed me."

Observing his bruises fading to yellow and green, she grinned back at him. "You pulled me with you."

At that time, they saw the children's tutor lean out the back door to call them in to class, as their play time was over. Reluctantly, they went, but Toby turned to make sure Efran saw that they were leaving the back grounds. Efran waved at him, but Joshua started crying.

Efran went over to pick him up out of the cart and Joshua patted his shoulder. Efran looked back to Minka to suggest, "Let's get your mail pouch and go ride." Agreeably, she went to get Nakam.

She and Efran swung by the nursery to get Joshua's wraps changed and pick up a sling. He set Joshua in it, shifting it over his shoulder, then they emerged into the front courtyard. Efran told the gate guards, "Get Kraken for me and Gaunter for the Lady, and, we'll need a couple of bodyguards. Whoever's available."

"Yes, Captain," Mathurin said, saluting, and Efran blinked as though he'd been slapped. Lyte's repeated, sardonic use of the meaningless title grated on him more than he realized. Mathurin, and all the others who used it, meant it respectfully.

Shortly, the requested horses were brought around, as well as Jehan, Coish, Tourse, Martyn, Finn and Gaul, with their mounts. Efran laughed dryly. "Do I need that many?"

"After all the excitement died down, we're bored, Captain," Tourse said, suppressing a yawn. The others smiled, a few gauging the Captain's reaction. He had been abnormally quiet ever since the insurrection, but today he was smiling as he lifted Minka onto Gaunter. Settling in the saddle, she positioned Nakam in his pouch so that he could see.

Efran mounted Kraken, who grouched, *It's about time*. Without bothering to snipe back, Efran repositioned Joshua to lie on his left arm. Turning out of the courtyard, he told the group, "I want to check the east Lands."

The bodyguards murmured acknowledgment. They walked down the switchback, as there was no rush. Efran didn't look over to see what further progress had been made on the new switchback. He didn't care any more.

With Joshua lying on his arm, he did prompt Kraken to an easy lope, and the rest followed. Efran glanced at Gaunter once or twice, just to reassure himself that he was behaving. With no one inflicting bad magic on him, he did fine.

The group rode silently past the construction, the Fortress' animal pens, and the fields, way out to the east Lands. They went so far as to pass the thriving cattle and sheep farms run by Lands' residents. The heads of those households came out to appraise the group as they rode by. Efran lifted a hand, and when the cattle farmers saw a woman riding by his side and a child on his arm, they returned to their chores, satisfied.

As they drew near the east branch, however, the landscape changed. Broken fencing and abandoned, half-built houses were all that remained in this area. It was a depressing sight. Except—the gaudy tent that Follriott had erected in his plan to rescue Trina remained standing. That made the desolation even more piercing.

Then Finn said, "Captain—!"

"Wolves!" Coish added in alarm.

Efran peered at the two large wolves about 40 feet ahead, one standing, one sitting, both watching him. "Canis," he whispered. "Lady Lupus." Dismounting, he said, "Everyone wait here; I'll be right back."

His men acknowledged this as he walked off with Joshua, but Jehan and Coish were almost writhing in

apprehension. “He’s unarmed!” Jehan groaned. He was holding Kraken back, who was dancing in agitation. The horse finally pulled away to follow his human over to the wolves.

Minka smiled, and Martyn said, “Oh, the Captain has no reason to fear them; they’re old friends. In fact, they saved my life.”

“What?” Jehan gasped. While Efran stood talking to the two wolves (and stroking Kraken’s nose in reassurance) Martyn told his fellow bodyguards about the very beginning of the Lands, the agreement between Efran and the wolves, and how they had prompted a runaway slave to climb the hill to the white fortress—“Me,” Martyn said.

By the time Efran returned to the group with his horse, they were all caught up on the wolves’ place in Abbey history. Remounting Kraken, Efran said, “Well, that was interesting. Canis and Lady Lupus are the leaders of a wolf clan that used to live in this area before we got here. When too many people moved to the Lands, the clan went to the wilds east of Eviron.

“But now they want to come back. There’s too much competition for too little food, with big cats—cougars, bobcats, ocelots—taking over. Canis promises they’ll stay off the developed Lands if we’ll let them hunt on the east Lands, and they’ll keep the big cats out of the area. Cats don’t make agreements with humans like wolves do,” he finished in an aside to Jehan.

“I remember that, Captain,” Gaul said, one of the loyal Forty. “I’ll never forget watching you walk into the midst of thirty wolves to make peace. What did you tell them today?”

“I told them yes, they can have the last five miles of the Lands to the east branch of Passage for their hunting grounds,” he said, glancing back as he turned Kraken to the west. “Peaceful wolves on the Lands are better than warring humans.”

They rode in silence for a little while, then Efran said, “The Red Regiment spoiled me. With the quality of men I had, they made me think I was a good leader, worthy of loyalty.”

His men looked shocked. “You are!” Jehan blurted.

Tourse blandly observed, “Eh, the boy’s got a mouth on him, but he’s right, Captain. Commander Wendt knew what he was doing when he promoted you. I was there, too.”

Efran shook his head in silent disagreement, but began thinking.

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Chapter 21

When the group returned to the populated Lands, Efran instructed, “Tourse, divide up these men to go to Ryal’s, the builders, and Rimbault to tell them that the last five miles to the east Passage belong to the wolves, and there’s to be no settling in that area. Oh, and, the coastal highway is safe; I warned them that we have commerce with Venegas, but I can’t make agreements for them.”

“Yes, Captain,” Tourse saluted, then turned to give the others instructions while Efran and Minka turned up the switchback.

As they gave up their horses in the courtyard, Minka petted both of them. “You did just fine,” she cooed at Kraken, who puckered at her.

Efran snorted, but led her up the fortress steps into the foyer, where they paused to look at their respective babies, one on Efran’s arm and the other in Minka’s pouch. Both Joshua and Nakam were asleep. Efran said, “I’ll drop him off at the nursery and meet you in the workroom.”

“I’ll drop Nakam off in our quarters and meet you at the foot of the stairs,” she returned. He smiled, but it grieved her to see how despondent he looked. Fortunately, the bruises were fading and the stitched cut healing.

As they entered the workroom, Estes and DeWitt looked over, momentarily idle. Efran glanced at the almost dead faerie tree, and that depressed him as well. He asked, “Any news?”

“Not really,” DeWitt said. “We were just talking about the Destroyer’s visit. I hate that so many men died, but . . . didn’t Kele say something about a dark wind, a bad spirit springing up? That was definitely happening in the Northeast Sector—a bunch of lawless men moving in close to what they thought were easy pickings.”

Efran nodded, throwing himself down to his usual chair. Minka sat quickly beside him before he could pull her down to his lap. Glancing at her in mild disgruntlement, he told his administrators, “We were just out in the east Lands, and found Canis and Lady Lupus, asking to come back. I told them yes.” He related that conversation, then said, “I want our residents to know that the agreement with the wolves is back in force. They won’t come here, but anyone who goes out east must know that those last five miles are theirs.”

Estes said, “The timing of that is interesting. A week ago it would have been impossible. But—we do owe the wolves some consideration; they made way for us.”

“Exactly my thinking,” Efran said, looking again at the sad faerie tree. “Now I don’t know what to do about the army.”

“Who to replace Commander Lyte?” DeWitt asked.

Efran nodded. “And Neale. How is he?”

“Not doing well,” Estes said. “He appears to be paralyzed from the waist down, and he won’t talk to anyone. He’s in a comfortable holding cell in Barracks Three. Coghill checks him once every few days.”

Efran leaned forward. “Where is his wife? Tisi?”

Estes replied, “Still in their house, with a woman helper—I can’t remember her name right off. She hasn’t gone to see him but hasn’t petitioned for a divorce, so—” Estes shrugged.

Efran exhaled, leaning back in the chair to lock his hands behind his head. “That’s—something else hanging. Another good man ruined. And I don’t know what to do. The army needs a Commander who has the respect of all the men, Polonti and Southerners.”

“That would be you, Efran,” DeWitt said.

Efran barked out a laugh. “A lot of the Southerners in our army were trying to hang me a few days ago.”

“Bad ones,” DeWitt said emphatically.

“Whom I let in,” Efran said, shrugging. “So either they weren’t bad until I made them that way or they were bad and I accepted them anyway.”

DeWitt protested, “Efran, you’re overstating your own blame.”

“I was de facto Commander, and I’m the one who made Lyte Commander,” Efran reminded him.

The others were silent; Efran covered his eyes to utter, “We need a man who can see these things.”

“That would take a—supernatural perception,” DeWitt said.

Efran removed his hands to stare at the shriveled branches in front of him. He got up to speak to the guard at the door, then threw himself back down to the chair with such violence that it threatened to tip over. Staring sullenly at the scrawny tree, he said, “I miss the faeries.”

Minka smiled warmly at him and the two men looked at him in surprise. He had seemed to prefer complaining about them.

But there came a sudden light breeze in the room which ruffled the remaining leaves on the tree in front of them. White-haired Kele, whom Efran had appointed Queene of Abbey Lands Faerie, peeked timidly from the few leaves. “Why, Lord Efran, do you mean that?” she asked, sweetly hopeful.

He sat up. “Yes, Kele, I do, and I’m grieved and hurt that you would abandon us when we needed you,” he said, sounding grieved and hurt.

“Oh, Lord Efran, in some situations I have to abide by the wishes of my subjects. But they feel as you do, and, since the evil wind is gone from the Lands, they are pining to return to their comfortable homes here,” she said.

“Well, why don’t they?” he demanded.

“We have to be invited back,” she said fretfully.

“Am I still Lord of the Abbey Fortress? Didn’t I just say I missed you? What more do you want?” he cried as a man trying to please a fickle woman.

“Your sentiment was lovely, but we require a *specific invitation* to return,” she articulated firmly.

DeWitt, Estes and Minka were stifling laughter while Efran was gaping at a pig-headed woman. Closing his mouth, he opened it again to say, “I do specifically ask that all the *good* Abbey Lands faeries would, if it please them, return at once to their homes here on the Lands. Thank you.”

Kele gushed, “Oh, I’m sure we’d be delighted to accommodate you, Lord Efran. You’re so welcome.”

She disappeared, and the tree before them suddenly puffed up as if infused with new life. Numerous faeries appeared from its burgeoning leaves to accept his invitation before disappearing to their various preferred habitats. Laughing, Minka went over to curl up on Efran’s lap. “See? You’re everyone’s hero.”

He released a faint whine as the faeries continued to bombard him with their acceptance.

Barr suddenly appeared at the door, saluting. “Captain Barr with Commander Wendt at your summons, sir.” About two years ago, Commander Wendt had been brutally blinded with acid after refusing to swear a loyalty oath to the new Surchatain Lightfoot—Minka’s father.

Efran turned in his chair, but held Minka down so that she couldn’t rise as she obviously intended to. He said, “Yes, thank you, Captain Barr. Do you have a moment, Commander?”

“Yes, Efran—” Wendt broke off as more faeries expressed their delight to accommodate the Captain’s desire for their return.

Efran turned back to the swelling tree. “Yes, thank you, faeries; we all deeply appreciate your acceptance of my invitation. If you would, please allow me a moment to confer with the Commander. Thank you.”

“We’re so pleased to accommodate you, Lord Efran,” unknown faeries said graciously. “How are you, Commander Wendt?”

“Doing very well, thank you. I’ll be doing even better when I can hear what Efran needs,” Wendt said as Barr directed him to a seat at the table. Then he stood behind Wendt’s chair.

“We’re delighted to accommodate you as well, dear Commander, seeing your long and respectful friendship toward faerie,” they said as Efran began swaying in his seat. Minka cuddled him, and he calmed down.

“Thank you; that’s very kind of you,” Wendt said. “Now, Efran. Here we are.” He knew where Efran was sitting because he could see the bright silver outline of Minka’s form curled up on his lap.

Efran turned to Wendt in the sudden quiet, and exhaled, “Commander, I need a man who is experienced, perceptive, wise, and—unflappable. Someone who can make quick decisions in crises and not cut corners. I need a man who can mold hot-headed youngsters into good soldiers, and retain the love and respect of all of them.”

After a moment’s silence, Wendt said, “I wish I knew of such a man.”

“I do know one,” Efran said. “Which is why I want you to be Commander of the Abbey army.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, then Minka gasped, “Efran, that’s brilliant.”

DeWitt said, “I have to second that, Minka.”

Estes said, “He is the only one I know who they’d all respect.”

Barr said, “Permission to speak, Captain.”

Efran turned to him, almost enraged. “Why are you even asking? Yes!”

Unperturbed, Barr said, “Commander Wendt, any man I know, including myself, would consider it a great honor to serve under you.”

Wendt hesitated, then said, “Efran, I’m—touched and gratified that you’re even asking. But there are times when a Commander *must see*—”

“No,” Efran said. “For anyone but you, yes. But you have so absorbed the knowledge and temperament required, all you need are the barest facts that any child nearby could give you—”

“And Brier Ridge?” Wendt asked, smiling. He and Efran had a longstanding disagreement over Wendt’s strategy in this battle, in which Captain Efran had earned a commendation for bravery.

Efran eased back in his chair. “You’re going to make me grovel. Then I will grovel. You saved my life with your strategy for Brier Ridge, so to the extent that that was a benefit to anyone, I will concede you were right.”

“Efran, none of us would be here if you hadn’t survived,” Estes said patiently.

“Then the strategy was good,” Efran said. “And you are the *only one* I could trust in the position”—which, for Efran, was the criterion that overrode all others.

“Then I suppose we’ll try it out,” Wendt said.

Efran exhaled in the greatest relief he had felt since the last time Minka had forgiven him. “Today is a banner day—we have the wolves patrolling the east Lands, the faeries in the fortress, and the finest Commander on the Southern Continent in charge of our army. Can we have the bells ring?”

As requested, the bells high above started ringing a victory march.

The fortress administrators put out a Lands-wide announcement as to the new Commander of the Abbey Lands Army. And the following day, when the response from the military and civilian populations bordered on ecstatic, Efran said, “They all know he’s the one man I won’t try to override.”

His administrators agreed, then Efran said, “I . . . never really allowed Lyte to be Commander, did I?”

DeWitt and Estes considered this, then DeWitt said, “From what I observed, he deferred to you without ever trying to draw a line.”

“Is that why he finally joined DePew?” Efran asked.

“I don’t know,” DeWitt admitted. “Is he still missing?”

Efran nodded.

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Chapter 22

Early on the second day of Wendt’s new position (April 2nd), he sent Krall to the workroom to advise the administrators of his new officer lineup: Barr and Gabriel would split the duties of Second in Command (as Gabriel was almost fully recuperated). Rigdon and Chee would be Captains of hilltop Regiments #1 and #2; Towner and Stites Captains of lower Regiments #3 and #4. The army had shed enough men in the failed insurrection so that only four regiments were needed instead of five.

Also, Melchior had requested to resign his captaincy due to his ongoing recuperation, but wanted to remain in

the army to serve Commander Wendt. Nyland and Wyeth would retain their titles and duties as fight instructors for all regiments, whose men would be required to attend training on the schedule set by the instructors. Finally, to avoid confusion, the lower barracks 1, 2, 3, and 4 would be renamed A, B, C, and D; Wendt would share an office with Captain Towner in Barracks A.

The fortress administrators thought all this an excellent plan, and sent Krall back to Commander Wendt with their approval. Efran noted, "We'll have to adjust pay rates for the new captains."

Moving on to the paperwork, Estes and DeWitt mutely agreed. Then Efran asked, "Did the new accountant—Ploense?—make it back up to his floor all right?"

The other two looked up with blank faces. So Efran whistled lightly. Suco stepped in, saluting. "Captain?"

"Yes, please check on the accountant Ploense on the third floor. We want to know that he made it back to work after the—disturbance. We need him to adjust Barr's pay to that of Second in Command, and that of Chee and Stites to Captain's," Efran said.

Suco, having heard the new appointments already, said, "Yes, Captain!" and waited to be given permission to run up a flight of stairs.

"You're dismissed," Efran said, smiling, and the new Polonti disappeared.

Glancing up, DeWitt observed, "All of the promotions are Polonti."

Efran nodded vaguely. "To even things up: Seconds and Captains are equally divided between Polonti and Southerners." He looked around in mild aggravation at not seeing Minka, then remembered that she was helping Ella settle back into her and Quennel's quarters today.

Shortly, Suco returned to salute. "Captain, the accountant Ploense has already made the pay rate changes for the new officers as of today."

"Excellent," Efran said, then asked, "Ah, did he lose much work the past week?" Suco paused, glancing away in confusion. DeWitt and Estes looked up as Efran elaborated, "In having to leave his quarters."

"He never left his quarters, Captain. He's been up there the whole time," Suco said.

Efran, DeWitt and Estes stared at each other momentarily, then Efran said, "Ah. Very good. Dismissed."

"Captain." Suco saluted again and correctly walked away without running.

After a moment of silence, Efran said, "I want the men to stop calling me 'Captain.'"

The other two studied him in astonishment. "Why?" DeWitt asked.

Efran shrugged, "It's—meaningless, now. It detracts from the other men who are genuine Captains here."

Seeing that this was somehow another injury from the insurrection, DeWitt carefully observed, "You require a title. 'Lord' is what's specified in your charter."

"Not that," Efran said instantly. "It's all right for outsiders to call me 'Lord' but not the men."

DeWitt looked at Estes, who said, “Efran, can you see men like Arne calling you anything other than ‘Captain’? Do you understand what you’d be asking of them to stop calling you that?” Efran looked stubborn, so Estes added, “We’ll ask the Commander. Will you abide by his opinion?”

“Yes,” Efran said defensively.

So Estes called in another sentry, Tomer, with the message for Commander Wendt: Captain Efran did not wish to continue to use the title “Captain.” What did the Commander recommend as his title?

The earnest young Polonti departed with the message and returned within minutes with the reply. Saluting, Tomer said, “Steward, the Commander says that Captain Efran’s title is ‘Captain.’”

“Thank you. Dismissed,” Estes nodded. Efran looked away in resignation.

Not much later, the administrators received another message from Wendt. Serrano arrived at the workroom, saluted, and said, “Captain, Commander Wendt requests your presence, and that of Lady Minka, in Barracks A.”

Blinking, Efran stood. “We’ll be right down,” he told Serrano, who saluted and departed with the message. DeWitt and Estes nodded at Efran as he went downstairs to find Minka. First, however, he asked for Kraken and Gaunter to be brought out to the courtyard for them.

He found Minka, Joshua and Nakam on the back grounds with the children. She was sitting on the bench under the walnut tree watching them all play. Unseen, Efran paused at the back door for a moment to observe them. In their rowdy games, they were taking care for the 15-month-old, Toby especially. He acted as goalie when the ball came sailing toward Joshua in his cart.

But the baby—almost a toddler, now—was not content to sit for much longer. He had climbed out of the cart to hold onto the side and bounce, occasionally letting go with one hand to test his legs. Efran also saw Stephanos standing watch over all the children.

Because the Abbey’s charter required that they care for abandoned children, Efran had made their supervision a priority. Whenever they were outside their own quarters or the classroom, there was a man standing over them. These men rotated frequently lest they get bored or distracted to the point of negligence. But knowing that their continued existence depended on their faithfulness in this duty, no one took it lightly.

Arne, on back door duty at this time, said, “I’m keeping an eye on the buggers, Captain.”

Efran turned to him—one of the men who used “Captain” in the fullest sense of the word. “Thank you, Arne. It’s a great comfort to me and the Lady that you do. Commander Wendt has asked us to come down for a word with him, so I’m just going to leave Joshua out here until you see that he needs to come in.”

“Yes, Captain,” Arne said complacently, which didn’t hide at all his gratification.

Having spotted Efran, Minka was grinning as he approached her bench. “He’s about to walk. You see?” she said.

“Yes.” He extended his hand to lift her. “Wendt wants us to come down—”

“He needs tea!” she squealed in excitement.

He laughed, “No, now, they have a perfectly competent kitchen crew down there to see to that.” He paused to lean down and stroke Joshua’s black head. The baby waved at him, babbling something about the game in progress.

Toby ran over, as well. “Efran! Watch, he’s about to let go.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it when we get back, Toby. Commander Wendt wants a word with me and Minka,” Efran said, ruffling his hair fondly.

“Are you in trouble?” Toby asked suspiciously.

“Probably,” Efran laughed. “But Minka will smooth things over.”

Toby nodded, so Efran took Minka around the west grounds to the gates. They passed the archers and sparring groups at practice, as well as Ella and Tess at work with the horses. Minka glimpsed the white doe browsing in Pia’s woods outside the fence, then looked up at the healthy, spreading faerie tree, whose resident faeries greeted them with windblown kisses.

Holding Efran’s arm, she sighed, “Oh, it’s just miraculous. With all the attacks—from the armies, the Graetrix, the Goulven, the snobbles, the tsunami, and now the insurrection—the fortress stands. We live here, and work here, and the children are not afraid.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “They are the reason we survive.” *And as long as we are faithful to our charter, we will continue*, he thought.

Their horses were being brought out when he and she arrived at the front courtyard. Efran glanced at the stablehand, then looked at him again, closer. The man quickly turned to walk off, but Efran recognized him as the one who had given him a wild horse to ride down to quell a disturbance—and this when Efran was still partially paralyzed, learning to ride again.

As Efran watched him practically run back to the stables, Squirt came around with Minka’s letter pouch. “Oh, you don’t need it today, Lady Minka?” he asked.

“No, but thank you for remembering, Squirt,” she said warmly.

Efran asked darkly, “Who was that, who brought our horses?”

Squirt laughed, “Yeah, he’s the one, Cap’n, but don’t worry over him none. He does just what I say.”

Seeing blackmail in the boy’s knowing smile, Efran laughed, “Good for you, Squirt.”

“Thankee, Cap’n,” he acknowledged.

While Efran and Minka walked their horses down the switchback, she asked, “So, what does dear Commander Wendt want to talk to us about?”

“Toby thinks I’m in trouble, which is likely,” he said.

“What a pessimist you are!” she scolded.

“You forget I served under him,” he smiled. “You’d be appalled to hear the beatdowns he gave me.”

“All in love,” she said.

He winced. “I know.”

They handed their horses to a sentry at the door of Barracks A, then entered to see Wendt sitting at one desk with Barr standing by. Captain Towner stood behind another desk over duty sheets. All three looked up as Efran saluted. “Captain Efran reporting as summoned with Lady Minka, Commander.” Minka stared at her husband in admiration. She didn’t know he could be so formal and correct.

“At ease, Captain,” Wendt said with a mostly straight face. “Hello, Minka.”

“Oh, Commander, I am so happy to see you where you belong,” she said. Unrestrained by formalities, she came around the desk to kiss his cheek. Towner watched, smiling. Barr watched with less expression. Efran just watched.

“Thank you, Minka. As long as you’re pleased, I’ll consider the experiment a success,” Wendt said.

“Don’t be silly; it was meant to be,” she insisted. Everyone hearing silently agreed, and Minka returned to her place beside Efran.

Wendt said, “Time will tell. Well, Efran, I thought I’d better update you.” He paused in some reluctance, and Efran tensed. “Many of the Abbey men who defected to DePew are now—permanently disabled. Coghill and Wallace are conferring over what to do. They don’t know, frankly, how many of them can be saved.” This was due to the Destroyer’s visit, of course.

“I understand,” Efran said, his voice cracking. Wendt did not give him a list of names, and Efran did not want to know who they were.

Wendt continued, “So I’m leaving that entirely to the doctors’ discretion. However, there is one man I think you should talk to.” Efran waited, and Wendt said, “Neale. He’s in a holding cell in Barracks C; paralyzed from the waist down.”

Caught off guard, Efran asked in a hard voice, “What—do you think I can do for him?”

“I don’t know. But I’m requesting that you talk to him. It’s not an order,” Wendt said.

Efran struggled with this, feeling Minka at his side. Then he saluted. “Yes, Commander.”

“You’re dismissed. Thank you for coming, Minka,” Wendt said.

“You’re welcome, dear Commander,” she said softly. Efran almost groaned; she just had to go and make it impossible for him to refuse Wendt’s request.

Efran escorted her out of the barracks with a hand at her back, then they walked the pathways to Barracks C. The door sentry, Pleyel, saluted. “Captain. Lady Minka.”

She smiled at him, but Efran said, “Pleyel, the Commander wants me to talk to Neale.”

“Yes, sir. This way, please,” Pleyel said. He took them around to a door at the back of the barracks where another man, Willis, stood guard. He unlocked this door to lead Efran and Minka along a row of cells to one at the far end. There, they looked through iron bars at Neale, sitting in a rolling chair.

The cell was small but decent, with a cot and pillow, a table, washbasin and other amenities. Willis brought over two chairs to place them outside the bars opposite Neale, then saluted and stood aside. Efran nodded at him, seated Minka, then dropped into the chair beside her to look at Neale.

He was hardly recognizable from the insurrection of five days ago. He was gaunt, unshaven, with shoulders drooped and dark circles under his eyes. He did not look up at them, or move. Knowing that Minka was dropping tears, Efran forced himself to speak to the man who had wounded him more deeply than anyone else that day—than anyone ever. “How are you, Neale?”

It didn’t appear that he would answer at first, but then he whispered, “In hell.”

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Chapter 23

Efran glanced aside. “What happened?” he asked Neale. “Why—” *did you do it?*

After a struggle, Neale raised bloodshot eyes to the wall behind them. “I don’t know,” he finally whispered. “It was like—I was blindfolded and led by the hand. Lyte complained that he had no real authority; Melchior told him he had no spine. So it became—us against them. Towner and Rigdon, in the upper barracks, had no idea of the—problem; Barr, down here, sided with Melchior. But the men picked up on it, and broke apart: Eurussian against Polonti.”

He was silent for a little while, as was Efran, having heard nothing he didn’t already know or suspect. Then Neale moaned, “I was in a special bind, married to a Polonti woman. Tisi didn’t love me, particularly; she just wanted to get out of that camp, and once we got here, she did whatever she liked. But she was my wife, so I fit nowhere, exactly. Both camps looked at me suspect—who was I with?”

He straightened, looking intently at the wall. “I was at the point of working my way out of it; I had a plan to get Lyte talking to the Steward and the Administrator about—about—”

“Me,” Efran said quietly.

As if Efran had affirmed the unutterable, Neale went on, “And then DePew came into it. And he talked to Lyte about a new start under a new system, Eurussian style. I didn’t know until then that DePew had come from Euruss, and had many friends there. I didn’t know then that they offered him a great deal of money to take you out. And he convinced Lyte that it was the only thing to do.”

Efran continued to listen only because Minka was sitting here. None of this was surprising or exculpatory.

A spark of light came into Neale’s eyes as he said, “There was a point, at the very beginning, I had the chance—the, the opportunity to say, ‘No, this is wrong. I won’t do it.’ But I didn’t act; I chose to wait to see what happened. From then on, I was so—entangled that my own men would have cut my throat had I tried to stop it.”

Neale's eyes searched the wall as he recalled, "And there were we, Lyte watching while the men took out their hatred on you. And while I watched my own men beat my Captain, and *did nothing to stop it*, I hated myself more than you could possibly hate me now," Neale uttered in fury, teeth bared. Efran looked up at him, then.

Neale turned his head toward Minka without daring to look at her. "So when Lady Minka ran over with the courage I didn't have, I let her alone. I watched her loose your hands, and didn't stop her. I let her lift you, and walk with you, and take my place as the one who stood up for you. Because you see—I *had no choice*. What she did was—ordained, and I was powerless to stop her. I saw that, and it was the beginning of my—waking to the fact that I was sliding into hell."

Minka was very still as the tears ran down her face. Efran just listened.

"I knew at that moment you would overcome, and beat DePew, and my chance to be part of your—your—vindication had passed," Neale said, his eyes fixed on Efran's midsection now. "Your escape from the gallows was set from the beginning. The only question for me was whether I had the integrity to take part in it. I *didn't*," he spat. "And now my life has been prolonged so that I can spend the rest of my useless days in useless regret, far too late." Neale smiled bitterly.

Efran lowered his head in the ensuing silence, which continued for several minutes. "As if you were the only one who ever bungled," he finally muttered. Straightening with a sigh, he slapped his hands to his knees and looked over to Willis as though ready to leave. Minka, silent, sat unmoving. Efran said, "Open his cage, please."

Minka's eyes went quickly to Efran as Willis came over with the keys. Neale had resumed the facial expression of the dead. Efran stood, extending a hand to Minka. She allowed him to lift her, then watched Willis open the cell door. Efran went in to take the handles of the rolling chair.

Wheeling Neale out, he told Willis (and possibly Minka), "I'm taking him to the Commander."

"Yes, Captain." Willis saluted.

With Minka walking beside him, Efran rolled the chair back up the path toward Barracks A. Every man he passed paused to watch. Coming to the front of the barracks, he stopped at the steps. Nodding to Minka, he asked, "Open the door, please."

She hurried up the steps to do that, then stepped aside. Wendt, Barr, and Towner with his scribe Viglian looked up. Barr bent to the Commander's ear to tell him what was happening.

Efran picked up the chair with Neale in it to lift it past the steps and set it inside the barracks office. He rolled it forward to Wendt's desk and saluted. But his eyes went to the side window as he said, "Captain Efran reporting with Neale, Commander. I have interviewed him as requested, and, feel that he is capable of ongoing service. Obviously, he requires rehabilitation due to his injuries, and an attendant, but—I'm sure you can arrange all that."

In the dense silence around him, he looked back with watering eyes at the Commander. "You once told an officer who was about to sentence me to hard labor, 'Don't kill your own wounded.' So, I am requesting that—we not kill our own wounded. Sir."

Efran shut his mouth and looked back at the window, away from Minka's adoring eyes. Neale turned his head toward the man behind his chair. Wendt said, "Request granted, Captain Efran. Dismissed."

Efran saluted. “Thank you, sir.” Extending his arm toward Minka, still not meeting her eyes, he turned toward the door. Then he paused. “You’ll need a—ramp at these steps, Commander.”

“Thank you, Captain Efran; we’ll take care of that,” Wendt said dryly, as though humoring a fussy faerie.

“Yes, sir,” Efran said, swaying slightly.

He and Minka made it down the steps so that she could stretch up to throw her arms around his neck and squeeze hard. “You are so wonderful,” she breathed.

He snorted. “For falling into a trap? Which is why he asked you to come.”

“That’s why you made him Commander,” she murmured, tucking her hand under the collar of his work shirt. He gurgled deep in his throat, and she demanded, “What did you do to get hard labor?”

A passing worker glanced at them, so Efran led her to their horses. Checking to see that no one was close by, he murmured, “I killed a fellow soldier, and it wasn’t entirely accidental.”

“Why?” she breathed, stopping beside Gaunter.

Kraken turned his head, replying, *Because he kept horses waiting without water.* She looked at him, startled, as though hearing.

Efran took Kraken’s reins to lead him to the water trough, and she followed with Gaunter. As the horses drank, Efran grimaced, “I’ll tell you sometime. I can’t right now.”

“All right,” she said.

Still in turmoil, he stood beside Kraken. “I need—let’s go see Ryal.”

“All right,” she said.

Since the notary’s shop was not far, they just walked the horses, glancing aside at the life-sized golden statue of DePew in the middle of the street, pointing up to the sky. Seeing a stone with a mounted inscription in front of the statue, Efran took Kraken over to have a look, so Minka followed with Gaunter.

The bronze inscription read, “Grieving the Loss of our Generous and Far-sighted Founder of the DePew Construction Company, his Employees and Friends dedicate this Statue to his Memory. May He Ever Point Us to the Heights.”

Efran and Minka meditated on that a moment, then walked around to the back (south) side of the statue to look at a painted wooden notice about the same size as the bronze plate, but with much smaller lettering: “DO NOT climb, hang on, lean on, or attach articles of any kind on this Work of Art. DO NOT smear with mud, food, alcohol, or any substance whatsoever. DO NOT attempt to push or pull the Work over as injury may result. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO SCRAPE OFF THE GOLD AS VANDALS WILL BE PROSECUTED. Sincerely, The DePew Construction Company.”

Quietly laughing, the two of them led their horses away to tie them at the post next to the notary’s steps. Minka whispered, “Do his employees and friends know what happened to him?”

Efran shrugged in ignorance, then asked, “Would it make any difference?”

“I suppose not,” she murmured, vaguely troubled.

They entered the notary shop, and Efran paused to look up at the little door bell’s tinkling. “If I’m found worthy to enter heaven, they’d better have a little bell to greet me.”

“What?” she laughed.

But Ryal and Giardi had come to the counter from the back room. While Giardi smiled warmly at them, Ryal said, “Hello, Minka.” Scrutinizing her husband, he asked in concern, “How are you, Efran?” The bruises on his face were mostly faded, the stitched cut scabbed over, and his swollen lip back to normal cushiness.

Sighing, Efran laid a hand on the counter, then put his head down on his arms. Giardi made a little sympathetic sound, then Ryal said, “Come to the back.” Efran lifted up to follow them to the back room, Minka holding his arm.

They sat around the small table where Efran had told Ryal the circumstances of his 16-year-old daughter’s conception. Now, Efran traced the fingernail scratches in the tabletop he had made in the stress of relating that hidden bit of personal history. He inhaled, then said, “We just came from talking with Neale—that is, listening to him talk about how he—fell into DePew’s machinery, and then couldn’t get out again.” He looked at Minka, and she raised her deep blue eyes to him.

Efran continued, “I took him to the Commander and told him he should be put back to work. Which—does that count as forgiveness? I don’t know. Because, I don’t feel any different. And, all of a sudden, I don’t know which of the men, the Southerners, I can trust. I trust you, and Giardini, and Wendt . . . DeWitt, for sure. Arne. Connor. Gabriel. But if I name too many more, I’ll be on thin ice, because I once trusted Neale and Lyte like I trust you. And I’m still . . . bleeding inside.”

Minka closed her eyes, leaning in to him, and he put his arm around her. “Oh! Don’t get worked up that I didn’t mention you,” he said to her, and she expelled a tiny laugh. “You’re in a class by yourself: Untouchable. Incorruptible. Unquestionable”—despite the fact that he couldn’t bear to see her in makeup and had to know where she was at all times.

“But with the men, ever since the West Bank, when they followed me straight into battle without hesitation, I felt—secure in their loyalty, until five days ago. Now I don’t know if I could ever lead them in battle again. Wendt is right about that,” he interrupted himself. “He can’t lead the men into battle. That would have to be me. But now, I don’t know if I can.”

He straightened abruptly. “You see—the Captain, or the Commander, whoever is leading the charge, has to have perfect confidence in the men at his back, or they will smell his hesitation, and it’s fatal. I’ve seen it happen: a fighting unit will just fall apart if the head can’t count on the body. It just dies. Now I don’t know if I trust the body, or if they trust me.”

He fell silent, stroking the fingernail scratches as if to wipe them out. Ryal murmured, “Yes, I’ve been there. I was a fighting soldier for about thirty years, from the time I was eighteen until almost fifty. And I bet you didn’t know that I retired as Captain of the Red Regiment.”

Efran’s eyes shot up and Minka cried, “Ryal! Really? Oh, that’s just perfect.”

“It’s true,” Ryal said, smiling. Looking to Giardi, he said, “I think I still have my insigne somewhere. Will you see—?” She rose and left the table. Efran’s eyes followed her until she returned a few minutes later to hand him a small wooden box.

Minka leaned over as Efran opened it. She drew a breath as he lifted out the worn, slightly soiled emblem. Efran half-gasped, “It’s the same. They never redesigned it—they were always talking about a new insigne, but never got it done.” He was silently weeping.

“It gets worse,” Ryal said. “They were talking about it in my day, because this design was a mix-up—it’s one that had been rejected that somehow got made instead of the approved design.”

They all laughed as Efran said, “So the mistake lasted for—how long?”

Ryal looked off, calculating, then said, “Sixty-one years. And ended up as the final insigne of the Red Regiment of the Army of Westford.”

They were silent a while, then Minka said, “Something you should hear, Ryal—you and Giardini. Neale said that when they were hauling Efran off to be hanged, and I ran up to go along with him, that Neale allowed it, that he allowed me to help him, because he realized even then that Efran was destined to prevail, and he—Neale—couldn’t alter that.”

She looked at Efran. “I am little, but, I provided what little help you needed. So the outcome of a battle doesn’t depend on strength, or loyalty, or numbers, but on what God has ordained to happen. That’s why you go to the keep and pray in every crisis, before every battle, so you will have the help that counts.”

He studied her. “So, I can accept what the men offer, and ride out on the strength of the unseen.”

“As you have since the beginning, when you rode out to meet Loizeaux’s thousands all by yourself,” she laughed.

“True,” Efran breathed, remembering. “True.”

He and Minka left when customers came in requiring the notary’s attention. As Efran untied their horses, he looked across the street to see Madgwick turn off Main onto a side street, carrying a case of ale. “No, no, we can’t have that,” he said, leading Kraken across the street toward her, unaware that he was illegally crossing outside the yellow crosswalks. Minka followed him criminally as well.

Madgwick turned when Efran drew up to her, taking the case under one arm. He had dropped Kraken’s reins, who was docilely walking alongside. “Hello, Madgwick. Where are we going with this?”

She laughed, looking back as Minka approached, leading Gaunter. Madgwick said, “Hello, Efran. Minka. Melchior’s recuperating at home, and I wanted him to have a little assistance.”

“That’s good. We need to see him as well,” Efran said. The main side streets had sidewalks, but this one did not, so they all just walked side by side, horses and people.

“He and Geneve will be glad to see you,” Madgwick said amiably. Efran grunted skeptically.

They walked silently for a few minutes, then Efran broached, “When the Destroyer came . . . it stopped over you.

What—what did it do?”

“It reminded me of the mercy of God,” she said.

Minka looked over quickly; Efran’s eyes widened. “How?”

Madgwick paused, then said, “The Destroyer looks evil because we don’t see all that God does out of our realm, or our time; we don’t see what He does beyond death. Our minds are not broad enough to comprehend what He accomplished in laying Himself down for us. All we can understand is, because He died for the love of us, we have to love each other. And because He lives, we live as well.”

“Neale,” Efran groaned, tearing up again.

Madgwick added, “Forgiveness is Godlike because only God can enable it.”

Efran was silent the rest of the way to Melchior and Geneve’s house.

At Madgwick’s knock, Geneve opened the door. “Madgwick! Thank you for—Efran? Oh, hello, Minka! What?—oh, here. Come in. Efran, just put that on the table, please.”

“How is he, Geneve?” Madgwick asked.

“Resting all right, thank you. It’s been hard for him to get comfortable with the broken ribs, but—” She broke off to watch Efran walk back to the bedroom.

Melchior was sitting up in bed, looking bored. They regarded each other’s healing faces, then Efran said, “You have to come back on as Captain—Wendt’s your new Commander.”

“I heard, good move,” Melchior admitted, wincing as he stretched. “But, the paperwork is a killer.”

“That’s what you have a scribe for,” Efran said, glancing around. He picked up a rose-scented candle to sniff it.

“Eh, scribes ask so many questions, I might as well do it myself,” Melchior grouched.

“I talked to Neale,” Efran said. Melchior waited, and Efran added, “He was pretty torn up about it all.”

“Eurusians are weaselly,” Melchior said in skeptical distaste.

Heartsick, Efran exhaled, “He was one of mine, from Westford.” Melchior shrugged, unconvinced. Studying him, Efran said, “You were one of Crowe’s men.” Melchior nodded, and Efran said, “Yet, you came down to us without hesitation after finding out how he deceived you and used you.”

“Yes,” Melchior said, easing back on the pillow. “It’s eye-opening, to hit reality face first. When all of Master Crowe’s illusions fell away, I began to see the hardness of your men, and I . . . liked that. Some, like Neale, hadn’t been thoroughly crushed yet, to be hard. I bet he is now.”

“Can I ever trust him again?” Efran asked quietly.

Almost unwillingly, Melchior allowed, “If he recovers. When you put him back on duty, he’ll die for you.”

“That’s what I wanted to know,” Efran sighed.

Minka came in, then. “Oh, Melchior! I’m so glad to see you healing. Where’s that beautiful smile?” Geneve and Madgwick leaned in the doorway to look.

He sat up, turning toward Minka to spread his lips wide over all his teeth. Minka and Geneve collapsed in laughter; Madgwick smiled. Efran observed, “Not bad, but—you’ve got to turn up the corner of your mouth there, a little.”

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on April 2nd of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

NOTES:

“[Metal plate](#) implanted into head of Peruvian warrior 2,000 years ago is thought to be the world's first skull surgery and it was successful.”

As noted in *Lord Efran and the Provision for a Wronged Husband*, the acoustics of the Abbey hill are due to the hill’s [plentiful limestone](#) with which the switchback was constructed:

“Mystery of Greek Amphitheater’s Amazing Sound Finally Solved

“Cut the chatter! The ancient mystery surrounding the great acoustics of the theater at Epidaurus in Greece has been solved.

“The theater, dating to the 4th century B.C. and arranged in 55 semi-circular rows, remains the great masterwork of Polykleitos the Younger. Audiences of up to an estimated 14,000 have long been able to hear actors and musicians—unamplified—from even the back row of the architectural masterpiece. . . .

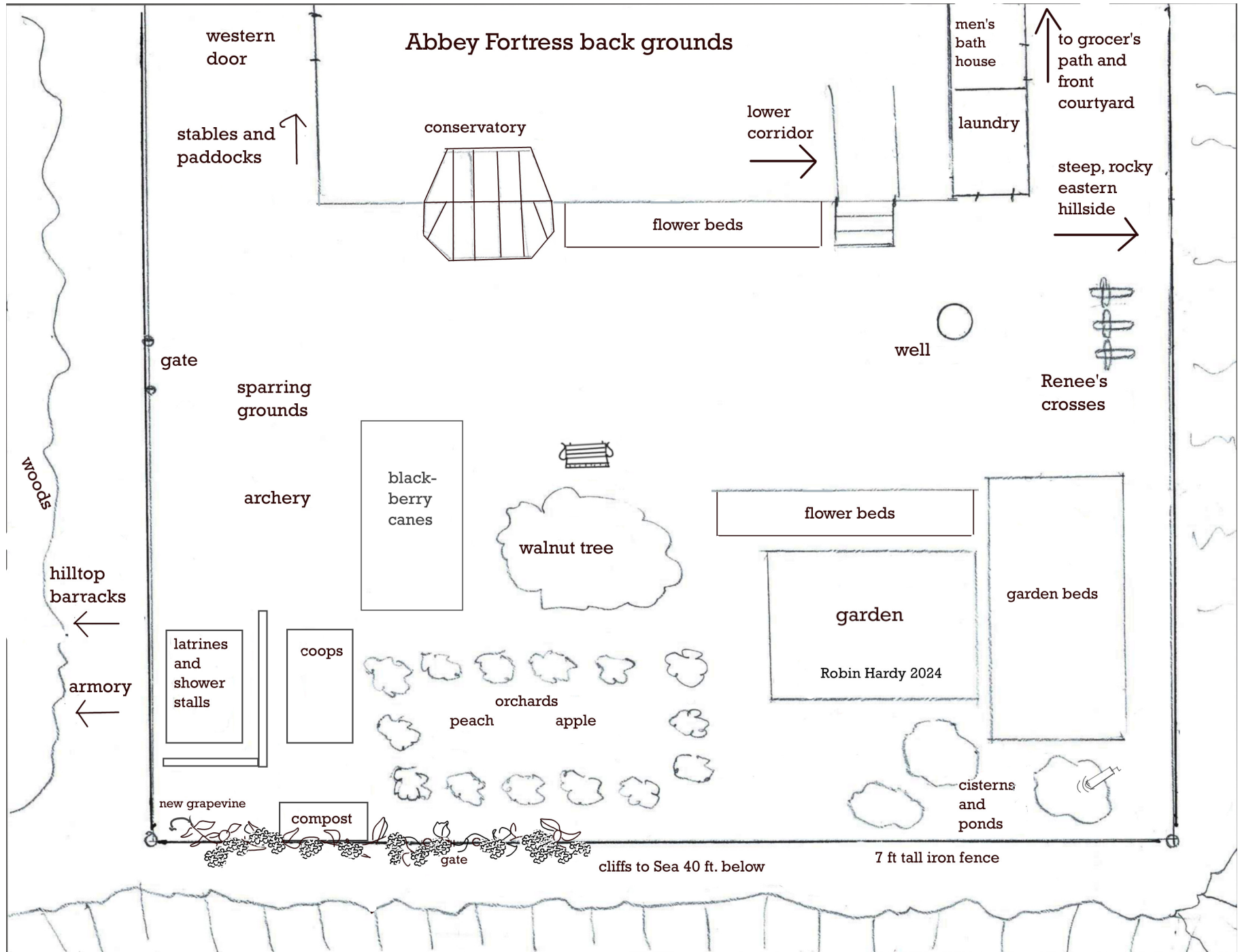
“[R]esearchers at the Georgia Institute of Technology have discovered that the limestone material of the seats provide a filtering effect, suppressing low frequencies of voices, thus minimizing background crowd noise. Further, the rows of limestone seats reflect high-frequencies back towards the audience, enhancing the effect.”

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Insurrection* (Book 18)

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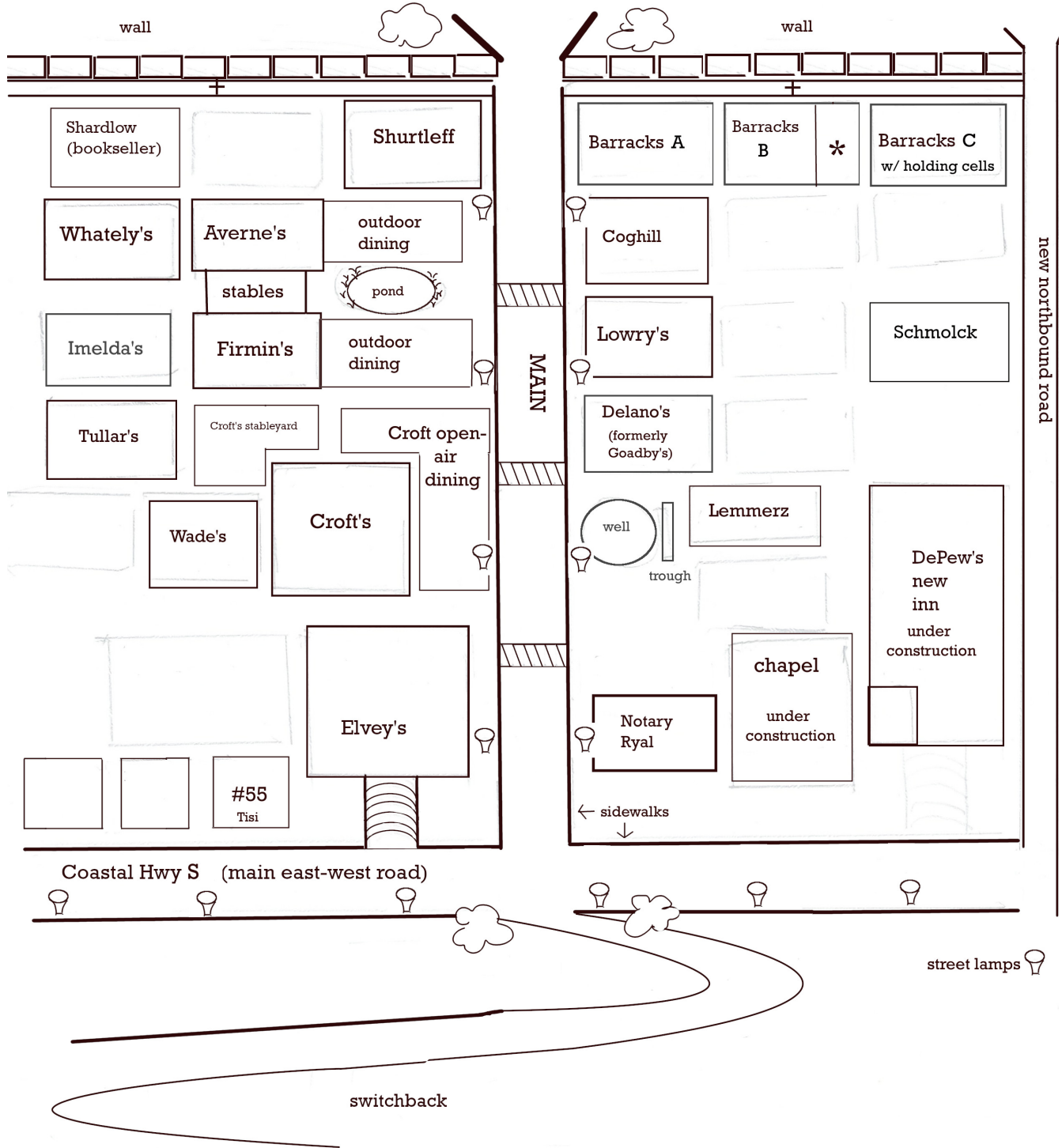
Aaro—AIR oh	Jehan—JAY han
Adele—ah DELL	Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
<i>aike</i> —AY kay (shooting intuitively)	Kele—kay lay
<i>aina</i> —AY nah	Kelsey—KELL see
Alberon—AL ber on	<i>koa</i> —KOH ah (fight to die with honor)
Allyr—AL er	Koschat—KOS chat
amnesiac—am NEE zhee ak	Kraken—KRAY ken
Arenado—air en AH doh	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
Arne—arn	Livy—LI vee (<i>i</i> as in <i>lift</i>)
Averne—ah VURN	Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
Barthelemon—BAR thuh luh mon	Marguerite—mar ger EET
Beischel—BESH ull	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Bennard—beh NARD	Meineke—MINE eh kee
Bidelspach—BID el spach	Melchior—MEL key or
Bowring—BOWE ring	melee—MAY lay
Canis—CANE iss	meritorious—meh reh TAW ree uhs
Challinor—CHAL en or	Minka—MINK ah
Clonmel—KLON mell	Nares—NAIR es
Conte—cahnt	Nephilim—neh FILL em
Cordelia—cor DEEL yah	Onfroi—ON froy
crèche—kresh	Pamukkale—pah MOO kayl
Cyneheard—SIGN herd	Peloponnesian—pell uh puh NEE zhuhn
Cyr—sear	Pia—PEE ah
Delano—deh LAN oh	Pieta—pie ATE ah
des Collines—day CALL en ez	Pindar—PIN dhur
Doane—rhymes with <i>own</i>	Pleyel—PLAY el
Dobell—DOH bull	Ploense—plonse
Efran—EFF run	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Eledith—ELL eh dith	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Elvey—ELL vee	Routh—roth (rhymes with <i>moth</i>)
Estes—ESS tis	Serrano—suh RAHN oh
Eurus—YOUR us	Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	Stites—stights
Eviron—ee VIRE un	Suco—SUE coh
Felice—feh LEESE	Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Folliott—FOH lee uht	Surchataine—sur cha TANE
garderobe—GAR de robe	Symphorien—sim FOR ee in
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)	Tera—TEE rah
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)	Teschner—TESH nur
Goss—gahs	Tiras—TEER us
Goulven—GOHL vin (hard g)	Tisi—TEE see
Graeme—GRAY em	Tomer—TOH mur
Graetrix—GRAY trix	tsunami—soo NAH me
Greves—greevs	Venegas—VEN eh gus
helleborine—HEL eh bohr een	Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
hotelier—hoh TEL yur	Verrin—VAIR en
Ianna—ee AN ah	Viglian—VIG lee en
Ino—EE no	Whately—WOT lee
insigne—en SIN yeh	Wystan—WIS tan
Jasque—JAS kee	



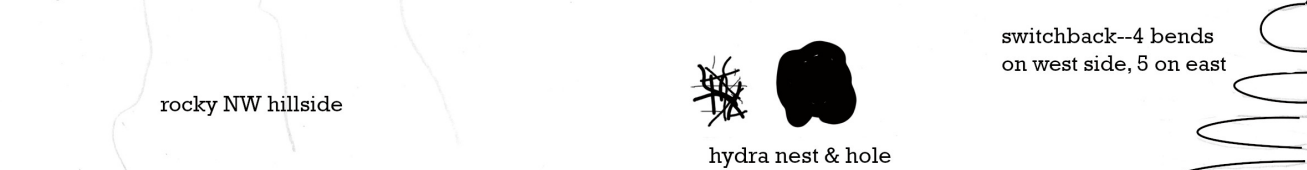
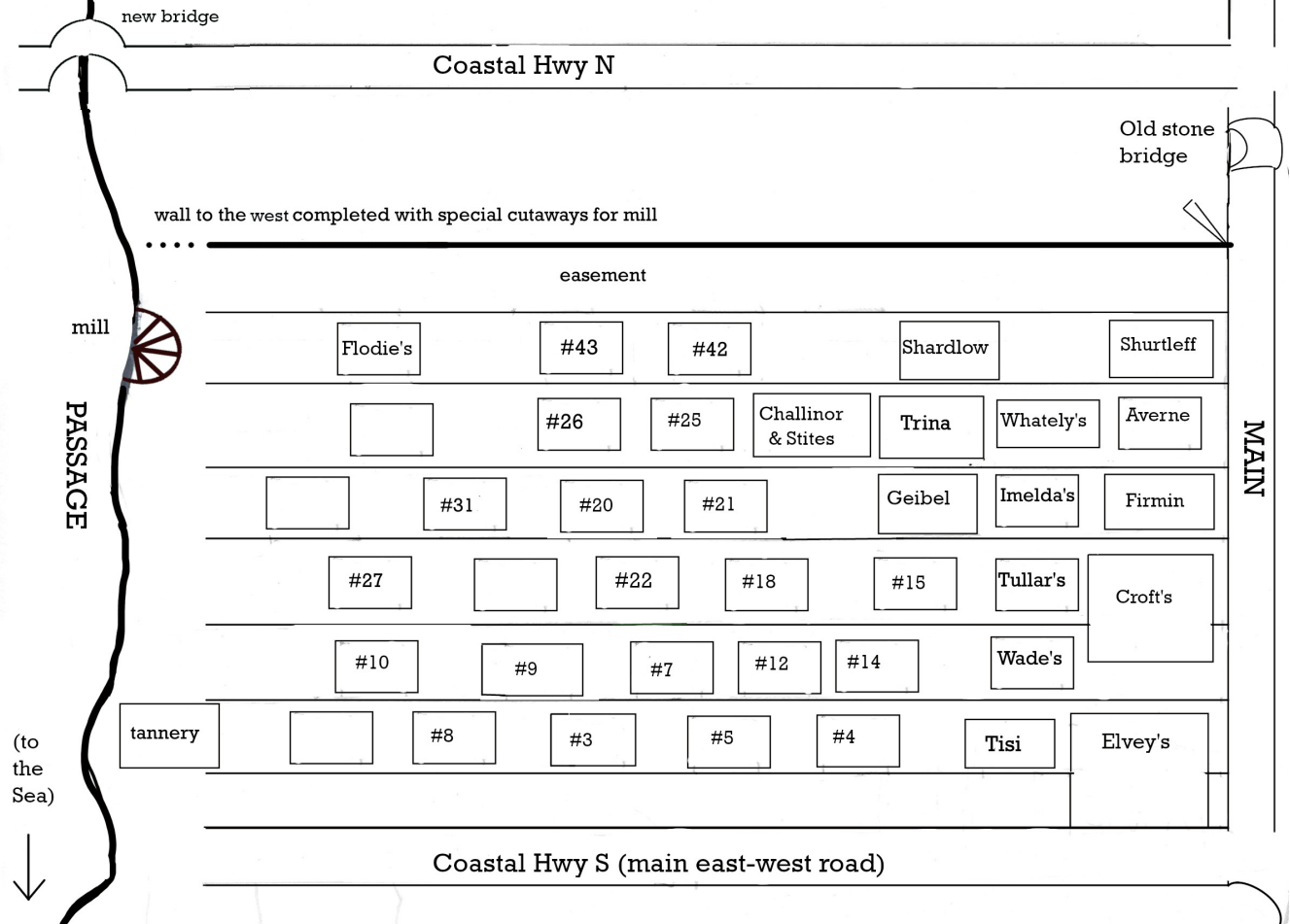
Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements



Abbey Lands Western Section



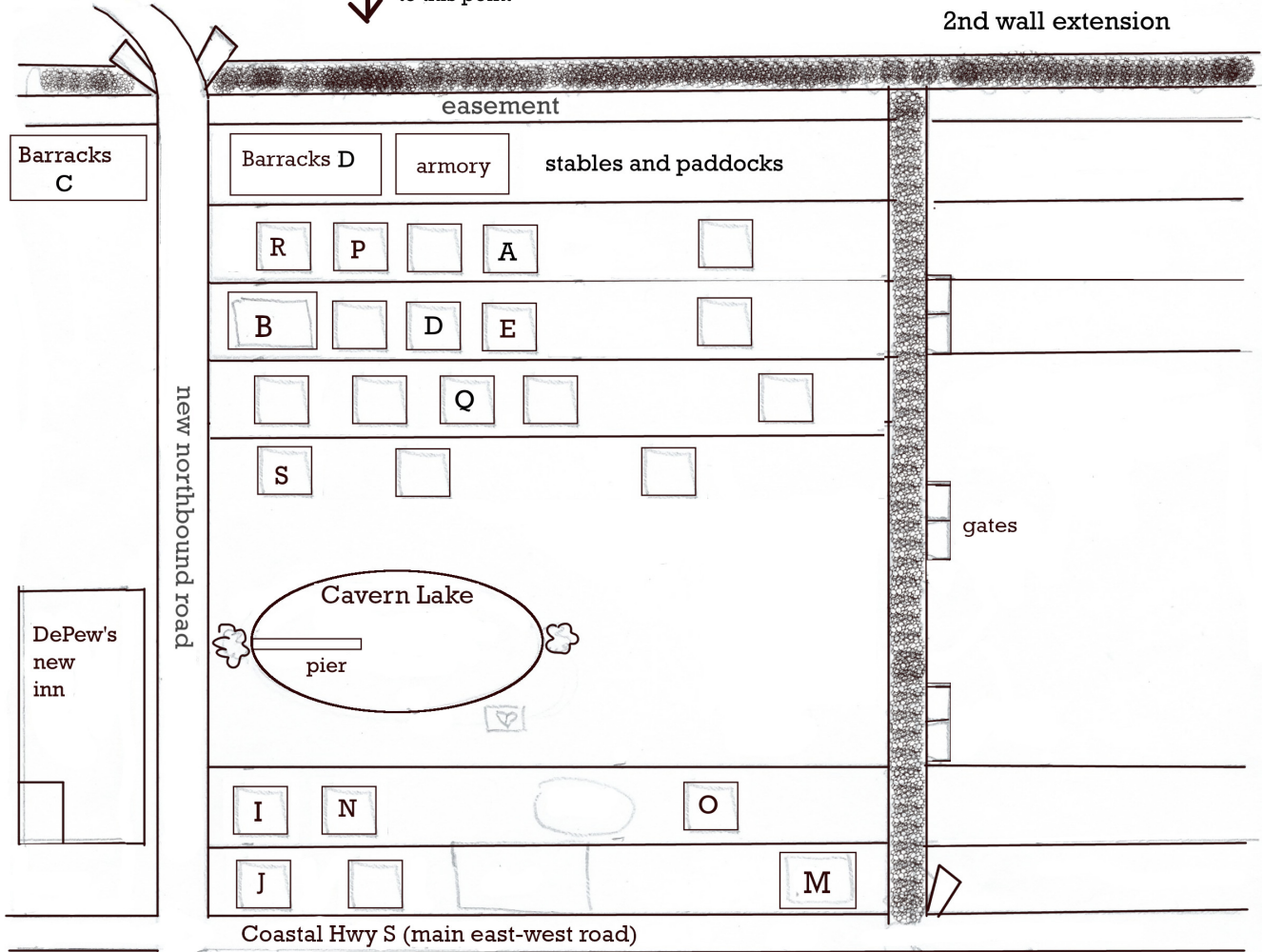
KEY

- 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 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
- 43 - Dallarosa & Enon

road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point



DePew's new inn

new northbound road

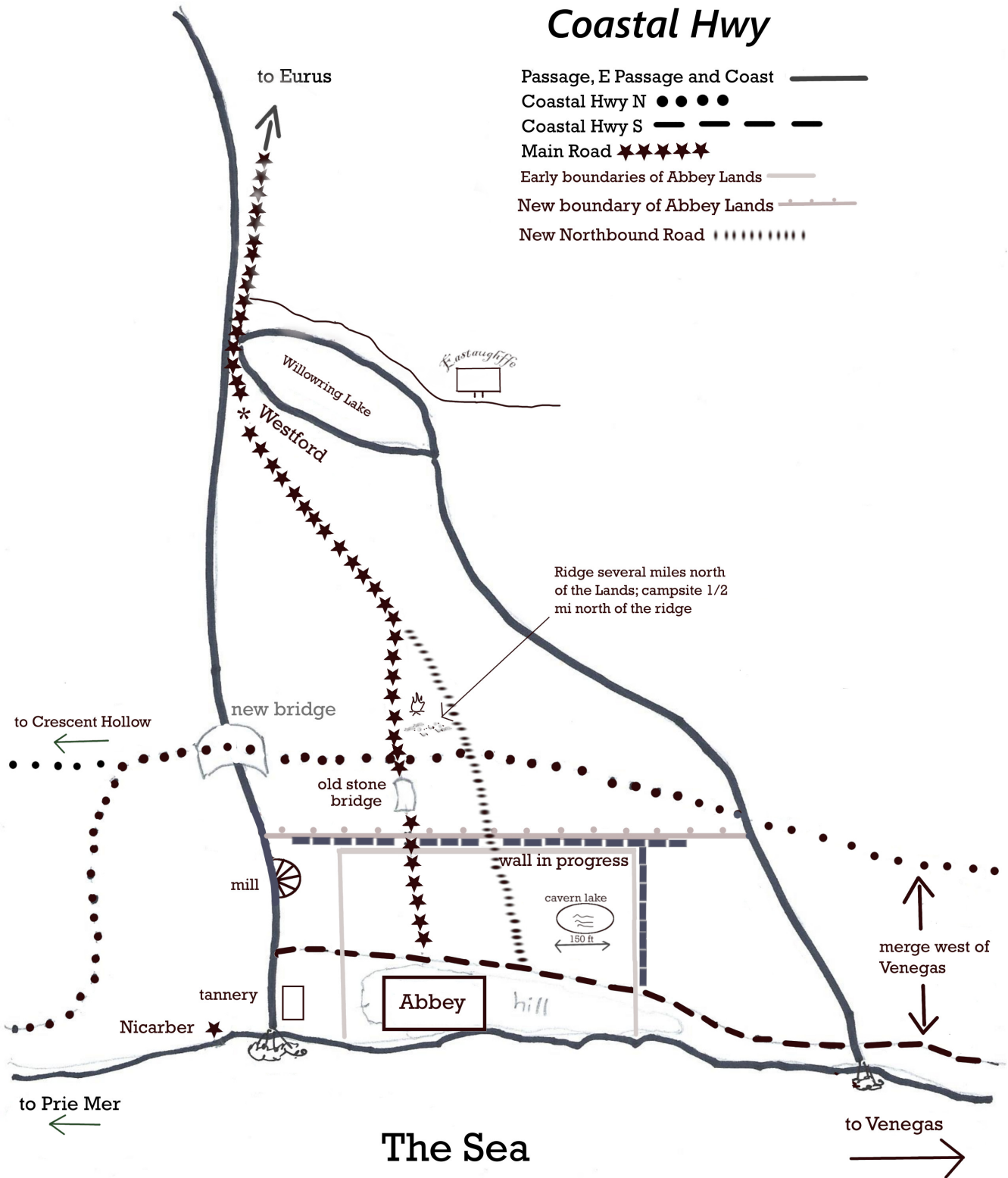
Coastal Hwy S (main east-west road)

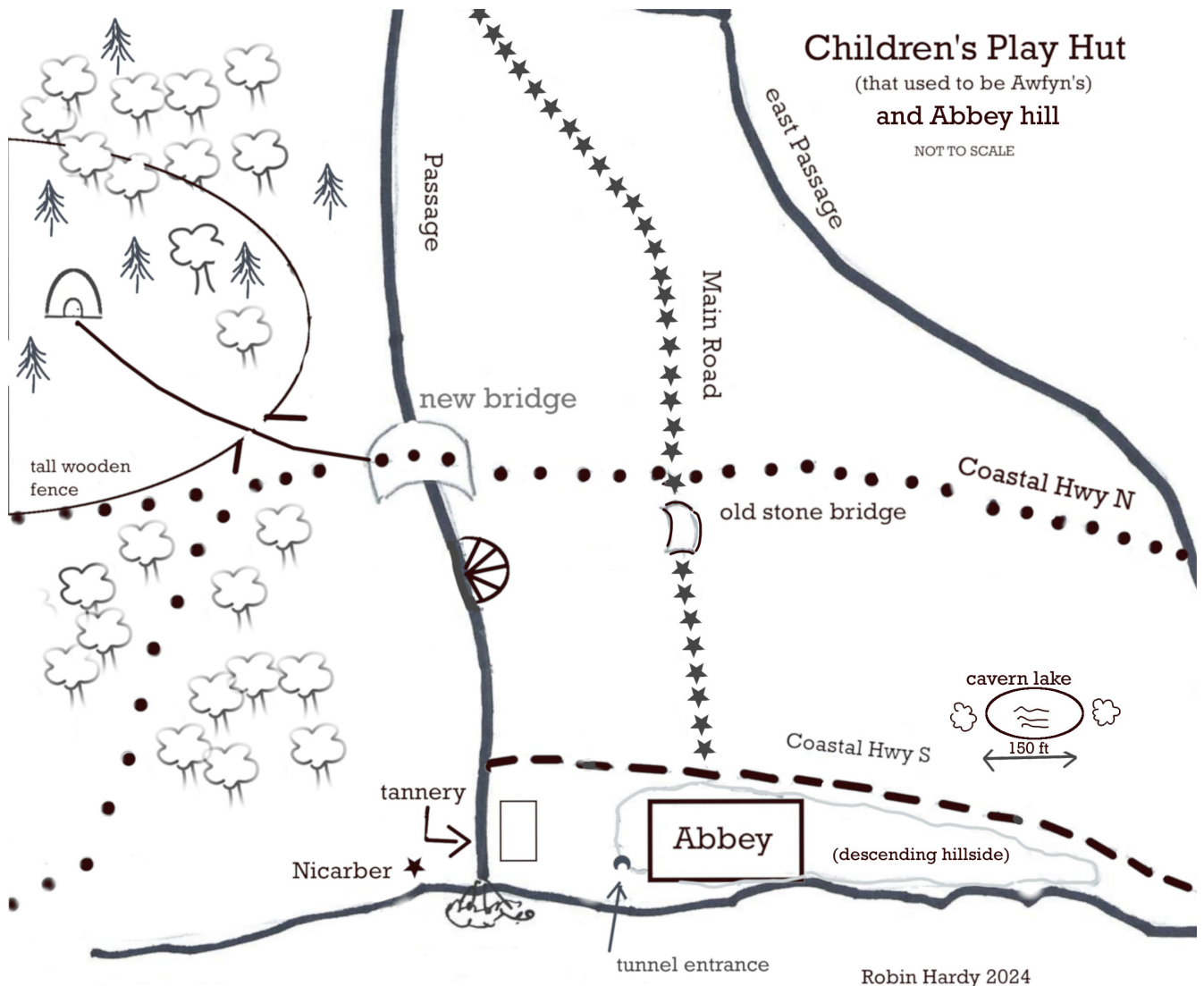
- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring's House
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office

Robin Hardy 2024

Coastal Hwy

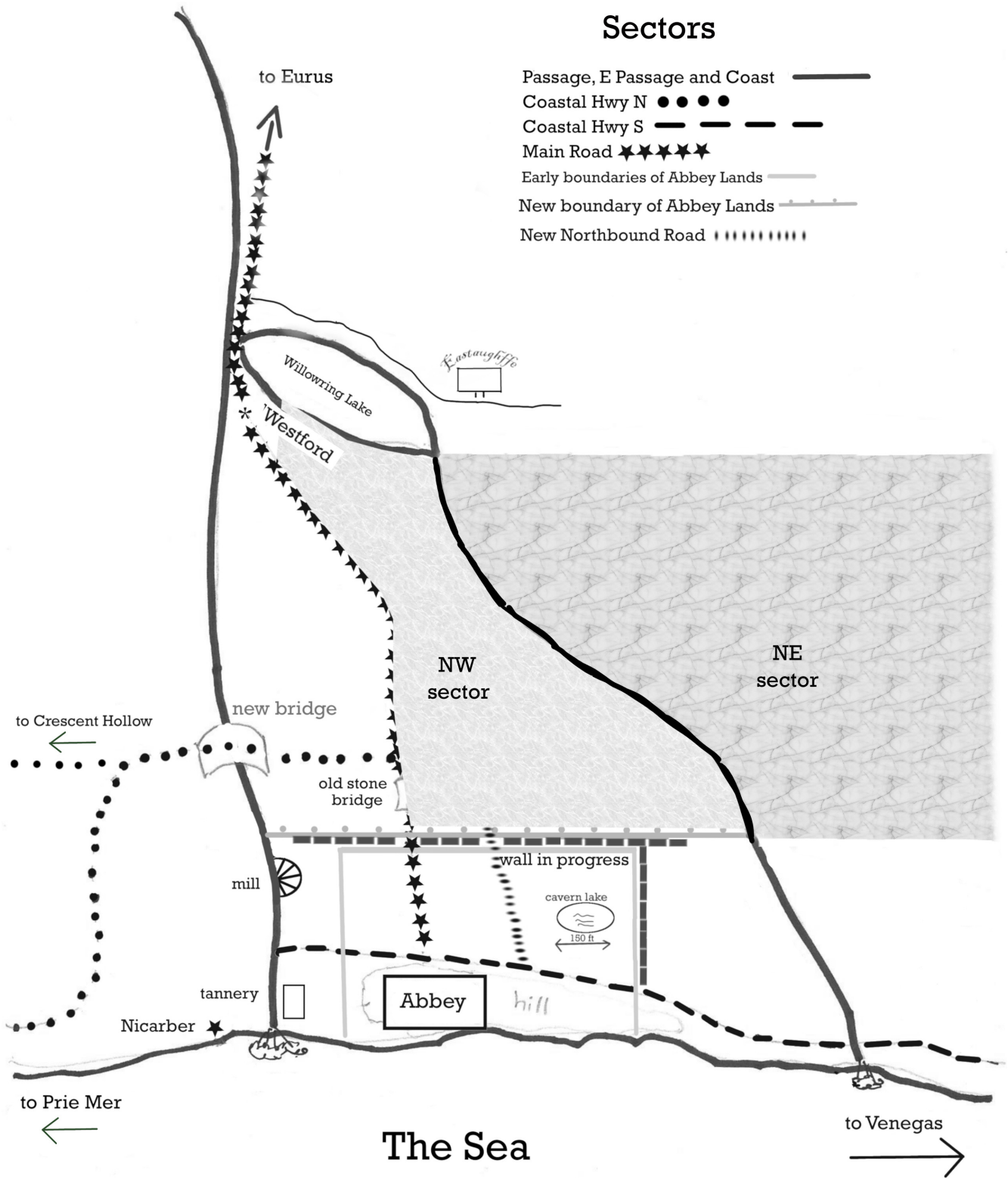
- Passage, E Passage and Coast —————
- Coastal Hwy N ●●●●
- Coastal Hwy S - - - - -
- Main Road ★★★★★★
- Early boundaries of Abbey Lands ————
- New boundary of Abbey Lands ————
- New Northbound Road | | | | |





Sectors

- 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 | | | | |



Ending the Insurrection (Book 18:
Lord Efran and the Insurrection)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



I think I need a movie set with costumes and props and special effects and stuntmen and fake blood. But for now I'll just cobble together illustrations. The stormy backdrop of this one was provided by [PickPic](#) (no photographer noted). The wall gates came from [Wikimedia Commons](#)¹. The gallows was provided by [Midnight Believer](#) on flickr. And the wonderful Venetian masks of [Comedy and Tragedy](#)² came via [Christine Venino](#).

Since I had to get Efran and Minka in there somewhere, I finally found [this photo](#)³. But this couple was just too clean and happy for my setting, so I had to edit them a little bit, per this Before and After matchup, below. (Yes, Minka required more clothes.)



Incidentally, [this](#)⁴ almost perfectly captures the book doorway that the Librarian opens to the would-be Treasury robbers.



Robin Hardy
May 15, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright for my illustration.

1. The wall, gate piers, and gates to Carr Manor House were photographed by [Chemical Engineer](#), who sounds like a fount of information.
2. Also found on Wikimedia Commons
3. Provided by [Summer Stock](#) on Pexels
4. Created by [Anatoly777](#) on Pixabay. The image is huge; I had to shrink it way down to post here.