



The Stories of

*The Abbey of St. Benedict
on the Sea*

Book 21

*Lord Efran in the
Hall of Memories*

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

On May 16th—two days after retrieving the Librarian from his book prison—Efran was sitting backwards in a chair on the back grounds near the bench under the walnut tree. Minka was sitting on the bench with his shirt in her lap, supervising Routh as he wielded the shears on Efran’s overlong white hair.

“No fear, Lady Minka,” Routh said with the confidence of an expert. “I’ve learned how to cut it nice so that it stays out of his eyes for a good long while. At least a week.” He paused the comb over the double row of scars on the back of the Captain’s head. Routh had his own scars after De’Ath’s visit—including bad bruises that were fading to green—so he passed over the Captain’s without comment. At least they were all still alive.

Efran caught himself before nodding at Routh’s statement: his hair grew fast. Minka said, “I know, which is why you’re the only one who cuts it now. I love Det—the other hair cutters, but I won’t forget the spikes.” Yes, Detler is the one who accidentally gave the Captain a very short cut.

Meanwhile, 16 1/2-month-old Joshua hung on the bench, watching Routh’s scissor work in fascination. Joshua kept waving an arm toward his father’s chair, indicating his intention to walk over there, but his legs hadn’t got the message yet. Nakam dozed undisturbed at his feet.

Other Fortress children ran over to watch, as well. Anything the Captain did provoked their interest, and not just theirs: other workers paused to look on. One laborer who noted Routh’s deft handling of shears and comb said, “Do my hair next.”

Glancing at his unruly mop, Routh said, “When I’m done with the Captain, I’ll pull out my schedule. A cut costs two [silver] pieces.”

“Two pieces!” the man exclaimed. “I heard it cost one piece!”

“For anyone else to do it, sure,” Routh said, nudging the Captain’s head down so that he could trim his neck.

“Can he charge that, Captain?” the laborer asked indignantly.

“He can charge whatever he likes,” Efran assured him. Routh’s job was as a soldier, not a barber.

“Eh.” The laborer went on his way, waving dismissively. Routh exhaled over the near miss.

Toby, meanwhile, was keenly observing Routh’s technique. “Can I have shears to practice on some who’ll let me, Efran?” Toby asked.

“Of course,” Efran said. “Ask Doane; he’ll find you a pair. Be sure to tell him they’re for cutting hair, so he’ll get you sharp ones.”

“Can I charge for it?” the entrepreneur asked.

“Get good enough at it so they’re coming to you, then you can,” Efran said. Toby nodded.

Hassie was picking up loose tufts of white hair from the grass. “It’s so pretty,” she murmured. “It sparkles.”

Efran glanced dubiously at Minka. She nodded, brows lifted. “It does. It’s the silver undertones.”

Grimacing at the threat of “pretty,” he asked, “Are you sure we can’t do the spikes?”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “I’m sure. We can’t.”

Another child, Beischel, had gathered a handful which he threw into the air. “It’s snowing!” Everyone looked up at the white and silver glitter that blew lightly in the wind.

Chorro, a Polonti orphan of the Abbey, came up to Efran’s chair as Routh removed the cloth from around his neck and Efran leaned forward to rub his head briskly. The black-haired child asked, “Why did your hair turn all white like that?”—when Efran was only 29. Chorro, like the rest of the Abbey Polonti, took pride in their association with the Polonti Lord of the Fortress. This new alteration was disturbing.

Sighing, Efran said, “I just aged a lot fighting the *hopui*”—De’Ath, the Polonti who had the dangerous gift of controlling the minds of other Polonti. For his crimes, he had been taken away by the Mogridge. “Other men suffered as well, but had the decency to keep their hair black,” Efran grouched.

“It wasn’t your fault, Efran,” Noah said, lower lip juttled. “You’re the one who didn’t give in.”

Efran shook his head. “I’m afraid I did. But the Monster found me, and some very brave young Polonti came and got me.” The children looked over at the horse (Kraken, “Monster”) stretched out on the ground a few feet away. He followed his human almost everywhere now, and no one tried to stop him.

Jera went over to sprinkle white and silver trimmings on his shiny black coat as decoration. He raised his head to see what she was about; snorting, he lifted his hooves to roll in the dirt. She chided, “You’re messing it all up!” He bared his teeth in a horse grin.

Standing, Efran dug in his pocket for a royal (worth 30 silver pieces) to hand to Routh. The soldier barber looked at it in dismay. “Captain, I—”

“It’s all I’ve got,” Efran said. “You can go get change from Doane, or you can cut some of the children’s hair.”

“I’ve got time for one or two others. Who needs a trim?” Routh asked, pocketing the royal. All of the children raised their hands, and Routh exhaled.

Minka stood to hand Efran his shirt. She experimentally played with his new cut as he surveyed the children. “All right, it looks like Chorro and Alcmund need it most right now, Routh. Toby can work on the rest of you when he gets his shears.” They agreed to that, and Alcmund plopped into the chair for Routh to drape the towel around his neck.

Efran put his shirt back on and murmured down to Minka, “Is it acceptable?”

“Yes,” she said, then admitted, “It does make you look different.”

“The white hair? How?” he asked uneasily.

“Guardian angel mode,” she murmured. He lifted his face in surprise.

At this time, the Librarian was tutoring two Polonti, Suco and Heus, in reading and writing the Southern Continental language. Dolivo's language classes for the Polonti were wildly popular, but that made them less satisfactory for the men who wanted most to learn—with that many students, individualized lessons were impossible.

So some of them returned to the less-exciting Librarian for lessons. He was free at any time except in the mornings, when he sat in on Law lessons with Soames, Lady Ella, and Lady Minka. But since the soldiers were required to know Roman's Law as well, they often dropped by to sit on the floor during these lessons. Soames and the ladies welcomed them warmly; the Librarian expanded in pride to have so many visitors to his domain.

"Now, copy these sentences," the Librarian instructed, withdrawing a parchment from under a large, flat book. While his students readied their sharpened charcoal sticks, he read off, "'Sheathe your sword.' 'My sword is in its sheath.'" They studied the letters as they copied them.

Heus objected, "The second *sheath* is missing a letter."

"Very good," the Librarian exulted. "That is because the first *sheathe* is an action, a verb. The second *sheath* is a thing, a noun. You will see this also in *breathe*, an action, and *breath*, a thing, as well as—"

A *thump* was heard behind the shelf unit leading to the hidden library, and the three of them swiveled to look in that direction. "Someone's back there!" Heus said.

"We shall not concern ourselves with that at present," the Librarian said. "Now—"

"But isn't the Treasury past that door?" Suco asked. Another mild scrabbling was heard, and both Polonti stood. "Librarian, we must check," Suco said.

Seeing that accommodating the interruption was inevitable, the Librarian said, "Very well. Please close the door to the corridor." While Suco watched, Heus went to close that door, and the Librarian pressed the carved scallop along one shelf unit to open the door to the hidden library.

When the two Polonti turned back to him, he had the unit swiveled open, and gestured for them to enter. "Please bring the lanterns; it's rather dim back here," the Librarian requested. Heus and Suco each took a lantern off the wall brackets to enter the narrow door.

They stopped abruptly with the Librarian behind them. All three were staring at the tower of books in the center of the room. Its feet—the four small corner balls—were resting on the floor, but the tower itself was rotating slowly as if decelerating from a rapid spin. And something was clinging to one side of the tower.

Heus reached out to stop the tower's turning with one hand, holding up the lantern with the other. Then they studied a very large opossum hanging on the tower.

All at once the opossum dropped to the floor and went stiff. While the Librarian looked on, Suco and Heus bent over the still form. All four feet were splayed in the air, the jaws gaping open, the eyes tightly closed, and the tail limp and curled. But it was the largest opossum either man had ever seen—over four feet long.

When Suco reached down as if to touch it, the mouth said, "Don't bother; it's dead."

The two men stared at each other, then Heus asked, "Are you injured?"

“No, I’m DEAD!” the mouth insisted. The tail twitched.

Leaning down to listen, Suco said, “But you’re breathing.”

“Which is a miracle,” the opossum snapped, opening its eyes to peer at them. “What barbarian would leave a gaping hole in the attic floor for someone to stumble down it in the dark?”

The men looked up, Heus angling his lantern to illumine the ceiling. Yes, there was something of an opening around the upper mechanism of the tower, which extended past the ceiling up into the darkness above it. But the available space between the ceiling and the tower mechanism amounted to no more than six inches on any one side. The opossum itself was certainly thicker than that.

Heus breathed, “How did you squeeze through that hole?”

The animal bolted upright to hiss, “Are you calling me *fat*?”

The men drew back a little. “No, just healthy,” Suco said. “Do you want me to take you out to the woods?”

“Ohh, you would like that, wouldn’t you? No, you shan’t get rid of me that easily!” the opossum declared, taking its stand.

“‘Shant.’ What does *shant* mean?” Heus asked, looking back to the Librarian.

He replied, “It is a contraction of ‘shall not,’ meaning, ‘will not’ or ‘won’t.’”

Suco looked up to the ceiling again. “Are you living up there, then?”

“‘*Living*’? Like some squatter?” the opossum cried. “I’ll have you know that I’m the Fortress Atticician.”

The Polonti starred at him. Suco attempted to repeat the word: “At-ah-sish-un. What does that mean?”

“That I am responsible for the entire demesne of the Fortress Attic,” the opossum said with great dignity.

“What all is up there?” Heus asked, peering through the dark opening again.

But Suco said, “That must be a great duty. I am Suco; this is Heus, and that is the Librarian. What is your name, Sir Atticician?”

“Sir Atticician,” the opossum repeated as if tasting it. “Erroneous, but respectful.”

They were suddenly looking at a small man about four feet tall with an opossum-like face and gray hair. He wore a suit that was the color and texture of old parchment covered with lines of faded ink. On his head was a tall hat in like material, with a band of faded red velvet. He actually looked to have emerged from many years of storage in an attic box.

“I am Nomus—Sir Nomus will work fine, thank you very much. I maintain the Fortress Attic Firmament, which stores Fortress memories. And the draw down of the book tower has vastly disrupted it,” he said, trembling.

Suco and Heus raised wide eyes to the Librarian, who said, “It appears that we need Lord Efran’s counsel.”

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Chapter 2

Shortly thereafter, Efran, Minka, Estes and DeWitt entered the library to see Heus standing at the open swivel door to the hidden room. “In here, Captain. Lady. Steward, Administrator.”

With Efran leading, the four filed into the hidden room, which was now illumined by two additional lanterns. As Suco and Heus stood by, the Librarian turned to bow. “Lord Efran, Lady Minka, Steward Estes, Administrator DeWitt, may I present Sir Nomus, the Fortress Atticitian, whose demesne is the Fortress Attic.”

While the little man peered warily at the collection of large men, Minka fell to her knees in front of him with a gasp. This enabled her to look at him eye to eye. “A real Atticitian! I can’t believe it! Oh, Efran—only the greatest houses have an Atticitian. It never occurred to me that we would be so blessed to house our very own. Oh, Sir Nomus, why haven’t we known of you before?”

The small man was gaping at her just as most of the large men were. (Efran was bewildered; Estes and DeWitt amused; Heus and Suco impressed, and the Librarian composed.) Nomus swept off his top hat to bow to her, admitting, “Frankly, Lady, I unfortunately misapprehended the nature of the new ownership. I feared that the fortress had fallen into the hands of savages.” Efran narrowed his eyes at Estes as DeWitt tried to suppress an abrupt chortle.

Minka gushed, “Oh, that’s entirely understandable, Sir Nomus; the children and I can be so silly that poor Efran doesn’t know what to do with us sometimes. But how can we make you more comfortable?”

Nomus gazed into her inquiring, attentive eyes. “Well, I . . . you could . . . or . . .” As his wandering gaze lit upon the book tower, he grew wroth again. “You can push this draw down back up and close the hole in the ceiling!”

Minka looked over her shoulder at Efran, who winced in a reluctant negatory manner. So she turned back to exude regret to the point of grief: “Oh, dear! I’m so sorry. We can’t. How can we make it better down?”

Nomus gazed at her, swaying slightly. “I will . . . think on it,” he said, then turned to scamper up the tower and disappear into the ceiling.

Minka got up off her knees to see that five men and one Librarian were studying her. DeWitt quoted, “He ‘fell into the little vixen’s blue eyes.’”

“Shhh!” she hushed him, pushing him out through the swivel doorway into the main library. The rest of the men followed with the lanterns, and the Librarian realigned the door to the rest of the wall.

Efran looked off for a moment, then began, “Where . . . did you hear of other—Atticitians?”

She looked vaguely guilty, raising her shoulders. “It just sounded like a quality asset.”

DeWitt laughed while Estes nodded agreeably. Heus looked dubiously at Suco. “The Lady Minka—made all that up?”

“Sounds like it,” Suco said.

“Wasn’t the Commander thinking about making her Lieutenant Commander?” Heus asked.

“That’s what I heard,” Suco confirmed.

“All right,” Efran said, as in, *That’s enough*. “Now we know that we have an Atticitian, and, at some point, we’ll find out what he does. As you were.” He beckoned, and she went to his side in satisfaction. When he looked down at her with misgiving, she reached up to play with his white hair.

Dinner that evening was interesting. Efran was holding Joshua at the door of the dining hall in order to hear a whispered report from one of the scouts he’d sent to Crescent Hollow. Joshua was leaning far out on his father’s arm in his demand for pie.

From her seat on the bench, Minka was warily watching the Polonti at their group of tables, where Heus was giving a recitation with many gestures to a collection of grinning men. “I wonder if I overdid it,” she murmured.

“Overdid what?” Ella asked, scooting toward her.

Efran looked down at his place that was being effaced in front of his cooling dinner, then gave the scout instructions that included the words “Estes and DeWitt.”

He squeezed with Joshua into his proper place on the bench, and Minka leaned behind him to tell Ella, “If Sudie doesn’t tell you tonight, I’ll give you an update tomorrow in Law class.”

“It was nothing much,” Efran told Ella as he cut into his venison steak.

Quennel, on Ella’s left, elaborated, “Minka discovered a new asset in the attic.”

Minka looked at him in mild alarm; Ella turned back to her to exclaim, “I didn’t even know there was an attic! How did you get up there?”

“Ask Quennel,” Minka said cautiously, and he laughed.

Efran looked at her with pained thoughts, so she brushed his hair lightly off his forehead. “Good cut. I approve,” she said, successfully derailing whatever he was about to say.

The children came back to their table to show off Toby’s efforts with the shears. The boys had nice, crisp haircuts, and the girls’ hair was almost as short. Hassie fluffed her airy blonde curls. “It’s so much lighter and easier to take care of!”

Minka said, “Oh, Hassie, that’s adorable! I love it. You know, I think I might—” Efran’s fork clattered down to his plate and he twisted to her in alarm. “I might—recommend Toby to my friends,” she ended lamely. Efran lowered his head, evaluating how close that was to a threat to cut her hair.

Ella looked over in despondence. “My hair will never curl like that.” Although only half Polonti, she had the straight, glossy black hair.

Minka turned to her. "I love your hair. Perhaps we could trade." Although what she suggested was obviously impossible, Efran scowled at his fork on his plate.

Ella did not look encouraged. "I'd look silly with your curls, like a washer woman. You're the only one with small enough features to look nice under that mass of hair."

Considering himself vindicated, Efran said, "Thank you, Ella." He now felt that it was safe to resume eating.

"But Ella, you're beautiful. Stop thinking you have to look any different," Minka protested.

Quennel said, "Thank you, Minka."

Efran swallowed definitively to order, "No one changes their hair." The others looked at his white head, but wisely said nothing.

The following morning, May 17th, Soames had an overflow for Law class in the library. The Librarian stood aside so that a kitchen maid, Asti, could sit at the small table with Soames, Minka and Ella. Another twelve people sat on the floor to listen while Soames covered permissible and impermissible businesses on the Lands. Among the latter were, obviously, prostitution and selling stolen goods or dangerous chemicals.

Almost anything else was allowed, but Soames said, "For the specific business that someone wants to start, he must check with the Notary Ryal. If he doesn't, and opens an illegal business, its assets can be seized without compensation. Besides, Ryal needs to know what businesses are on the Lands, so that he can recommend them. Questions?" he asked, looking around.

A fortress worker on the floor raised his hand. "Can we see the opening to the attic?"

"No, I'm sorry," Soames said.

Another asked, "What's up there?"

Soames hesitated. "I don't know. I don't know who knows."

Minka turned to the Librarian. "Surely there's something about it in one of our books. I would love to know more about the rôle of the Atticitian."

The Librarian inclined his head to her. "This will require research, Lady Minka, which I will be delighted to carry out."

"Thank you," she said, pleased.

When they were released from class, Ella caught Minka in the corridor. Wringing her hands slightly, she said, "I want to get my ears pierced like yours. Will you go with me?"

"Of course," Minka said instantly. "But what about horse training?" She noted that Ella was wearing a dress, not training gear.

"I asked Jasque for an hour off, for personal business," Ella admitted. "I really like the little gold hoops." She studied Minka's ears, or what could be seen of them.

“Oh, yes, they’re perfect,” Minka said, fingering one. “They’re small enough to not get caught on anything, but still make me feel a little dressed up. And they would look lovely in your dark hair.” She raised a lock of Ella’s hair in mild envy. “Do you have any money on you?”

“No,” Ella said in sudden anxiety.

“No problem, we’ll get a little from Doane.” Minka took her up the corridor to Doane’s cubicle off the foyer.

They looked in at him standing beside the shelves, rearranging folders. “Hello, Lady Minka. Lady Ella. What can I do for you?”

“Oh, Doane, it’s so nice to see you upright!” Minka said. He had suffered a bad injury that had put him in the rolling chair and braces for a long time.

“Thank you, Lady Minka. I’m getting there,” he said in satisfaction.

“Just Minka. Doane, we need five or seven royals for some—essentials,” she requested.

“Certainly, Lady Minka.” He went over to another shelf to pull out a pouch and walk it to her. “There’s ten royals. Is that enough?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, adding, “If it’s not, I’ll come get more.”

“Of course it is,” Ella said in subdued alarm.

“I may want to shop,” Minka said tentatively, and Ella grinned.

Minka told the door guard, Ellor, that they would be visiting shops around Main, so he sent for a bodyguard and horses. Shortly, four Abbey men came out leading six horses. They bowed to the ladies, one saying, “Tourle, Coxe, Elowen and Pleyel at your service, Lady Minka, Lady Ella.”

“Oh, yay!” Minka said, surveying them. “All calm, unflappable men. We won’t tax you at all. We’re only going to one—maybe two shops. I don’t know yet.”

One of the new, green Polonti said, “That’s quite all right, Lady Minka; bodyguard duty qualifies for hazard pay under certain conditions.” Obviously, he was repeating verbatim what he had been told.

The other men lightly groaned, but Minka laughed in delight. “Who are you?”

“Elowen, Lady Minka,” he said cautiously, perceiving that he had somehow misspoken.

“Perfect. Then we will see that you all get hazard pay,” she decreed, mounting her little mare, Rose. Ella laughed, half embarrassed, but already enjoying herself. The men grinned, and they set out.

Main Street was not overly crowded yet, as Shurtleff had not yet opened for the midday meal (although a line was forming). Before they approached his area, however, Minka turned off at Firmin’s to proceed to the shop behind his: Imelda’s Beauty Potions.

As the women dismounted, Coxe muttered to his cohorts, “One of us has to go in with them.”

Waving a dismissive hand, Tourle set out after their charges, explaining, “Hazard pay.” The others laughed, content to stay with the horses. He opened the door for the women, and Minka smiled at him.

Imelda was not here at the time, but the beautician Bowrie was. Minka explained that Ella needed her ears pierced, so Bowrie did that quickly and competently. With a blank masculine face, Tourle stood at the door in view of them.

While Ella was tentatively fingering her new little gold hoops, Bowrie tutored her on how to clean her ears and Minka looked at the other earrings they had for sale. But Bowrie, being a beautician, began pulling out makeup. “Here, let’s try just a little lip rouge. The deep red looks so beautiful on olive skin,” she told Ella.

“Oh, no,” Minka said. “We’re not here for makeup, just the earrings.”

“But Felice wears it so beautifully,” Bowrie argued. “Polonti women were made for makeup.”

“Not any that are related to Efran,” Minka objected. Standing, she laid two royals on the counter for the hoops. “We’re off, Ella.”

“Yes,” she said, while Bowrie looked after them in disgruntlement. Tourle immediately opened the door and followed them out.

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Chapter 3

The rest of the bodyguard perked up at their exit. But Minka paused thoughtfully beside the mare. “I want more earrings for when I can change the hoops out.” It had been six days since she had gotten her ears pierced, and Imelda told her to leave the hoops in for a week. So, it was not at all too soon to buy more.

Looking north thoughtfully, she said, “Enon’s mother Dallarosa makes very pretty tatting jewelry—earrings, too.”

“Like that collar you wore? Oh, yes, let’s go look at what she’s got,” Ella said, already mounted.

“I know where she lives,” Minka said, climbing easily to her saddle. Tourle and Coxe drew up on either side of her and Ella, with Pleyel and Elowen following. Minka led them north on Main to the last street, then west almost to Flodie’s Oddities and Articles of Worth. “Here. Number forty-three,” she said. Dismounting, she and Ella, pursued by Tourle and Coxe, went up the walk to knock on Dallarosa’s door.

Minka stubbornly knocked for several minutes before giving up. “She’s not here,” she sighed. Then she looked west down the street. “Maybe Flodie’s has something.”

“The secondhand shop?” Ella asked dubiously. “Does she carry jewelry?”

“She carries all kinds of things,” Minka said vaguely.

Tourle and Coxe remounted, but Minka merely began leading the mare toward Flodie's, since it was so close. Elowen was the first to dismount to walk his horse beside her. Tourle rode beside Ella as she followed on her horse with Pleyel and Coxe riding rearguard. In the open, the bodyguard must be judiciously spread against all avenues of threat.

They approached the entrance to Flodie's, but Minka wasn't looking at it; she was looking ahead at the lush, spreading faerie tree. This one was a little different than the others around the Lands: its leaves were two-tone, but instead of green and copper, they were green and silver. She almost got the impression that they were identifying with Efran's white hair.

Releasing the reins, she walked up to the tree, whose leaves were rustling without a breeze. Elowen followed right on her heels, feeling the strong pull of faerie without knowing what it was. "This is a very old tree," he muttered.

"But it hasn't been here very long," Minka said. Her eyes followed the sinewy trunk up to the dense canopy of leaves overhead. "It looks like a ceiling," she whispered. As Ella remained mounted, Pleyel and Coxe stayed on their horses while Tourle dismounted to approach not far behind Elowen.

Minka suddenly lifted her riding skirt to begin climbing the tree. The bodyguards started; Elowen said, "No, Lady Minka—what are you doing?"

"Climbing the steps! Look, steps in the trunk," she said. She went up one step after another, lightly grasping a vine that ran alongside like a handrail. Elowen followed so close behind as to almost tread on her skirt.

Tourle stood at the bottom of the tree. "Lady Minka, I don't like this."

"No, it's all right," she said. "It's—"

Her head jerked up, as did Elowen's, to see a rectangle suddenly open in the canopy of leaves above them. "Sir Nomus! What are you doing way out—? Yes, I'd love to."

As she reached up to be rapidly drawn through the opening, Elowen said, "Oh, no you don't!" wrapping his arms around her legs. Thus he was drawn through the doorway as well, which then closed right after him.

With a shout, Tourle attempted to follow them, but the steps had disappeared, leaving a smooth trunk for him to attempt to climb without footholds or handholds. Coxe came running forward; Pleyel pressed his horse tightly against Ella's with a hand on her pommel.

Sliding back down the trunk, Tourle turned around to order, "Get Lady Ella back to the fortress. And tell the Captain that something named 'Nomus' took Lady Minka and Elowen up through an opening in the leaves."

The remainder of the bodyguard, Coxe and Pleyel, turned their horses to lope Ella back toward Main while Tourle stood looking up at the tree in aggravation.

Moments after Ella was returned to her suite, Coxe and Pleyel made their report to the Captain in the second-floor workroom. Minutes later, he and they were standing with the Librarian in the hidden library. Efran pulled over the rolling ladder to climb it to the ceiling. He pushed and pulled the panels abutting the opening of the tower, but there was no room to climb through.

“Sir Nomus!” he called into the opening. “I’d be very grateful if you’d send the lady and her bodyguard back down, please.” He listened for a minute, then shook his head. Looking down from the ladder, he asked the Librarian, “What do you think?”

“As Fortress Atticitian, he would not take her against her will, Lord Efran. And as she has a bodyguard, I would assume that she is safe. Also, she may have the opportunity to learn much for us,” he replied.

Efran grunted, “Logical and most likely correct. Then I suppose we’ll wait.”

At that time, a sentry approached the door to the hidden library to salute. “Captain, Lady Minka and her bodyguard are waiting for you in the Steward’s workroom on the second floor.”

“What?” Efran said. Coxe and Pleyel stared at each other.

The sentry, a new Polonti, began repeating himself, but Efran interrupted, “Yes, thank you. I’ll—go check.” He turned out of the library to run up the stairs, followed by the remaining two bodyguards. On the second floor, he sprinted to the workroom.

Minka spun to him. “Efran! Don’t be angry with me. Please!” She tried to throw herself on him, but he held her at arm’s length, trying to see what was wrong. “Please, Efran, don’t punish Elowen; it’s not his fault! There was just—so much to see, and it was so overwhelming. Efran, I—had no idea we were gone for so long. It was just—I’ve never seen anything like it, and—”

“It’s all right. Minka, it’s fine. How—long did you think you were gone?” he asked.

She searched his face, but seeing that he looked merely concerned, she calmed down. “I don’t know. Hours? A day? Or longer? It was—oh, Efran! It was the history of the Abbey, all around us! Battles, and courageous men, and the children coming—oh, Efran, I saw Ares as a young boy first coming to the Abbey! Oh, his face, his poor little face.”

He held her so she could weep for a minute, then she straightened. “He was so brave, Efran; my heart just burst for how brave he was, so wounded and alone. But the Sisters took him in, and bathed his face, but they didn’t have anyone who knew how to stitch it closed.” She had to let the tears flow a little bit longer for him. Efran looked up in shock at Elowen, who nodded blankly. Coxe, Pleyel, DeWitt and Estes were intently looking on.

“Oh, and the enemy soldiers coming against the fortress—they surrounded it, Efran, on all sides clear to the Sea. Just—miles of soldiers all around the hill. I just knew we were all going to die—all the children! But God sent an enormous storm that washed them away, while the fortress stood against it. Oh, so much—I’m still overwhelmed by it all,” she breathed. He held her lightly.

A moment later she resumed, “So much beauty and courage, I never imagined. So much of the miraculous in their defense, and their provision. It was like—a great panorama of God’s miraculous work in the Abbey over centuries. And I saw Nakham! Just as he looks now, but with an ancient Lord—Caradoc. His name was Lord Caradoc. And—”

Wide-eyed, she gripped Efran’s arms. “He was talking with Barthelemon. He was the Lord of the Abbey Fortress when Barthelemon made the agreement with the Destroyer. He was Polonti, Efran, and Barthelemon convinced him to the arrangement because he told him that a Polonti lord would set the Destroyer free, and the fortress would stand.”

He gazed at her, and she leaned on him again. “Those were just—little pieces of what we saw. I can’t even remember it all; so much is just slipping away while I’m trying to tell you about it. But to see—oh, Efran, to see God’s working so—wonderfully year after year, for new lords and new children, in new troubles and crises—the fortress stood, because He upheld it. He upholds it. . . .” She looked almost faint, so he held her a little tighter.

She righted herself. “I saw building and rebuilding. They had a wall just where the north wall is now, Efran; they had a stone wall. But an enemy brought a herd of great beasts with massive legs and great fan-like ears and great trumpeting noses that curled like snakes. I know you won’t believe me, but they did. And they had riders on the huge beasts that rammed the walls and broke them down and started coming up the hill to attack the fortress.”

She stopped to assume her devious face. “Before they could get to the fence, they broke through the northwestern hillside and fell to their deaths in the cavern waters, because they were too heavy to swim.”

Efran smiled slightly. “We could’ve warned them about that.”

She sighed in her triumphant exhaustion. “What a wonderful, miraculous story we’re a part of. A living story, all happening in the same place. Only, they didn’t have the faerie trees yet. No one had the faerie trees before we got them. One great, early lord—Allessandrini. He was the first, Efran! He was the Lord of the Fortress when it was just being built. And he contributed much to its design, because he was a genius. He knew everything there was to know about construction, and engineering, and even aesthetics. He designed the gates. Well, Lord Allessandrini questioned the grooves in the foyer; he didn’t see a reason for them. But the engineering angel Aaro told him those gaps would be filled in time. So even though he didn’t understand it, and wouldn’t see the design made whole while he was on earth, he agreed.

“Oh, Efran. It’s all for a reason—the most expansive, wonderful, embracing reason . . . we can’t imagine. . . .” She finally dropped off, and he picked her up. But she lurched up to murmur, “Poor Tourle is still waiting at the tree. I promised them hazard pay, Efran. I promised them.”

Efran said firmly, “They’re to be given hazard pay, Estes—Elowen, Coxe, Pleyel and Tourle.”

“Of course, Minka,” Estes said. So she sank back down in Efran’s arms with a sigh.

Efran nodded to Coxe, “Go tell Tourle he can come on back.”

“Yes, Captain,” Coxe said, blinking.

“I’ll ride with you,” Pleyel said.

“Thanks,” Coxe said, and they turned out.

Efran told DeWitt and Estes, “I’m just going to lay her in Wallace’s quarters for now.” They nodded, then looked over to Elowen, standing at the end of the long table behind the tree growing up through it.

He mumbled, “Permission to be dismissed, Captain.”

“Granted,” Efran said. So Elowen dropped into a chair at the table, put his head down, and passed out.

After Efran had taken Minka out, Estes and DeWitt looked at each other for a moment. DeWitt observed, “Sounds like a quality asset.” Estes snort-laughed, and they went back to work.

Minka woke up, somewhat, in time for dinner, though she was still groggy and disoriented. As soon as Efran helped her to sit on the bench, and sat himself, however, she had to lean behind him to check Ella's ears. So Ella leaned behind him as well to show Minka. "I just cleaned them. They don't hurt at all."

"Good. They're very pretty with your black hair," Minka said, sounding slightly drunk. Which is what exhaustion sounds like.

In fact, when a plate of chicken and kale was placed in front of her, she didn't lift her head off Efran's arm. He couldn't abide that. "Here, eat just a little. You need it after all that." With Joshua on his left leg, Efran pushed her to sit upright.

"All right." She took up her fork to begin slowly eating. "It's very good," she murmured.

After a few quiet minutes, during which he merely nodded at passing diners who spoke to him—or her—he quietly asked, "Where was Nomus during all this?"

She took a drink of lager, then said, "In there somewhere. He certainly didn't leave."

"Ah. How did he get you out?" Efran asked.

She stopped eating to think about that. "He took us to a door that opened onto the second floor. And we just walked down the corridor to the workroom."

He quickly looked at her. "Show me the door."

She was shaking her head. "The moment we stepped out of it, I looked back to see which door it was. There was no door."

"Ah. So he has his own entrances and exits," Efran observed. *Rather like Nonesuch and Asmuch*, he thought. *Or like Nakham*. Speaking of which—"What about the book tower? Why does it bother him so much to be down?"

She paused, looking vacantly over the hall. "I have no idea. I never saw it; he said nothing about it." She raised her shoulders.

Because she was practically sleeping upright, he knew he should stop asking questions, but he couldn't help it. "Why an opossum?" he breathed in restrained laughter and disbelief.

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Chapter 4

Minka opened her eyes and sat up. "That goes back to the very beginning of the fortress. Sir Nomus had his work to do, but the workmen brushed him aside as merely being in the way—a little man, what could he do? But they'd been warned not to harm the woodland creatures. It was bad enough that the workers had to cut down so many trees on the hilltop; they were not to afflict the animals whose homes they'd destroyed.

"Nomus' problem was that, as a specialized leprechaun, he couldn't make himself very much bigger or smaller. He could change shape readily enough, but then he would be a tiny deer or an impossibly large rabbit. Other

kinds of animals, like monkeys, are the ideal size and shape—but there are no monkeys on the hill. So he chose the opossum as the best compromise. In that form, he could range all over the construction without hindrance,” she explained.

“So he created all the scenes you saw?” he asked.

“No, he preserved them. They’re related to the Librarian’s book doorways, except you can’t walk into these scenes, you can only observe. But as the Librarian explained, they’re made by the force of actions and words imprinted on the fabric of the universe,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. Observing how little she had eaten, he urged, “Finish your plate.”

She picked up her fork to eat three bites of chicken and kale. Then she put her fork down with finality. “I’m finished.”

With Joshua asleep on his shoulder, Efran rose and helped her out from behind the bench. Ella and Quennel looked up to tell them goodnight, and he patted the heads of several children as he and Minka left the hall.

In the corridor, he turned her toward their quarters. “Go on to bed; I’ll take Joshua to the nursery and be right there.”

“All right,” she said, her eyes now fully glazed.

He watched to make sure that she got to their door before he turned down the corridor to hand the chunky toddler over to Cordelia at the nursery. She laid him on the table to change his wraps, then lowered him to the large bassinet on the floor where Nakam was already waiting. Fortunately, there was room for them both.

As Efran turned away from the nursery half-door, something at the south end of the corridor caught his attention. Nomus was standing at the closed back door, watching him. It was clearly a summons. So Efran walked down the corridor to him, and the little man opened the door. “Welcome to the Hall of Memories, Lord Efran. You may enter on the Firmament.”

So Efran stepped into a night pavilion with rows of brightly lit windows before him. Walking between the two rows of windows, he looked down to see that there was nothing under his feet but stars in the immensity of space. To his left and right these windows, or portals, opened onto moving pictures. The portals extended before him as though lining a corridor to infinity.

He paused before a portal on his left to see a starkly familiar scene. He and his 130 men were arrayed along the switchback. Having depleted their supply of arrows in holding off Loizeaux’s thousands, Efran watched himself draw his sword to make a last stand, crying, “*Koa!*” His men responded, echoing the cry. This was a real event of 19 months ago.

While his historical self struck at the oncoming soldiers, Efran looked past the fighting to a great shape rising in the distance of the portal. The upper body of a man the size of a mountain appeared along the horizon. He lifted the northern Passage with the terrain around it and shook it out like a housewife shakes crumbs from a cloth.

The roar of the oncoming water filled his ears even now, and his figure in the moving tableau paused as Barr cried, “*No koa!*” Efran watched himself remove his helmet to gaze on the floodwaters purging the land almost to the foot of the switchback. He now saw another Great One lean down to lay an arm along the northern boundary of the Lands, causing the remnant of the flood to wash to the east.

Momentarily overwhelmed, Efran looked down at his feet again to see the Sun at one edge of the stars and the Moon on the other, awaiting their entrances in the sky like actors in the stage wings. He took another step on the Firmament, then looked to the portal on his right. Here, he watched himself in Marguerite's basement being beaten to a pulp ten months ago by Master Crowe. He saw his body breaking and his soul gathering at the cracks, ready to be poured out.

But a voice said, *Look up here*, so Efran then and now looked above the huge wine vat where a fountain of blood opened up beneath a Roman execution, pouring from the head, hands, back and side of the Crucified. The power streaming from that fountain sealed the cracks in Efran's body and opened his eyes to the reality beneath Crowe's deception. *Strike Crowe here, and here, and here*, the voice said. When Efran hit the lie at its weak points, where the truth lay closest to the surface, the illusion began shattering. Then the real Master Crowe was exposed, and Efran himself shown to be truly whole.

I don't remember hearing the words, but I did what they told me to do, he mused. Then he walked a few steps farther on the Firmament, looking up in wonder at the waters streaming over his head from one curved edge of the domed universe to the other. Following the curve of the dome downward, he saw great flaming balls streak through the black space between the stars below his feet, and far beneath, he saw a tiny blue sphere dotted with spots of white cotton here and there.

The next portal on his left showed him gazing over the barricade, fear gripping his heart as he realized that Wyse was about to withdraw to besiege the Lands. This would guaranty a slow, wretched death for them all, and make a gift of the empty Fortress and Lands to their enemy. Every moment of this reality was fresh to him, as it had happened less than a month ago.

While he watched himself grapple with the fear and uncertainty, he saw Nakham lean beside him to suggest, *Jump up on the barricade and challenge him to fight*. Efran now saw that this wasn't Nakham's own idea; he was relaying a message that Efran had been unable to hear at the time.

I can't. I'll fall, he had replied. Again, Efran was only now perceiving this inner debate.

No, you won't. We'll hold you up, Nakham said.

There was a short struggle, then—*All right*. Efran stripped off his helmet and buckler.

As he shakily climbed onto the wet, treacherous stumps, Efran now saw silvery hands gripping his feet. When he rose to a stand, more silver hands buttressed his hips and his back. The stability filled him with joy, and he called out, "Fight me! You want to end this now? Come fight me up here!"

Watching now, Efran saw the joy as a visible stream. It had been poured down from the windows above only to be blocked by his fear—*I can't. I'll fall*. With Nakham's prompting, Efran had forced down the fear to hear the command from above, and to act on it.

The joy then flowed through him to his men, who began the war drums. All this inflamed Wyse's pride so that he rejected a course of certain victory. That victory belonged to the Abbey because Efran did what God told him to.

Absorbing this, Efran took another step on the Firmament, in which he glimpsed a whirlpool at his feet. He had no time to react before he was sucked into it and thrown down to land on a hard, dark floor.

Groaning in the darkness, he was unable to see anything except the shadowy shape of something tall and heavy

slowly rotating beside him. Then lantern light pierced the darkness. Lying flat on his back, Efran looked up at the tower of books, and the opening in the ceiling above it. Then he turned his head toward the source of the light.

The Librarian approached with a lantern to lean over him. “Lord Efran, are you injured?”

“No, Librarian, thank you,” Efran grunted, shoving himself up. “Please remove all these books and push the tower back up; secure it in place. At once.”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said.

“Thank you.” Efran got to his feet to stagger out into the main library, and from there up the corridor to his and Minka’s quarters.

Falling over Kraken spread out on the bedroom floor, Efran landed on the bed and took off his boots. Then he dropped beside Minka. Although sound asleep, she scrunched into his side.

The following morning, May 18th, Efran was shaken awake, as was Minka beside him. They both blinked at Kraken looming over the bed to tap it with a hoof. “Your pet needs to go out, Efran,” she murmured.

He groaned, “Ha, ha. That’s funny—‘my pet.’ Why don’t you stay in your comfortable stall where there’s hay?” He pulled himself out of bed to crookedly walk Kraken out of his chambers to the foyer.

You need a guardian, Kraken replied. Seeing him down the steps to the courtyard, Efran had no argument to this. So he stroked Kraken’s nose, and the horse ambled across the northwestern corner of the fortress to the stables.

Fennig, on duty at the wall gates today, rode into the courtyard from the switchback. He dismounted to salute. “Captain, Surchatain Sewell of Venegas is here with two subordinates to speak with you.”

“Is that right. Finally,” Efran muttered, looking down Main to the three riders waiting outside the gates. Five days ago, Efran had sent Sewell’s most recent messengers back with instructions for him to come here to talk if he was upset about Efran’s burning down his brewery and a couple of fields. “All right; send them up.”

Fennig remounted to take the message below while Efran turned back into the foyer to instruct that Sewell and his men be shown to the small dining room. He also asked that breakfast for five be brought as well.

Entering his quarters, he found Minka newly dressed, brushing her hair. Taking her around the waist, he asked, “Will you come defend me to Sewell for burning down everything? He’s on his way up.”

She eyed him dubiously. “Are you sure you want me to? I say things.”

“Better you than me,” he said, shucking off yesterday’s clothes to poke around in his wardrobe for clean ones. “Besides, the kitchen’s bringing breakfast.”

“All right,” she agreed. “Let me get someone to take Joshua out, then I’ll be there.”

“Thank you.” He paused to kiss her, then said, “Remind me to tell you about my visit to the Atticitan’s demesne.”

“You too?” she asked eagerly. “When? Yes, what did you see?”

“I’ll tell you after you educate Sewell for me,” he baited.

“Oh, that’s so not fair,” she sulked.

“No, no—you’ll have fun. I promise.” Dressed, he kissed her, then they turned out of their quarters to go their separate ways.

Approaching the small dining room, Efran saw Loghry already there with the cart, glancing around. “Where do you want the plates and dishes, Captain?”

“Just put everything in the middle of the table,” Efran said. “Ales? Good. Set them over here. Oh, and bring a lager for Lady Minka, if you would.”

“Sure, Cap’n.” Having unloaded the platters of ham and eggs, peaches, and fried potatoes, besides the mild ales, Loghry rolled the cart back out.

Shortly, the door guard came up leading three grim men. He saluted Efran and announced, “Surchatain Sewell, his Commander Tuiren and Advisor Borghese, Captain.”

Efran said, “Thank you, Corwyn. Gentlemen, help yourselves to a late breakfast and have a seat.” He gestured to the loaded table.

As they filed into the room, Efran paused to note that Borghese was a Southerner, possibly even Eurussian. Efran would have to hear him speak in order to know definitively. He was dressed in robes that reflected Venegasan ideas of elegance. As for Commander Tuiren, Efran knew him by sight, but not well. He was Polonti, of course, a long-time soldier, probably as old as Lorient—in his mid to late 40s. As Efran studied his visitors, the three of them studied his white head.

Regarding Efran’s invitation to breakfast, the Commander and the Advisor looked to their Surchatain. He sat at the head of the table without taking anything to eat or drink. So they followed his lead, rejecting refreshments. Undisturbed, Efran began filling his own plate.

Minka walked in to glance at the seated guests. Still standing, Efran said, “There you are. Minka, you know Surchatain Sewell. That is Commander Tuiren and the Advisor Borghese. This is my wife, Lady Minka.”

“Welcome to the Abbey Fortress,” she said to them. Tuiren nodded with an impulsive smile, but none of them rose from their seats.

Efran thought, *You’ll repent of that rudeness before we’re done.* He asked her, “What would you like?”

“Oh, eggs and peaches,” she said, sitting one chair down from Tuiren. Loghry came to the door with her lager, which she accepted with thanks, and Efran filled her plate. She smiled at him, waiting to start eating until he had sat with his breakfast.

Sewell then leaned back to inquire, “And where is the *hookama* Adele?” That was the Polonti term for a high-class prostitute.

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Chapter 5

Efran glanced up blankly. “The *hookama* Adele? Isn’t she with you?”

“No,” Sewell said, shifting. “She stole a horse to return to you.”

If he thought he’d embarrass either Efran or his wife, he was mistaken. Minka looked off in blank unconcern while Efran choked back a laugh. “Really? Wherever she got to, it’s not here, thank God.” But having considered Sewell a necessary ally, Efran was unhappy with this opening.

Minka, feeling herself under scrutiny, flicked her large eyes toward Commander Tuiren. She smiled softly, and he shifted, looking away.

The Advisor Borghese observed, “Captain Efran, your face is that of a young man, but your hair is the white of old age. I am curious as to that.”

“Only my underlings call me ‘Captain,’ but I’ll accept your homage,” Efran said pleasantly. Borghese blinked at the slap. But as he was not in the Abbey army, he should have known to refer to his host by his proper title of “Lord.”

Efran went on to say, “My hair turned white as a result of my struggle with the *hopui* De’Ath, who attacked me for interfering with the slave trade he had installed in Venegas. The Mogridge have him now.” Having said that, Efran returned to his plate.

After the few minutes necessary for them to digest that, Borghese asked, “What makes you think this De’Ath had anything to do with Venegas?”

Efran paused to swallow his mouthful before replying, “He took credit for it. I believed him because I could see no reason why you would betray us by kidnapping my messengers, my emissary, and my friend’s children to use as forced labor in your fields.” Listening with half an ear, Tuiren looked back at Minka, who lifted soft eyes to him.

Sewell objected, “We kidnapped no one.”

Efran said, “No, you only bought them from the renegades who kidnapped them. Although I err in one detail: the renegades *attempted* to kidnap my messengers, who killed half of them before the rest ran away. But I won’t have my men inconvenienced like that.”

He stopped eating to look plaintively at Sewell. “You have been a good friend to us. And we came to your aid when Mounoussamy attacked you. Why would you throw us over now?”

Sewell sat up, exhaling, “You caused a great deal of damage to our building and our fields, Efran.”

“I had to pay *three hundred royals* to get my emissary and my friend’s children out of chains in your field,” Efran said, leaning forward. “But I will pay you a reasonable amount for your building if you will swear to use no more slave labor.”

“Three hundred royals?” Sewell repeated. “What happened to it?”

“Ask your Steward. He was holding my wife until I brought it, but I did not stay to see it counted,” Efran said.

Sewell looked at his Commander. “Is that true? Was Theodulph holding the Lady?” Sewell could have asked Minka herself for a definitive answer. But he didn’t.

Tuiren reluctantly said, “Yes. However, she and her bodyguard escaped.”

“Escaped,” Sewell repeated in disbelief. “So Efran didn’t pay three hundred royals.”

“Yes, he did. He left the money at the gates when the lady and her bodyguard were found outside,” Tuiren admitted. He glanced back at Minka, who smiled warmly at him.

“Who received it?” Sewell demanded, looking between his Commander and Advisor.

Since Borghese said nothing, Tuiren disclaimed, “I don’t know who finally took possession of it, Surchatain. I and my men were clearing the road to Vychan at the time, as you had instructed.”

“Then how do you know he paid it?” Sewell asked.

“Many witnesses confirmed it—soldiers and civilians. But there were no guards at the gates, and the Steward did not respond to Captain Efran’s summons, so he left the gold at the gates and rode off with his wife. Again, that’s from a number of reports.” He didn’t look at Minka during this declaration, but was aware of her eyes on him.

Sewell turned to his Advisor to demand, “Why were there no guards at the gates?”

“Appointing guard duty is the Steward’s responsibility, Surchatain,” the Advisor said.

“Did I not give you oversight of the Steward in my absence?” Sewell asked through clenched teeth. When Borghese stalled on an answer, Sewell asked, “Where is the three hundred royals?”

“I have no knowledge of this, Surchatain,” Borghese said.

“Then what am I paying you for?” Sewell asked in rising anger.

In casual curiosity, Efran asked Borghese, “Where are you from? I’m having trouble pegging your accent.”

The Commander and the Surchatain both looked at the Advisor. His face paled slightly, but he said, “Dansington, Captain.” This was an out-of-the-way village which at one time had been a haunt for renegades. But its current use was as a nursery and boarding house for the unwanted children of rich women. Ella had been raised there, being the half-Polonti offspring of a Eurasian woman.

“Dansington?” Efran leaned toward him in great curiosity. “In what capacity?”

His face pasty white, Borghese said, “As a tutor, Captain.”

“A tutor,” Efran repeated. “One moment.” He sprang to the door to whisper instructions to a soldier, who ran off. Waiting at the door, Efran said, “You may as well eat, gentlemen.”

Tuiren glanced at Minka, who smiled with devious expectation. Then she placed the platter of ham in front of him, and he reached over to help himself. Sewell wavered, but the Abbey's kitchen was legendary, so he served his plate as well. Minka passed all the platters over to them. Looking uneasy, Borghese did not eat.

Shortly, Ella appeared at the door in her work clothes. She looked questioningly to Efran, who whispered in her ear. Her eyes shot to the table. When her gaze landed on the Advisor, she uttered a derisive laugh. "Yes, he was a lecherous janitor."

"Do you remember his name?" Efran asked.

She shook her head dubiously. "No, I don't think so. Burgess?" she hazarded.

"Thank you, Ella. As you were," Efran said.

"You're welcome, Father," she said. Then she paused to add, "We missed you in Law class, Minka."

Minka winced. "I overslept. I'm sorry. Send someone to wake me tomorrow."

"All right," Ella laughed, moving off.

Efran leaned against the wall by the door, crossing his arms with a vague smile. Borghese sat frozen while Sewell cleaned his plate angrily and Tuiren took a second slice of ham. "This is very good," he noted to Minka.

"We have the finest kitchen on the Southern Continent," Minka said, quoting Efran. "Perhaps you'll bring your family to visit us on your next day off, Commander?"

He looked surprised and gratified. "I—would like to."

"Good," she smiled at him, then turned her blue eyes to his superior. "Surchatain Sewell has a standing invitation, so I hope to see him in a more relaxed setting as well."

Sewell sighed, "Thank you, Minka. Well—we'll be off, then." He stood, as did his officers. "Thank you for breakfast, Efran. We'll be in touch."

"Captain." Tuiren saluted Efran in respect, but bowed to Minka. "Thank you, Lady Minka."

"You are most welcome, Commander," she said, glittering. "Good morning, Surchatain Sewell."

Sewell nodded to her, subdued. Then he turned out with a brief glare at his Advisor, who dropped behind the Commander for shelter as he exited.

Efran watched them walk out the foyer doors to the courtyard, then he turned to murmur, "He fell into the little vixen's blue eyes—both of them did, it looks like." She grinned.

Efran was determined to do nothing else for the rest of the day, and that Minka would assist him. So he put Joshua on his shoulders for them to walk in the hilltop woods.

Someone finally found a second key to the gate in the fence between the back grounds and the woods. So with the key left in the lock, no one had to climb the 7-foot tall fence anymore (although some Polonti did for sport.

So some Southerners had to, as well.) As Efran walked with Minka at his side and Joshua chortling on his shoulders, he told her about his experience in Nomus' Attic.

When he described witnessing his own battles, she said, "Yes! That's exactly what I saw, except you were shown the hidden help you had. Isn't it amazing?"

"Left me pretty well stunned. And I was looking down at the stars, the sun, the moon, and the earth, then looking up at waters over my head," he said. She stared at him, and he insisted, "That's what I saw. I don't understand it, but I felt as though I were in the center of the universe."

Looking away, she murmured, "I didn't see all that." She inhaled the fragrance of the undergrowth around them, including orchids, helleborine, primroses and bluebells—or what remained that the deer had not eaten.

He added, "Oh. And I found out the problem with the tower being drawn down." She turned wide blue eyes back to him, and he described being sucked down in the whirlpool and spat out on the floor of the hidden library. "So I asked the Librarian to shove the tower back up, after unloading the books off it."

"I don't know if there's room for them in the main library," she mused.

"Oh, no, I'm sure he'll keep them in the hidden library, where there is room. He said some of them were very valuable," Efran said. Keeping hold of Joshua, he looked up at the sunlight breaking through the treetops.

"Good," she nodded, smiling up at Joshua on his high seat. He was looking all around, squealing at whatever he saw. He wanted to point as well, but Efran had hold of his hands.

"Peeah!" Joshua called.

His parents quickly looked around. "There you are!" Efran said, and they watched Pia emerge from the trees with a phalanx of Polonti around her. "You only come out to see me when I have Joshua," he complained.

"No," she said with an actual smile. "I come to see your hair."

Minka laughed as he grimaced. But he got down on his knees, Joshua still on his shoulders, for her to run her little hand over his head. Then she stepped back and announced, "The white is from *kilana*, marking the victor in the struggle. It is also the grief leaving. It will not last."

"It? What?" Efran asked in confusion.

"Grief that Ka Mea sends does not last," Pia said.

"Sent by Ka Mea," Minka breathed—the Polonti term for "Maker of All," God.

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Chapter 6

Not quite comprehending, Efran asked, “The grief won’t last?”

“The white is outpouring of grief. White and grief both will leave,” Pia said.

Still dubious, Efran sat with Joshua on his leg. “All right, thank you, Pia. Now, Joshua and I need our words for the week.” She was helping Joshua learn, and Efran relearn, the Polonti language.

She sat on a drooping tree limb while her Polonti sat on the ground around her. Minka leaned on a tree. Pia said, “Today we talk animal calls. Polonti use calls to talk over the distance. A little owl call—*hoo hoo! hoo hoo!*—means ‘danger, be still and look.’ A yellow-bellied toad call—*boh boh boh boh*—means ‘come to gathering,’ and the loon wail—*ah AHHHHH ah ah ah aah*—means death, and a call to mourning.”

As she reproduced the calls, Efran and Joshua copied the sounds while Minka just listened. “Oh, my, the loon call is so sad and eerie by itself,” she murmured.

And sure enough, as they were practicing the loon, two Polonti rushed up to demand, “Who has died?”

Efran said, “No one yet; we’re just practicing.”

“Very well done, Captain,” one said with a short bow.

“No, no; you don’t bow to your Captain,” Efran said, getting up quickly with Joshua. “*Mahalo*, Pia; we’ll come for more later,” he said. She nodded, slipping away, and her Polonti departed with salutes instead.

Efran put Joshua on his shoulders to head back to the fortress grounds with Minka. The baby was issuing a realistic yellow-bellied toad call. “That’s very good, Joshua,” he said, but his voice was tight.

Reading him, Minka exhaled, “Efran, why are you disturbed? Isn’t it encouraging that Pia saw Ka Mea in what you went through?”

He muttered, “Pia’s very sure about some things that I don’t really know for a fact. I’m not sure how much the Polonti idea of Ka Mea aligns with the God of reality.”

“Well, if the white goes away, that will tell us something, won’t it?” she asked.

“Maybe,” he groused.

“You’re hopeless,” she murmured, holding his arm. Joshua patted his head.

Entering the western door of the fortress, they went down the corridor for Efran to lift his son over the nursery half-door for fresh wraps. He then paused at the stairs, but Minka said, “I need to stop by our quarters.”

“I’ll go with you,” Efran said.

They walked up the corridor past the dining hall and the kitchen. She was opening the door to their quarters when Clough, on door duty, said, “There she is!”

Efran and Minka both paused as Fellowes ran up with a letter. “From Lord Justinian, Lady Minka.”

“Oh, yay! Thank you,” she said, taking it and closing the door in both men’s faces.

While Fellowes returned to his duty, Efran stood at the door in deep hesitation. Sometimes Minka was firm about his staying away when she had to use the garderobe. So he waited in the corridor.

But as minutes passed without her appearing, he became anxious. “Minka,” he said quietly at the door. “Minka. Are you all right?” He pushed down on the door lever, but she had locked it.

He continued to wait at the door, fighting down apprehension and wild speculation. “Minka, if you’re all right, you need to tell me before I break this door down,” he said quietly at the crack of the door.

All at once the door opened. “I’m fine,” she said quickly without looking up.

“Minka?” he asked, bending to study her. He was unable to read her face; she looked—shocked? Her breathing was shallow and she glanced around without focusing on anything. “Minka, what is it?” he whispered.

“Justinian’s letter,” she said. It was somewhat crumpled in her hand.

He took it from her hand, then paused. “The seal’s unbroken.”

“Yes. I was waiting to open it until we got to the workroom,” she said vacantly.

“All right.” He turned it over several times to verify that it was unread. “Then let’s take it up.”

“Yes,” she exhaled. “We’ll take it to the workroom and I’ll read it there.”

“Then let’s go on up to the workroom,” he said cautiously.

“Yes.” Taking the letter back, she inhaled as if steeling herself. Then she took his fingers to begin leading him to the stairway.

They made it up to the workroom where Estes, DeWitt, Pieta and Koschat were going over columns of numbers. Estes glanced up to nod, and Efran announced, “Minka got a letter from Justinian.”

DeWitt half-laughed. “I can hardly wait to hear this.” Peering at her, he asked, “Are you all right, Minka?” She was standing vacantly beside a chair as if unaware of anything around her.

“Yes,” she said quickly, and began to sit. But Efran, already in his chair, pulled her over to sit on his lap. She looked at him thoughtfully, then said, “Yes. Justinian’s letter.”

Waking up moderately, she briskly broke the seal and began reading:

““To my peach flambé:

““So much news my head is spinning, but I’ll try to keep all brain material intact so that I may relate everything coherently, without my usual jocularity and wit, which would be a waste of page space.

““First, and most importantly, Verlice’s sons are settling back into their lives with a most grateful family and

township. Their story has been made known throughout the Valley, and Verlice has repeated far and wide the rôle of the Polonti Captain who secured their release from enslavement in exchange for 200 royals.

“Moreover, his lovely young wife (truth) offered herself as surety for the payment so that the young men could be immediately transported to the Abbey Lands for nourishment and medical attention.” The workroom was silent as everyone listened to Minka read as though she had no comprehension of the words she was speaking aloud. She didn’t even attempt to amend Justinian’s flirtations.

She continued, “Back in Eurus, a leather worker by the name of Choules has visited Lady M, having heard that she is a dear friend of the Polonti liberator. Choules is a leader of a coalition of Eurussian tradesman whom your intrepid Gargoyle also released from chains. His group is discussing moving their shops and families down to your Lands, and had some very specific questions regarding their prospective settlement, which she has urged them to put in a letter to you. I do not have that yet, and am not waiting on it to send this.

“The palace at Eurus has blown up, figuratively speaking. As the Council grew increasingly suspicious of dealing with a half-asleep Surchatain, a friendly chemist gave Grand Councilor Molyneux a potent waker upper for him, which worked so exceedingly well that Surchatain Baldassare became a raving maniac for approximately 48 hours. After being restored to a semblance of sanity, the Surchatain ordered his lovely wife hanged. She, however, has disappeared, and Baldassare is convinced that Lady M is hiding her.

“Therefore, Baldassare has issued orders for the confiscation of her estate Featherstone. This is, of course, highly illegal under any rulership on the Continent, but as there is a non-zero chance of his successful appropriation, the Lady’s staff and friends are arranging her possibly imminent transport to the Lands.

“All of this is entirely up in the air right now, so am sending this off in haste, but don’t be surprised if the next letter contradicts everything herein, rather, in the last two paragraphs.

“Yours in burning love,

“Justinian,” she finished blankly. She looked around sightlessly, then blinked back down at the letter. “Did I read it all?” she murmured.

No one answered; they were all studying her nonreaction to such devastating news regarding her dearly loved Auntie. Efran, jaw working, asked tightly, “Minka, what’s wrong?”

She blinked at him over the letter, then looked vacantly around the room before pitching forward onto the table in a dead faint.

He gathered her up, standing. “Be right back,” he muttered, carrying her out of the workroom in the direction of the doctor’s quarters.

The four remaining at the table looked at each other. Estes stood to retrieve the letter that had fallen onto Efran’s chair. “We should send men up to Eurus,” he observed.

“Yes, but let Efran decide how many,” DeWitt said. Then he began, “Do you suppose—she’s—?” At Estes’ blank face, DeWitt turned to Pieta. She shrugged dubiously.

Efran returned to the workroom, alone. Flopping down into his chair, he said, “Leese kicked me out.” He was pale and perspiring.

Estes offered a distraction. “We think we should probably send support to Marguerite,” he observed, placing the letter in front of Efran.

He looked down at it for a moment, then whistled. Detler stepped in, saluting. “Captain.”

“Take this down to Commander Wendt, please.” Efran raised the letter toward him.

Detler stepped forward to take it. “Right-o, Cap’n.” He paused to assess the Captain’s face, then his astute eyes swept the others. Stepping back, he saluted and turned out of the doorway.

Efran remained sitting and breathing. He glanced toward the east window, which showed only the fading of the day. He wiped his palms absently on his pants as he waited. The others quietly returned to their work.

Efran started at footsteps outside the door, but it was only the women’s matron Gayla leaving her workspace across the corridor. So he looked back to the window while sweat trickled down the side of his face.

Leese appeared suddenly in the doorway; Efran spun in his chair and everyone looked up. Composed, she said, “Efran, will you step out for a moment, please?”

Shaking, he said, “Tell me, Leese.”

She smiled. “She appears to be pregnant, about three months along.”

The others in the room looked at Efran in pleased surprise. He braced his elbows on the table and put his head in his hands. In the stillness of the room, he choked out, “She—doesn’t have the body to carry a b-baby.”

“We’ll help her, Efran,” Leese said.

He raised up, groaning, but Minka appeared in the doorway beside her. “Thank you, Leese.” Minka’s glance landed on Efran, who quickly composed himself. “I’m fine,” she said, crossing over to drop into his lap, where he covered her with his arms. “I just got very dry, and she gave me water.” She smiled back at the doctor’s wife, who nodded and withdrew.

“I’ve been neglecting my morning tea, since I didn’t have anyone else to make it for,” Minka added apologetically. “I’ll be careful to start drinking it again.”

“Good.” He produced a convincing smile. “I’ll have a cup with you in the mornings. It’ll do me good.”

“Oh, yay! Then I’ll be sure to remember to make it.” She nestled down happily on him, and he looked up at the faerie tree with eyes of dread.

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Chapter 7

Somehow word got out, so at dinner that evening, the happy couple were bombarded with congratulations. Efran endured them with a frozen half-smile, frequently glancing at his wife. After the first shock of its being made known, she decided to accept the attention graciously. She was smiling, quietly content. With their second anniversary only four days away, she finally had the deepest unfulfilled desire of her heart: her own baby growing in her own body.

Efran stirred his food around on his plate, but Minka ate heartily. “I can’t believe how hungry I am all of a sudden,” she chatted. “Efran! Don’t you want your suckling pig?”

He looked down at his plate. “I—I’ve gotten tired of it, I guess.”

“Do you mind if I eat it?” she asked.

“No, of course not; help yourself,” he said, dumping the contents of his plate onto hers.

“Thank you.” She primly dug in and ate it all.

Ella and Quennel, on Efran’s left, were having a long, quiet conversation while she repeatedly glanced at her father and stepmother. Finally, she decided to ask Minka about it herself after Law lessons tomorrow.

At the conclusion of dinner (such as it was), Efran was rising from the bench with Joshua on his arm and Minka’s elbow in his right hand when Gaul approached, saluting. “Captain, Commander Wendt says it’s probably overkill, but he’s sending fifty men to Lady Marguerite’s tomorrow morning, and wishes to know if you’d like to lead them.”

“No,” Efran said instantly. “I’m too conspicuously Polonti. Connor, Gabriel, Arne, and Stephanos have all been there before, and would be good to send again.”

“Yes, Captain.” Gaul saluted and hurried down the corridor to relay the message.

Minka accompanied Efran to hand over his yawning son to the nursery caretakers, then they walked back up to their quarters, his arm draped over her shoulders. As they undressed for bed, she put a hand on her belly and laughed, “I’m getting fat already. See?”

He looked over at the tiny swelling of her little abdomen and laughed with tears in his eyes. “So I see. Rose is out; we’ll have to find you a nice draft horse.”

She grinned, satisfied, then they both turned at the *whomp* of the corridor door slamming against the wall. Kraken nosed his way into the bedroom, then stretched out his muzzle to snuffle at Minka. Wide-eyed, she looked up at Efran, who muttered in exasperation, “There’s your new guardian.”

Sure enough, the horse circled in the space between the bed and the door, then lay down and stretched out. Efran had to climb over him to get to the garderobe, then climb back again to get to bed.

With a happy sigh, Minka tucked herself into his side as usual, dropping off instantly to sleep. Still, he waited a long time to make sure that she was really and truly out. Then he quietly slipped down from the bed and crept over Kraken, who snorted at him in irritation. “Shut up,” Efran whispered.

He left the door ajar when he exited to the corridor. Crossing the foyer, he glanced at the door sentries sleeping on their feet. With a mild shake of his head, he turned into the keep, illumined by blue starlight. It was unnecessary to turn around to see the Scripture engraved on the wall panel, as every line was visible to his inner eye.

He faced the ten-foot-tall crucifix, hardly able to raise his eyes to the depiction of the Sufferer. It suddenly occurred to him that in every image he had ever seen, the Crucified was discreetly covered with a loin cloth. In reality, he knew that such a concession was not part of a Roman execution; He was nailed up naked to the view of his gawking, jeering enemies . . . and then raised to unimaginable power and glory three days later—

*As many were astonished at him—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
So shall he startle people of many nations, and kings shall shut their mouths because of him.*

Efran dropped to the foot of the crucifix to pray. But he couldn't produce the words to express the dreadful certainty that Minka would die in the bearing of this child—his child—which would make him the instrument of her death. The child itself would probably not survive. Marguerite had told them that Minka's mother Kewe had suffered greatly with her birth, and baby Sybil had required careful nursing to make it past her early years.

Hands clasped around the base of the crucifix, he tried to pray; he struggled to express his sorrow and regret that he had ever laid a hand on her. From early puberty, he'd had an instinctive abhorrence of violating the young girls. So what did he do? He took a young girl to wife the moment she was of legal age, and then impregnated her with death. *This is my fault. Save her, deliver her—she did nothing to deserve this but love me.* But even those words remained so deep in his unconscious mind that he was unable to bring them out in prayer.

Eventually, he raised himself up to return to bed. Kraken was standing now; he rarely stayed lying down for more than an hour or two. Efran felt his way around him, but Minka did not stir when he reinserted her into his side. He spent the rest of the night staring at the muted, shifting colors through the stained glass as it played over the wall at the foot of the bed.

The following morning, May 19th, he got up early to let Kraken out and go get breakfast while Minka was still asleep. The ham and eggs were fresh and hot; the peach compote sweet, but Efran could hardly choke half of it down.

As he came out into the corridor, he looked up at the Second Gabriel entering through the front doors. They saw each other at the same moment, so Efran walked up to meet him in the foyer. When Gabriel saluted, Efran studied the tension in his face. He said, "Captain, Commander Wendt instructs you to lead the party to Featherstone today, in uniform."

It had come to this: Wendt had to order him to do his duty. Efran said quietly, "Please tell the Commander that I'll be right down."

"Yes, Captain," Gabriel exhaled in relief. He turned to trot out the large double doors to the courtyard.

Efran took the stairway to the second-floor workroom. There, he found DeWitt just settling down to work. Estes wasn't here yet. "Efran! You're here early. How is Minka?"

"Sleeping, thank you. DeWitt, I'm leading the party to Featherstone today, and I need our copy of the treaty we signed with Baldassare and Wyse," Efran said.

“Oh, yes, I imagine so,” DeWitt said. He turned to scrutinize the wall shelves, then pulled out a folder. He flipped through it to extract a parchment with seal and signatures. “This looks like it,” he said, handing it to Efran.

Glancing over it, Efran said, “Yes. I’ll need a travel pouch.” He looked toward the cabinets.

“Yes.” DeWitt went over to riffle through the cubbyholes until he found a suitable pouch. While Efran rolled up the document, DeWitt asked, “You want a ribbon for that?”

Efran glanced up with a sardonic smile. “No, I’m going to present it in a fist.”

“I’d love to come see that,” DeWitt said in genuine disappointment that he wouldn’t.

“You’ll hear about it. All right; I’m off,” Efran said. DeWitt nodded.

Downstairs, he paused at the foyer doors to tell Conte, “Have Kraken saddled for me, please.”

“Yes, Captain.” Conte saluted and stepped out, gesturing toward the stables.

Efran turned back to his quarters to let himself in quietly. He changed into his red Abbey uniform, but rolled his undyed linen dress uniform in a tight bundle to take with him. Then he looked into the bedroom where Minka was just awakening.

She smiled at him sleepily, caressing the little bump on her abdomen. Then, seeing his uniform, she raised up. “Where are you going?”

“Marguerite’s,” he said, smiling as he leaned over her. “I have to make sure that no filthy Eurussians touch her property. I hope not to be gone long, but we want to tie their hands tightly, and, possibly kick them in the knees, so, however long that takes.”

She chuckled. “All right. I’ll be good,” she promised, inhaling contentment.

He brushed back her disordered hair, whispering, “Thank you.” He paused to drink in her serenity, then backed into the outer room to stuff essentials into his saddlebags, shoving his knife into its sheath on his belt. He strapped on his sword, took up his bow and quiver, and finally slung the document pouch over his shoulder. Then he exited to the courtyard where Kraken looked over with ears standing.

Arriving at the lower barracks next to the wall gates, Efran glanced at the men assembling, all in Abbey red. He dismounted to head for Barracks A, from which Gabriel bought out the Commander. So Efran stood before them to salute. “Captain Efran reporting for duty, Commander.”

“Very good,” Wendt said.

“I’m carrying the treaty we signed with Baldassare, which I will shove up his nose,” Efran added.

Wendt said, “Sounds like fun. Look around at the men preparing to leave; see if there is anyone you do not wish to take or anyone not here that you need.”

“Well,” Efran said, turning to glance over the men. He noted that not all of them were Southerners, and not all of

them were his first choice. As his gaze paused on Jehan and Coish, they looked back stubbornly. No, they weren't the largest nor the most experienced, and they were conspicuously Polonti, but . . . they were two of Minka's favorites. So Efran's eyes swept past them.

He turned back to say, "All are satisfactory, Commander. Since I have no idea how long this correction will take, expect messengers daily."

"Very good, Captain," Wendt said, returning his salute, and Efran's eyes began watering.

As he climbed back on Kraken, he turned to look at his fifty-odd men mounted and waiting. "I'm going to ride hard, gentlemen, but I don't wish to abuse any of the horses. If yours needs to stop and rest; do so, and follow as you can. In fact, latecomers may give our EurAsian friends pause, wondering how many of us will show up."

His men smiled or saluted. The gates opened, and Efran said, "We're off, then." Kraken lit out like an arrow from the bow.

Kraken kept up a steady lope for hours, but contrary to what Efran had told the men, he did stop for a rest and water break at noon. The dozen who had managed to keep abreast of him so far (including Jehan and Coish) were glad to stop with him, and late arrivals were even gladder to join them.

After almost an hour at their rest stop, Efran looked around. "Is that all of us? Does anyone know?" Several men started counting, but Hawk was the first to say, "Yes, Captain; there are fifty-two of us, not including you."

"All right, then. Let's—" Efran broke off as he was swinging up to the saddle.

Young Eymor had just trotted up on a draft horse. He saluted. "Don't mind us, Captain; Big Loxe doesn't care to lope, sir, but we'll get there all the same, and, I can report that nobody's following you."

"Fifty-three," Hawk muttered sullenly, as he didn't like to be wrong.

"Very good," Efran laughed. "Onward, then." He turned Kraken north, who jumped into a powerful stride immediately. Right behind him, Jehan and Coish smirked at each other for having managed to grab two of the strongest horses in the stables.

By late afternoon, Efran's group had reached the outskirts of Eurus. He had them stop under a stand of oaks and hickories through which a brook ran not far off the road. "How many here? Someone count."

Several did. Shortly, Fennig said, "Twenty-eight, Captain."

"Good. Who all knows the way to Marguerite's Featherstone from here?" Efran asked. A half-dozen hands went up, and Efran said, "Seagrave, Truro, Martyn, Serrano—we're waiting for twenty-five more, is that right?" Upon the answering affirmations, he went on, "You four wait for the stragglers here, bring them all up to Featherstone, where you'll report to Tourse for instructions. Let's go."

Efran then directed Kraken down the road to Marguerite's mansion.

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Chapter 8

Efran's group arrived at the open, unmanned gates of Featherstone and continued loping up the drive, scanning for anyone, friend or enemy. Having yet seen no one, they drew up to the elegant white mansion. Efran pulled Kraken up to the steps, above which stood the broad double doors surmounted by a cut-glass fanlight.

Hopping down from Kraken to leap up the steps, Efran pounded on the doors. "Marguerite? Hartshough? Who's here?"

The door was opened by a purple uniform, whom Efran dropped with a fist to the face. Running inside, he shouted, "*Koa!*"—"Attack!" whipping out his sword at the oncoming purple bodies.

As his men thronged in behind him with swords drawn, the purple bodies stopped and threw up their hands. "No! We're just guards!"

"Marguerite don't need you," Efran said. "Seagrave, Teschner—disarm them; bind their hands." Many others not named Seagrave or Teschner grabbed the guards to haul them unarmed out to the front steps.

Meanwhile, Efran was striding up the foyer, shouting, "Marguerite! Hartshough!"

The door into the dining room opened, and Marguerite came out. "My goodness, such a to-do. Are you from the Abbey Lands?" she asked, seeing the red uniforms.

"Marguerite! You don't know me?" Efran asked in dismay.

She came closer to peer at his face. "Efran? Why is your hair white?"

"I forgot about my hair!" he laughed, grabbing her up to hug her, gently. "Is everyone all right? Why are these soldiers here?"

"Efran, my goodness," she said, stroking his hair, and he grinned at being petted. "Yes, Surchatain Baldassare has posted them to make sure nothing is damaged before he takes residence."

"Oh, is that so? When?" Efran asked through gritted teeth.

She sighed, "I don't really know. He promised to give me time to get out, but—"

"No, you're not going anywhere. Is Hartshough here? And the rest of your staff?" he asked.

"Yes, but I can't call him. It annoys the soldiers," she said dolefully.

"Call him," Efran uttered.

She pursed her lips at him, then summoned as of old, "HARTSHOUGH!"

Men in red all down the long foyer whooped in laughter, and the very Hartshough appeared from the door to the dining room to bow. "Good to see you, Lord Efran. Once you and your men dispose of the old guard, we desire your presence in the dining room."

Marguerite said, “Yes, that. Thank you, Hartshough.”

Efran added, “I thank you as well, Hartshough, but I have a minor errand to see to first. You are welcome, however, to feed my men.” Efran gestured Tourse over to give him instructions about searching the house, evicting the soldiers, posting guards, and seeing to the horses. Then he had Jehan bring him his saddle bags while Coish got the three of them fresh horses from Marguerite’s stables.

Within minutes, Efran, in his white linen dress uniform, came out to meet Jehan and Coish standing by their horses in the courtyard. The foyer, back doors, balconies, and courtyards swarmed with Abbey men, as the Eurussian guards had been taken away (where, Efran didn’t ask). But Efran and his honor guard of two young Polonti were unarmed, save the pouch slung over Efran’s shoulder.

He, Jehan and Coish rode away from Featherstone into the central district of Eurus as twilight approached. Arriving at the gates of the palace, Efran reined around without dismounting while the Eurussian gate guards stared up at him stonily. Twenty or more guards began gathering beyond the gates, eyeing the Polonti.

Jehan and Coish, behind Efran on either side, watched in anticipation as the Captain looked over the hindrances before him. He was thinking, *Does my title carry any weight outside the Lands? Can I exercise my authority on behalf of Marguerite? We’re about to find out.*

He said loudly, “I am Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. I demand to speak to Surchatain Baldassare and the Council.”

The Eurussian guards looked momentarily frozen, then the two gate guards tentatively unlocked the gates and opened them. The remainder of the guards stood back in two lines to present a clear path from the gates to the palace steps. So Efran and his attendants walked their horses to the steps and dismounted. Efran took the document pouch off his shoulder to hold it.

The two door guards opened the doors for him and his boys. Efran turned to one Eurussian to instruct, “Take me to Baldassare.”

The guard wavered. “He and the Council are in a private session, Lord Efran.”

“Excellent. You will lead us there,” Efran ordered.

He said uneasily, “This way, Lord Efran.” All three Polonti watched, fascinated, in that he seemed compelled to obey while still aware that he was throwing over his duty. It made for an uncomfortable dissonance—for him, at least.

The guard led them to a pair of double doors off the foyer. He opened them, then stepped back to begin announcing him: “Lord—”

Efran stopped him with a gesture, then walked toward the rectangular table at the end of a large room, Jehan and Coish following him. All of the high officials seated at the table, eight of them, stared at the intruders, as did the minor officials, secretaries, amanuenses, servants, and guards that filled the room. And Baldassare sat in the middle of the table staring at this unwelcome figure of authority.

Regarding them all, the tall, white-haired Polonti said, “I am Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Surchatain Baldassare, I have come to warn you off treaty breaking.”

With Efran looking directly at him, Baldassare hedged, “Efran? You’re—Efran? What?”

Efran replied, “You put your signature to a treaty swearing that, among other things, you would leave Marguerite alone. Now I see that you are poised to evict her and occupy her estate.”

When Baldassare merely gaped at him, the councilor at his right demanded, “Do you have proof of this treaty?”

Focusing on him, Efran asked, “And who are you, sir?”

“I am Grand Councilor Molyneux,” he said firmly, to indicate that he was not cowed.

“Excellent. Here.” Efran sidearmed the pouch twelve feet to the Grand Councilor, who caught it in surprise. As Molyneux opened it to unroll the document, other councilors rose from their seats to come look over his shoulders.

“This is your signature, Surchatain,” Molyneux said, glancing at him. Baldassare squinted uneasily.

Another councilor observed, “And there’s the provision regarding the lady! ‘Lady Marguerite, her staff, her guests, her house and possessions shall all be off-limits to EurAsian interference.’”

“So? I signed the document as a councilor so that they would release me. It has no significance now that I am Surchatain,” Baldassare blustered.

Molyneux noted, “You signed it simply ‘Baldassare.’ Unless you changed identities, it is binding.”

“Again, so?” Baldassare said with curled lip. “What can the little Abbey lord do about it?”

“Read on, Grand Councilor Molyneux,” Efran said dryly.

Molyneux picked up the document to scan it, then read out loud: “‘If EurAsian is found in violation of any part of this treaty, the Abbey Lands shall respond as its leadership deems appropriate, to be held harmless under Roman’s Law.’”

The whole table studied the grim Polonti in white from head to foot. But Baldassare folded his arms to snort, “What shall you and your little Polonti village do to me, Lord Efran?”

He replied, “First, let me recall to you why you, Wyse and Inglese signed the treaty in the first place: you attacked our ‘little Polonti village’ with a thousand conscripts on horses, whom we sent stampeding back up to you. Inglese is dead, but we still have Wyse. Then we sent you in a carriage back here with a copy of this treaty. And my response to your breaking it is this: unless you withdraw immediately from Marguerite’s estate, and leave her strictly alone . . . I’ll burn this palace to the ground.”

The Councilors stared at him in shock, but Baldassare said, “That’s quite a threat to make to a sitting Surchatain. Seize him.” He gestured to the guards filling the room.

As they moved toward Efran, he and his two boys formed a defensive triangle. But then alarm bells began ringing from several different parts of the palace. The guards paused, and Molyneux shouted, “Go see to it!” The guards ran out, and more alarms began ringing.

Jehan whispered, “I smell smoke.”

Apparently the councilors did, too, for one rushed to a window to look out. “Fire! I see a—two! Two small fires at the base of the walls!”

Glancing to the window, Efran caught sight of the Abbey Lands faerie Solace outside. She paused to wink at him, then moved on. *Faerie magic*, he thought. He couldn’t decide how he felt about that.

“How are you doing that?” one councilor shouted at Efran.

He said, “I’m not. I only declared it. Baldassare’s signature is what’s lighting the fires.”

The councilors swung toward the Surchatain, who seemed to shrink in his golden robes. Molyneux turned to tell the instigator, “We withdraw any claim on Marguerite, and swear to abide by the treaty that Baldassare signed. Now you may put out the fires.”

The alarms continued to ring as Efran said, “Pull your men out of Featherstone.”

Molyneux roared at his attaché, “Do that now!” As the man ran out, Molyneux said, “Lord Efran, I am acting in good faith; surely you can as well.”

Efran turned his head to mutter, “Stop the burning, please, Solace.” Promising nothing, he looked back at Molyneux.

The occupants of the room waited tensely as one by one, the alarms went dead but for the reverberations. The Councilor at the window craned his neck to see all around, then turned back to the room with a bare sigh of relief. Baldassare sat as though numb. Presently, a senior guard entered to bow to the table. “Surchatain Baldassare, Grand Councilor Molyneux—all fires around the palace have been extinguished.”

As the table of Councilors turned to Efran, he said, “Good evening, gentlemen.” He bowed, and his boys did likewise. Then he turned to walk out of the room and down the foyer to exit the great doors. The numerous Eurussian guards hung back with dark faces.

The few guards remaining in the courtyard stood aside while the Abbey representatives claimed their horses and exited the open gates. Riding out, they saw men with water buckets continue to walk around the perimeter of the palace. And on gaining the road to Featherstone, the Landers looked back at blackened portions of the palace façade.

As they rode at an easy lope in the gloaming, Jehan asked, “How did you do that, Captain?”

Efran laughed, “It wasn’t me; it was the faerie Solace who came up here with Baldassare. I’m afraid he’s regretting that now. Faeries are unaccountable.”

Coish opined, “Women are *loco*.” Jehan fervently agreed; Efran winced.

When they arrived at Featherstone, they found it festively lit inside and out. Marguerite’s stableman took their horses, and they entered the foyer to be presented with mugs of clear, light beer by a pretty maid. She curtsied and said, “Lord Efran, you and your men please join Lady Marguerite and Lord Justinian in the dining room.”

Efran lifted his cut-glass mug in acceptance while his boys held theirs in both hands, marveling that the Lady served beer in such exquisite receptacles.

As the three entered the dining room, Efran's men sprang up from the table and Marguerite rose to hug him, patting his back. "They all left, Efran, even the ones we didn't know were still about."

"Excellent," he smiled, placing his mug on the table to shake hands with Justinian, who was eyeing his hair.

"Your men have been telling us the most outrageous tales," Justinian observed grimly. "But before we address that, we need to hear what just happened—although I note that the fires in the area of the palace appear to be out now."

"Oh, Justinian, let them sit and eat first!" Marguerite cried.

"We'll do it all," Efran promised, sitting with a sigh in front of a medium-rare ribeye steak.

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Chapter 9

Efran, Justinian, Marguerite and various Abbey soldiers talked for hours over dinner and dessert. He told them about their struggle with De'Ath, which turned his hair white, and Estes' brilliant use of the Polonti *Code of Justice* to convict him. And Efran received an update on Verlice's sons (who were doing well; Arturo was up and about, though not attempting heavy work yet).

And, of course, Justinian rattled off several witty and only slightly off-color observations in Efran's voice, which never ceased to astonish his listeners. "Justinian, you're going to get in trouble doing that," Marguerite admonished as if he were an adorable six-year-old.

"It'll be worth it," he said in Efran's voice, looking off the way Efran did, and those sitting around him almost fell over. Even Efran laughed, finally recognizing himself in Justinian's imitation.

As Efran was rising from the table in exhaustion, Marguerite objected, "Oh, Efran, you can't go to bed yet! You haven't told me how my darling Sybil is doing!"

He paused, unsteady on his feet. "Well, Marguerite. She's doing well. We'll talk more tomorrow." He bent to kiss her head, then followed a maid to his appointed room. Marguerite and Justinian studied each other; several Abbey men had already told them that Lady Minka was pregnant.

Efran slept late the following morning, May 20th, because no one woke him. When he appeared downstairs for an early lunch, Marguerite met him with a fond pat. "Did you sleep well, dear?"

"Yes, Marguerite, like the dead," he exhaled. Then he raised his head at the sound of banging on the back door. "Uh oh."

"Yes, your horse is giving the stablemen fits," she observed almost proudly.

"I'll be right back," he said. He went to the back door to slip out, finding Kraken directly outside. Taking his halter, Efran told him, "You can't come in; this place has bright, clean floors."

Then you can sleep in my stall, Kraken said.

Efran laughed, “Not likely.” He walked the monster over to the pond to let him drink and paw the water. “Give me today to rest up. Unless something happens, we’ll ride back tomorrow.” While Kraken waded farther into the pond, Efran looked down at his rumpled dress uniform. “Play out here, but behave. I have to go talk to Marguerite.”

She knows, Kraken said.

“Probably,” Efran admitted, turning back to the house.

When he returned to the dining room wearing frayed but clean work clothes, he found a ham omelet with fresh blueberries and raspberries waiting for him. As he picked up his fork, Marguerite sat beside him. “Justinian is checking on the wreckage at the palace after your visit yesterday.” She didn’t mention that this was on the tail end of night-long information-gathering for him.

“Ho, I can’t wait to hear about that,” he said, scooping up eggs.

After a moment, she asked softly, “What of Sybil, Efran?”

He swallowed, laying down his fork. “Leese says she’s pregnant, about three months along.” She was quiet, and he added, “I’m scared, Marguerite. She’s . . . small and—not strong. I watched Adele give birth, and—”

They looked up as Justinian entered, tossing his tall hat onto the table. He swept aside his evening suit tails to sit beside Efran with a wry look. “Well, you’re up, you instigator, you firebrand. Yes, I’ll have the punch with a twist, please,” he said to the maid, who nodded as she placed an omelet in front of him as well.

He shook out a crisp linen napkin for his lap. Efran glanced over with a half-smile while sampling his own punch. “Oh, that’s good. Is that from Wirrin Valley brewery?” he asked Marguerite.

“Yes, we’ll get you a case to take back,” Marguerite said.

“Good.” Efran looked back to Justinian, who was regarding him in mild suspicion.

“I suppose you’ll claim ignorance regarding Baldassare’s disappearance,” Justinian remarked. He took up a forkful of ham to chew on while eyeing Efran judgmentally.

“Already?” Efran asked, setting down his glass. “Who replaced him?”

“Molyneux is Acting Surchatain by order of the Council. And his first action was to rescind Baldassare’s seizure of Featherstone,” Justinian said, glancing up at Marguerite. She exhaled softly, closing her eyes.

Efran narrowed his eyes. “Is it that easy?”

“When one has a lunatic burning down the house around one, you’d be surprised how quickly one can act,” Justinian observed. He held his napkin atop his cravat to sip the colorful punch.

“All right,” Efran said, looking off to think. “Then I’ll take most of the men back tomorrow, but leave a crew here to keep watch.”

“Thank you, Efran,” Marguerite said. He crinkled his eyes at her.

While Justinian went to bed, Efran put his men at Marguerite’s disposal to repair, clean, or perform any other chores that Featherstone required following her brush with eviction. Efran was very glad to have apparently prevented it, but at the same time, he wanted her down at the Lands with them. Minka missed her; Marguerite wasn’t getting any younger, and he wanted them to have time together in case—

Shutting down that line of thought, Efran went out walking the grounds with Kraken. So, what did his experiment prove about exercising his titled authority outside the Abbey Lands? Efran had to mull that over for a while before deciding: not much. His show of authority carried little, if any, of the supernatural hallmarks shown in Minka’s use of it. Apparently, Efran’s assumption that there *was* power in it gave his performance enough force to bully the guards—but not Baldassare.

Brandishing the treaty was a nice touch, but the only thing that gave it teeth was Solace starting fires with faerie magic. And it was just coincidental that she was there. . . .

Or was it? Could that have somehow been part of the gift, as she—and all Abbey Lands faerie—were under his authority? He tried to think that through, but couldn’t comfortably conclude anything from it. He didn’t like to use faeries; they bent the rules and, worse . . . seemed to offer a shortcut to waiting on God. Shortcuts were dangerous; moreover, even well-meaning faeries were unaccountable.

Then he wondered, “When did I decide the solution for everything was to burn it down?” He must have been tired, because the only answer he could come up with was: *Is it wrong if it works?*

Later that day, Efran pulled Tourse aside to task him with separating out at least ten men to stay on at Featherstone as slave labor for Marguerite. Meanwhile, they had to make sure that Acting Surchatain Molyneux didn’t start casting glances toward Featherstone again.

And at twilight, Efran was standing on a balcony that looked toward the heart of Eurus, and the palace. Even from this distance, he could see that dark discolorations remained along the façade here and there, which workers were even now trying to whitewash. Apparently, the stains kept bleeding through. *That’s fine; I want you to remember it*, he thought.

That evening, he almost fell asleep over dinner—which was inexcusable, given the quality of what was set before him. But when he went up to bed, he lay there looking up at the gathered silk of the canopy over the bed. And he realized that for the first time ever, he didn’t want to go home. He wasn’t anxious to see Minka because he couldn’t endure the thought of what was coming. Even if she survived, it was likely to be crippling. And it was all his doing.

While he contemplated this, he became aware of faint reverberations from somewhere below. So he got out of bed and went down the dark stairs to the dining room. From there, he followed the sound of shuddering thumps to the kitchen, then to the back door.

He opened it to the dark, swaying shape, and sighed, “Come back to your stall. I’ll lie down with you, as long as it’s clean.” He paused for Kraken to drop a pile on Marguerite’s lawn, then they went back to the one stall in the stables with a broken door. After Kraken lay down with his neck stretched out, Efran flopped down on his back in the hay beside him, his head on the horse’s neck. He snuffled his human’s hair.

“Yes, the pillow was perfumed; stop it,” Efran muttered, reaching back to whack him. Kraken snorted.

Early the following morning, May 21st, Efran swung up on Kraken in Featherstone's courtyard to look around at those assembling: about 35 of his men had elected to return to the Lands today; the remaining 18 would dribble back with reports as released by Tourse.

"All right; is everyone ready?" Efran asked generally. With the men mounted and looking to him, he said, "Graeme, I think we took care of the renegades that were hiding along this road, but I want you and Leneghan to ride as rearguard with your swords at the ready."

"Yes, Captain," Graeme said, and Leneghan saluted.

"We're off, then," Efran said. As he turned Kraken, he lifted a hand to Marguerite and Hartshough on the front steps, and his heart hurt for Minka to see her again.

Then they set off down the southbound road to the Abbey Lands.

Because Efran saw no need to tax the horses, they rode at an easy lope with frequent rest and water stops. But since they had left so early, it was only late afternoon when they crossed the old stone bridge that marked the northern boundary of the Lands. The wall gate guards rang the alarm bell to herald their coming, which was repeated by the courtyard bell.

About half the company stopped at the lower barracks where they were quartered. In addition to these, Efran had instructed Jehan and Coish to report to Commander Wendt and Captains Towner and Stites. Following that, they were to report to their own Captain, Rigdon, and Captain Chee in the upper barracks.

Ascending the old switchback, Efran kept looking up for Minka among those waiting in the courtyard, though he knew he wouldn't spot her unless she were right at the fence; she was usually the shortest person out there. So he didn't expect to see her until he had dismounted in the courtyard. But even then, he didn't.

Turning to the gate guard, he began, "Mathurin, where is—?"

"Yes, Captain; the lady was out shopping, since we didn't have notice of your coming. But I'm sure her bodyguard heard the bells and'll be bringing her right away," he explained.

"Ah. All right," Efran said uneasily. Meanwhile, since Estes and DeWitt *had* shown up to see him, Efran gave them a disjointed but positive report of their success. He ended, "I'm afraid our copy of the treaty is gone, but it may be moot at this point."

DeWitt asked, "So the faerie Solace isn't ruling any more?"

"No, she just dropped by to start fires for me. Grand Councilor Molyneux is the Acting Surchatain, as long as he survives," Efran said. He was still looking distractedly over the Lands.

Patting his shoulder, Estes said, "I'm sure she'll be up shortly, Efran. For now, go bathe. You smell like a horse."

"Probably," Efran laughed. With a last glance down the switchback, he carried his saddle bags up the fortress steps toward his quarters. Kraken was firmly led to his repaired and newly reinforced stall.

After receiving the greetings of the door guards, Efran wearily opened the door to his quarters—and stopped to gaze around the room.

It was filled with baby paraphernalia—wraps, blankies, clothes—especially tiny dresses—bottles, jars, tins, a changing table, and a frilly bassinet beside the bed.

He barely heard the door open behind him, then she was rushing up to throw her arms around him, dropping more bags in the process. “You’re back,” she sighed happily, and he could do nothing but wrap her up.

She turned her sweet face up to him, glowing. “Oh, I know I’m overdoing it, but I’m having so much fun. Oh, Efran, I hope it’s a girl. I think it is. And I hope she has your hair.”

He looked momentarily pained, given that his hair was white, but she didn’t notice. Her chest expanded with another great sigh, and she took his hand to put it on her abdomen. “I know it’s too early to feel movement, but I can tell I’m getting bigger. Oh!” She looked at him in sudden surprise. “What am I thinking? I’ll need maternity clothes before all the baby things. Oh, I’m so silly!”

“That’s not silly. You have time to get all you need,” he said, kissing her head. Glancing at his chest of clothes that was now covered with baby accouterments, he added, “I’ve been told that I smell like a horse, so, I’ll go out to the men’s bath house—”

“No, use the third-floor room,” she said, scooping purchases off his chest to open it and pick out his work clothes and drawers.

He began, “Will you come—”

“Of course,” she said, handing him his clothes.

“—and bathe with me?” he finished, smiling.

“And prance down the stairs all wet?” She arched a prudish eyebrow at him, adding, “Let’s think about what to do after you bathe.” He accepted that.

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Chapter 10

Efran was considerably more relaxed at dinner. Since Minka was so happy, he decided to just enjoy the time they had together and not look six months down the road. Besides, many times when he thought he had seen disaster looming, God stepped in and did something altogether different. Wasn’t it entirely possible that both Minka and the baby would survive?

As news of Minka’s condition spread, many people paused by the back table to offer quiet congratulations. Ella wanted to hear all about how she was feeling, so there was an extended conversation behind Efran’s back during which Ella held on to his left shoulder and Minka encircled his waist with an arm, all while he ate and fed Joshua on his left leg. None of this disturbed him.

The children came over in great curiosity. With serious eyes, Toby asked, “Minka, are you going to have a baby?” He enunciated the words clearly so there would be no misunderstandings.

“Yes, darling,” she said with a warm, loving smile. “But you will always be our first.”

He nodded hesitantly, as if that were fine, but not his concern. “But Minka,” he said, lowering his voice, “you’re not big.”

“That comes later,” she said just as quietly. “The baby has to grow.”

His face grew troubled. “Yes, but, you’re not big *now*. Ladies who have babies are big, to carry the babies in their stomachs. You’re not very much bigger than me or Noah. How can you carry a baby?”

And there it was. It wasn’t a criticism or a denial; it was a search for reassurance that this was even possible. Efran stared down at his plate.

Minka was momentarily silent, then smiled mischievously and said, “I’ll grow. Not this way [pointing up] but this way [pointing out from her stomach]. Watch me.”

“All right.” Toby accepted that, leaning forward to kiss her cheek.

He backed away with Alcmund so that Hassie could step closer to the bench. Twisting her hands indecisively, she asked, “Can I come watch?”

“The birth?” Minka asked, and Hassie nodded rapidly.

“I don’t know. When it gets closer to the time, we’ll ask the doctor. All right?”

Hassie nodded again, then asked, “It doesn’t hurt, does it?”

Minka paused, remembering Adele’s screams, then confessed, “I’ve never done it before.”

Hassie considered that, then said, “I can hold your hand. That will help.”

“Thank you, Hassie,” Minka smiled.

Following dinner, Efran, Minka and Joshua (on his father’s shoulders) walked around the back grounds for a while, watching the sun spread over the Sea to their right. The diminishing light crept back along the forests to the west, drawing the blanket of evening over the trees.

Minka sighed, pressing into Efran’s side. He couldn’t drape an arm over her shoulders as he usually did, because he had to keep both hands on Joshua. “I can’t believe it,” she murmured. “I’m trying not to make so much of it, in case something goes wrong, but—it’s like falling headfirst into a room that’s been locked to you. Oh! Did you get the hole in the attic sealed up for poor Nomus?”

“I think so. I’ll check with the Librarian,” he murmured.

“Isn’t it amazing, all the wonderful things we keep finding here?” she marveled.

“Yes, and very unsettling. I have no idea what I’m lord of,” he complained. Joshua wanted a hand free so he

could wave at people, so Efran let go with one hand to place it at Joshua's back instead. They passed several of her favorite men walking with a girl—Martyn and Hadewidis among them—and Minka was quietly thrilled. She wanted everyone to be in love, and to have babies (but Hadewidis had just turned 15, so she and Martyn had to wait a bit longer).

When Joshua started yawning, they headed back to the fortress. On the way, they passed Wyeth and his wife Cyr sitting on the bench under the walnut tree, talking with hand signs. At six months along, Cyr was definitely showing, and Minka grinned in anticipation. She put a hand to her belly, feeling the hardness, and tried to imagine herself all puffed up. She laughed, shaking her head at the futility of it; Efran looked up to the stars.

And that night, while she curled up into his side almost purring, he lay awake until an hour before dawn.

The next day, May 22nd, Efran and Minka were invited to the grand opening of the new chapel on the Lands. Leaving Joshua to play with the children under the care of his guardians, they took Kraken and Rose down the switchback to the elegant oyster-shaped chapel which occupied two plots behind Ryal's shop. (Due to the unique shape of the cockle roof as seen from the hilltop, the chapel immediately became known as the "oyster house.")

Efran and Minka entered to look around the beautiful walnut and oak interior, with far more space than just the hall (where services would be held). They were greeted by Lemmerz, Geneve, and the architect Bozzelli, a native of Crescent Hollow. Ryal and Giardi were also in attendance, as were several prominent business owners: Firmin, Averno, Coghill, and DeGrado, whose custom stained-glass windows graced the building.

Bozzelli stood before everyone to thank them for coming, and to recognize the businessmen who had generously contributed to the chapel's construction, plus extra for its expansion. Then he pointed out various state-of-the-art amenities, including two ground-floor garderobes (which sent waste directly into the nearby sewer via pipes to protect the water in the community well), bathing and laundry facilities, a decorative iron fence around the entire back grounds and a rock-and-copper fountain in the middle.

There was also a beautiful, well-appointed kitchen with imported tiles on the wall and floor. All these areas were supplied running water piped in from the community well. It was unquestionably the most luxurious habitation on the Lands, including the fortress (though that was much larger).

Looking at all the extras, Efran murmured, "Why does a chapel need a kitchen?"

Bozzelli said, "We're looking to use this facility for more than merely religious services, Lord Efran—important gatherings, community meetings. You want your upper echelon to be comfortable."

"Oh," Efran said.

Minka chatted with everyone as they ate hors d'oeuvres and drank mild ale. In the meeting area of the hall, Efran glanced around at the elegant scrolled seating (movable) and the wainscoting along the walls. Looking toward the front, with its raised platform and lectern, Efran paused. "Where is the cross?" he asked.

Several conversations around him faded; Lemmerz looked to the architect. Bozzelli replied, "We had plans to install one, Lord Efran, but several members felt it might be offensive and unnecessarily exclusionary."

Efran looked stricken. "Offensive," he whispered. Then he raised his chin slightly. "I see. Well, I won't force it on you"—though the Fortress had paid for the construction of what he had assumed to be a place to worship the One who gave offense. (Efran knew nothing about who actually paid what, nor did anyone else here.)

Geneve, accurately reading him, seethed at being put in a position of having misled him, when she had made the purpose of this building plain to Bozzelli from the beginning. But Efran never thought to blame her. He looked at Ryal, whose gray eyebrows raised minutely, and Efran nodded in response. The Church was not a building; it was a Body.

Having lost interest in the structure, Efran vacantly stood at the door to wait for Minka to conclude her socializing. Seeing that, she interrupted herself to go to his side; he smiled down at her and they left. The Grand Opening of the All-Purpose Luxury Civic Center collapsed shortly afterward.

While Minka went to Law class (which Soames had delayed to accommodate the chapel opening) Efran went to his quarters to look over his gear. He was thinking about the redeemed murderer Oatman, who had come out of seven years' hard labor with a new purpose for his life. Oatman never said a word about his redemption; he only drew the Cross on every piece of gear he used: his shield, his scabbard, his helmet, his breastplate. And, going against orders, he sacrificed himself to save at least fifty men overwhelmed in a surprise attack.

Going to the wardrobe that he had converted to an arms cabinet, Efran pulled out his breastplate. He wanted to emulate Oatman here; he wanted to brandish the Cross. But he hesitated. If he wore it externally without living it internally, he would merely profane it. Oatman's outer expression was an overflow of what filled him inside, and his sacrificial death proved it.

Dismally, Efran replaced the unadorned breastplate in the cabinet. "I'm not there, and I don't want to be a hypocrite."

Two days later, Efran received a surprise visit from representatives of the Council of Eurus. It was such a surprise, in fact, that the pair of Abbey men who had returned the previous day from Featherstone had no idea that the councilors were coming. But two of them—two councilors with a bodyguard of six—presented themselves at the wall gates demanding an interview with the Captain. This was about an hour before sunset on May 24th.

After consideration, Efran had their bodyguard sent to Croft's for dinner and lodging. Then he permitted the councilors' carriage to be brought up to the courtyard. Grudgingly, he had dinner for the two brought to the small dining room, but chose to wait to have dinner himself until this meeting was concluded. He had already determined that it would be short: he would apologize for nothing and reimburse them nothing for the fires or anything.

To not inconvenience his administrators—both of whom were dealing with pregnant wives—Efran summoned Captain Rigdon's new scribe Oulton to take notes for the Fortress records. Minka he sent on to the dining hall for dinner. Quennel would hold Joshua until Efran got there.

So with Oulton in place with quills, ink and paper, Efran had the councilors brought in. The door guard Ellor announced with a salute, "Councilors Dromgoole and Undergrewp, Captain."

"Have a seat, gentlemen." Already seated midway down the table, Efran gestured to the head, where plates of venison, greens and twisty rolls sat, as well as ales. The visitors stiffly entered to take their seats. Efran remembered both of them from the confrontation in Eurus five days ago, though he didn't know which was which. Frankly, he didn't care.

After checking to see that Oulton was ready to take notes, Efran asked, "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

“Lord Efran, Councilor Dromgoole and I have come to demand reparations from you,” Undergrewp said stiffly. He was a stern-faced aristocrat with thinning hair slicked back—with pomade?

Efran was studying his hair even as he docilely rejected the demand. “No, and I am surprised you’d pretend to care what happened to Baldassare, after having deposed him.”

“This does not involve Baldassare,” Undergrewp clarified. Dromgoole, a ponderous, red-faced man, had opened his ale.

“Then what do I supposedly owe you for?” Efran asked idly, glancing out the open door to the foyer. Oulton was dutifully scratching with his quill.

“Smoke damage to the Councilors’ ceremonial robes,” Undergrewp said.

Efran blinked. “What?”

Undergrewp laid an invoice before him. “Cleaning our robes of the smoke residue has cost twenty-six royals and fifteen pieces. We’re adding a penalty of two hundred royals for the aggravation and disrespect, as the robes are of costly make and centuries-old patterns.” He extended the sleeve of his own robe to add, “Worse, you can still smell the smoke on them.”

Declining to sniff his sleeve, Efran glanced at Dromgoole next to him, whose sleeve was dangling in his plate of venison. So Efran laughed, “You’re buggy.” The juvenile insult came out of nowhere; Efran hadn’t used it since leaving Eledith about 16 years ago.

A movement on the table caught his eye, and Efran started as a large cockroach crawled out of Undergrewp’s sleeve to scuttle toward his plate.

“You—” Efran lurched up as a second and a third rapidly emerged from the councilor’s other sleeve. Undergrewp stood to shake out his sleeves in a panic, so that more cockroaches fell out. Dromgoole removed his plate from the table while Oulton simply brushed the roaches away to continue taking notes.

“You’re full of them! Get rid of them!” Efran demanded.

Undergrewp tore off his robe only to find more roaches skittering out of his lacy shirt. He began dancing and screeching like a girl, shaking his hands helplessly over his rippling shirt.

Meanwhile, Dromgoole looked down at his writhing robe, then opened it for three green tree frogs to leap out onto the table, snapping up roaches left and right. While Undergrewp was hopping from foot to foot in distress, Dromgoole set down his plate to remove his robe, draping it over the back of the chair. As the robe continued disgorging frogs, he picked up his plate to resume eating a safe distance from the table.

Efran and Oulton stared at the stream of frogs that emerged from Dromgoole’s lumpy robe to leap after the roaches. But as those were still swarming from Undergrewp’s shirt—and now his pants—Efran said, “Get out! Both of you! Out!”

Chapter 11

Undergrewp flew from the room, shedding roaches as he went. Dromgoole set his empty plate back on the table, but took up his ale. With frogs still emerging from his councilor's robe, he waved dismissively at it and followed Undergrewp out.

They stopped in the courtyard to wait for their carriage, but since Undergrewp was still spewing roaches, the gate sentries forced him out onto the switchback. Dromgoole padded after him complacently, drinking his ale. When their carriage came, they got in to proceed down the switchback to Croft's. But Undergrewp, awash in insects, was barred entry by the doormen.

In fact, it took only minutes for the pair of Councilors to be rushed up Main and tossed out of the gates, with their carriage and bodyguard following post haste. By now it was dark.

Meanwhile, Efran and Oulton were watching a dozen green frogs chase down the remaining cockroaches. Hesitantly, Efran asked, "What—did I say after Undergrewp demanded reparations for smoke damage to their robes?"

Oulton picked up a sheet of notes to search it, then read: "'What?'"

"After that," Efran clarified.

Oulton looked down at his notes again. "You said, 'You're buggy.'"

Efran squinted at him. "And then I said . . . ?"

Referring to his notes again, Oulton quoted, "'You're full of them. Get rid of them.'" He looked up to belatedly add, "Captain."

Scowling, Efran summoned, "Kele!"

She appeared at once, bristling, "Good heavens, Lord Efran! Why such urgency in the middle of dinner?"

Efran took a breath before proceeding. "Forgive my abruptness, Kele, but I need to know who is taking my words and acting on them."

"Whaaat?" Kele asked, her pixie face screwing up in bewilderment.

"Buggy! Roaches! Frogs!" Efran said, gesturing around the room.

"Why, Lord Efran, none of the faeries would presume to encroach on your words of authority," Kele said, affronted.

"This was—from my words?" Efran repeated in alarm.

"Yes, Lord Efran. May I be excused to dinner? We were enjoying a very funny skit by Hebblethwaite and Bythesea in imitation of self-important councilors who emit insects and other creatures," she said airily.

Efran eyed her, but said, “You’re dismissed,” and she vanished.

Efran looked at Oulton, who was contorting his face to avoid smiling. Glancing around at the clean-up crew, Efran muttered, “Well. I suppose the frogs can stay. Only—that’s enough.” He looked warily at Dromgoole’s robe, which suddenly went limp. Undergrewp’s innocent robe still lay on the floor, as did the invoice.

Oulton bent for his quill to add that note to the minutes of the meeting, and Efran said dryly, “Thank you. Dismissed.”

“Thank you, Captain, but I need to make copies of my notes for Commander Wendt, Captain Rigdon, and Administrator DeWitt,” Oulton said, sitting again to dip his quill.

Efran winced, but gestured Ellor over. “Bring a plate and ale for Oulton, please.”

“Yes, Captain,” Ellor saluted, moving off.

“Thank you, sir,” Oulton said without looking up, and Efran grunted.

Wiping the sweat from his upper lip, Efran went on to the dining hall and claimed his place beside Minka. That required a shifting of bodies all down the left side of the table, but Efran was finally able to sit and receive his plate of venison from Madea’s son. “Thank you, Wardly.”

“Sure thing, Cap’n. And here’s yer ale,” the boy said, producing it from his apron pocket.

Efran nodded, opening it to take a swig as he looked around. Ella, to his left, continued her conversation with Minka by holding his shoulder and leaning behind him, as usual. As Ella had Joshua on her lap, Efran held out his hands to him, but Joshua merely glanced over in a perfunctory greeting.

He was clutching a spoon with which he was excavating a piece of cream pie, and Efran didn’t see any way to interrupt without creating a hall-wide disturbance. So he left the boy alone in order to work on his own plate.

Before long (while Minka and Ella were still conversing behind him), he saw Oulton enter the hall with a few sheets of paper which he carried clear up to the head table to deposit in front of DeWitt. Efran stopped on a mouthful, then warily began chewing again, only to stop again when Oulton handed off another few sheets to Rigdon at another table. Having done all the damage possible in the dining hall, the young scribe exited without catching sight of the leery Captain.

Efran’s eyes flicked from DeWitt to Rigdon as they read in concentration. Because DeWitt had received his meeting notes first, he finished them first. And Efran knew he had finished reading when he put his head in his hands to laugh. Oulton must have included a narrative along with the dialogue. That made Estes look over, so DeWitt handed the notes to him.

Looking toward Rigdon’s table, Efran just caught him handing his pages to Captain Chee. Since he was busy eating, he waved his fork at the man next to him to read them aloud. Wincing, Efran looked off. *How bad can this get?* But Minka had finished her conversation with Ella, so righted herself to lean on his arm.

He glanced down at her nearly untouched plate. “You know you need to eat,” he whispered.

“Yes, I do,” she sighed, putting a hand to her abdomen again. By sheer force of will, she ate half the plate.

After Law class the following day (May 25th), Minka set herself to organize all the baby things now cluttering their quarters. Efran left her to her task and began up the stairs. Then he paused, listening. Unsure of what he was hearing, he went back down to their quarters to listen at the closed door. No, Minka was merely humming as she reorganized. So he withdrew from there to go out to the courtyard, noting a few frogs in the corridor.

The door and gate sentries saluted smartly, but he merely acknowledged them with a nod as he scanned the area. Looking toward the stables, Efran exhaled, knowing what he heard. Kraken was calling.

Entering the stables, Efran went to Kraken's stall to see him standing listlessly, head down. His door had been reinforced with oak planks and iron hardware that he couldn't kick through or jiggle open. Efran lifted the latch and went in to comb him down thoroughly. Squirt usually did this, but he was overwhelmed with work, as more stablehands were needed.

With that refreshing, Kraken shook himself and Efran said, "Come on back." There were nice large exercise pens for the horses, but Kraken didn't get along with most of them; he wanted his human. So Efran just left the stall door open and walked out. Kraken followed, ears perked, as Efran walked him past the training pens, the sparring grounds, and the archery lines.

Under the apple trees, Efran stopped to stroke his neck. "I have to take care of a few things inside—"

The undergardener Tourjee came up, pausing with puckered lips. "Captain, could we borrow your horse for a bit? We sure could use him to drag loads of compost from the bins way over there to our gardens way over here. I'm afraid there's a lot of it."

Efran answered, "Of course." Patting Kraken's nose, he asked him, "You'll help them, won't you?" Kraken nodded. "All right. Go with Tourjee; do what he says, and I'll be back out shortly."

"Thankee, Cap'n. Come on, Bruiser, and let's get this knocked out. Then I'm sure we'll find an apple or two for you." Ears forward, Kraken walked right with him toward the bins.

As Efran turned toward the back door, he paused to watch the children. Joshua was standing in between Toby and Hassie, each holding one of his hands. They took small, slow steps to help him start walking. The toddler was squealing in excitement to push out one shaky, chubby leg at a time.

Toby glanced up to see him, and Efran nodded, smiling. *That kid should be the next Lord of the Abbey Fortress*, Efran thought, then wondered, *Do I want to saddle him with that burden?* It was a heavy one.

Exhaling, Efran went back into the fortress and up the stairs to the workroom. DeWitt looked up when he entered, but Estes was engaged with the lists in front of him. Leaning back, DeWitt said, "Efran, did you *really* call up roaches and frogs? That's just—biblical."

"I don't know," Efran laughed, flinging himself into his chair. "But the first thing Undergrewp accused me of was causing smoke damage from the fires, and. . ."

"You said the faerie Solace did that," DeWitt noted.

Efran paused in the effort of distilling reality from fleeting impressions. "I thought she did, but then, when he made this ridiculous demand for reparations, and the first thing out of my mouth was the 'buggy' insult—I was thinking about that all last night. I haven't said that to anyone since leaving Eledith because I wanted to keep all

my teeth. To say it to a Eurasian Councilor was—bizarre,” he laughed in disbelief.

Then he looked over quickly as a large basket appeared at the door, carried by small hands. Efran sprang up to take it. “What are you doing?” he chided.

“I’m all right,” Minka said. “I just discovered that I bought far more baby things than I can use in the first six months—unless I have twins.” Efran’s face blanched, but she went on, “Since I’m not the only one expecting, I thought I’d just bring some of the excess up here to share. If you don’t have room in a cabinet, we can just leave it all in the basket.” She looked around at their filled shelves.

Estes said, “Thank you, Minka. Efran, just put it in the corner there, and someone will raid it as needed.”

Efran took it to the corner, then came back to lean down and scold her gently, “Don’t ever lift anything that heavy again, especially up and down stairs. All right? Minka?”

“I know,” she said, chastised. She took his fingers to lead him back to his chair and sit in his lap. “I’m just feeling like I can do anything.”

“Well, let’s get over that feeling,” he said, still shaken.

“I will. Let’s go walk around back.” She jumped up to take his fingers.

“Yes. Maybe I shouldn’t spoil the surprise, but Toby and Hassie are helping Joshua walk,” he said.

“Oh, how fun!” she cried. “I have to see this.”

He took her elbow to lead her down the stairs, then they went out.

Minka was gloriously happy, loving on Joshua for walking and on Toby and Hassie for helping him. Then she had to pet Kraken for all his hard work hauling compost. She stopped over the flower beds in surprise to see that the Forget-Me-Nots and Primroses that she had planted last year had come up again this spring. Someone else had planted baby’s breath nearby, and she closed her eyes in gratitude. She wanted to fill the nursery with it.

Then she opened her eyes at a new concern. Taking Efran’s fingers, she gently led him away while Kraken went with Tourjee to make another compost run. “Efran, I’m worried,” she whispered.

“About what?” he whispered back, lowering his head.

She expelled a thoughtful breath. “I know how devoted Kraken is to you, but we have to put the baby’s crib in our bedroom, and I don’t know *how*—”

He choked back laughter, seeing that she was deadly serious. “Don’t worry about that. Kraken will learn to sleep in his stall as long as someone pays attention to him during the day. The baby won’t have to share space with him,” he solemnly promised.

“Good. Thank you,” she said. Smiling up at him in adoration, as usual, she took a quick breath. “Efran—!”

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Chapter 12

“What?” Efran asked apprehensively.

Minka was stroking his hair. “Efran, your hair is growing back black.”

“Is it?” He put a hand to his head.

She made him bend down and turn his head so that she could part his hair, looking. “Yes, it’s black at the roots, about a quarter inch, more on the back,” she breathed. It had been about three weeks since it had turned white. “Pia was right! She—”

At that time, they heard the courtyard gates alarm bell. Efran squeezed her arm lightly. “Stay back here.”

“Yes, Efran,” she said quickly. He ran up the back steps through the corridor toward the foyer. At the same time, Kraken shucked off his load of compost to begin running around the west side of the fortress.

Efran emerged into the front courtyard to see a lone Polonti, a large battle-scarred man, loping a massive war horse down Main toward the switchback. Captain Stites was shouting at his men to put down their bows, given the civilians all up and down the street. A courtyard gate guard, Finn, told Efran, “Captain, he just busted through the wall gates.” The gatecrasher was not in uniform, but wore a kerchief of Venegasan blue.

Efran groaned, rolling his eyes. This was pure Polonti theatre. Sewell was really mad about Efran’s arson, but couldn’t afford to attack his much stronger ally. So Sewell was using other means to try to extract reparations. Although the warrior messenger couldn’t do much harm, it would be a show of dominance for him to gain the courtyard gates. This Efran would not allow.

At this time, he glimpsed the hatchet in the messenger’s right hand: he’d come prepared for the faerie trees. Although Efran didn’t see it now, the pair at the wall gates had lost several large limbs, just as an insult *and* injury.

He glanced aside at Kraken trotting up. Efran grasped his mane to leap up on his bare back, and the guards threw open the gates for him. Loping out, Efran knew he needed to stop the messenger from entering the switchback, but Kraken wouldn’t get there in time—the gatecrasher was approaching the last crossing on Main before the switchback entrance.

Here, Kraken made an independent course correction. He turned due north to jump lightly over the raised outer edge of the switchback and slide down the steep incline between levels, his haunches almost touching the ground. Efran pulled himself up to sit on the horse’s shoulders, leaning back to stay vertical. Kraken crossed the switchback road to repeat the shortcut, jumping over the outer wall and sliding down to the next level.

Meanwhile, Humblecut, Procuring Agent for Elvey’s, was on a mission to acquire an emergency order of six dinners from the fortress kitchen. A challenge like this might give lesser men pause, but Humblecut knew his duty and set about to do it.

He rode the lumbering old horse who was set in his ways, and one of the ways in which he was set was the learned knowledge that the bright yellow crossings were sacred, and when he himself occupied the crosswalk with a rider on his back, nothing was permitted to impede him. NOTHING.

Therefore, Humblecut entered the crosswalk on the stubborn old gelding before seeing the Polonti messenger of doom galloping up on his warhorse. By the time Humblecut looked over with great round eyes, the beast was within ten feet of him, and Kraken had two levels yet to descend.

Panicking, Humblecut pulled back on the reins, which only served to stop him directly in the path of the thundering behemoth. Humblecut squeezed his eyes shut while everyone north of him on Main and south of him in the courtyard breathlessly awaited a Collision for the Ages.

At the last second, the oncoming horse veered to avoid the obstruction, falling on its side. The rider was not thrown, but suffered the impact of a thousand-pound animal on his leg, on pavement. Humblecut, opening his eyes to find his way clear, proceeded through the crosswalk toward the new switchback, which was closer to the kitchen door. Meanwhile, Kraken, with Efran astride him, arrived at the crosswalk and halted.

Efran waited for the messenger's horse to stagger up with his rider on the other side of the crosswalk. Then he said, "I am Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Who are you and why do you think you may breach my gates?"

Sweating, the great Polonti grunted, "Lord Efran, I am Wrexall, sent from Surchatain Sewell. He requires one thousand royals from you for the destruction of his property." This demand carried a lot less force than it would have, had he been able to deliver it at the courtyard gates.

"Really," Efran breathed. He nudged Kraken forward two steps (blocking the crosswalk, thus forcing the ladies who had begun crossing to wait just a moment). The other horse, shaky after falling, backed up with an angry snort. Efran replied, "I require a refund of the three hundred royals I paid to get my emissary and my friend's children out of chains in Venegas."

Continuing forward, Kraken bumped the other horse, who bared his teeth but spun away. Wrexall reined him back around, and Efran said, "I require another three hundred royals for the indignity inflicted upon my wife, whom Steward Theodulph thought to hold captive until I paid up."

Kraken pressed forward, at which the other horse reared. Kraken bit him in the chest, and the horse swung around to run until Wrexall, grimacing, wheeled him back again. Pedestrians, riders and carts veered out of the way. Efran, pursuing him at a walk, said, "And I require one hundred royals for each man I lost defending Venegas from Mounoussamy—thirty-two men. So you may tell Sewell that, subtracting his thousand, he owes me two thousand, eight hundred royals. Goodbye."

Kraken reared up to strike at the other horse, forcing Efran to clutch his neck to hang on. But they were halfway up Main by now, and the wall guards had the gates wide open. Seeing the exit, Wrexall's horse wheeled to gallop up Main, through the gates, and over the old stone bridge.

From there, he headed east on the coastal highway, where they came from. Wrexall was bent over the pommel in pain. The men at the wall then closed the gates and saluted the Captain. He nodded, turning Kraken south again.

After waiting at another crosswalk for the ladies in their new dresses, Kraken ascended the switchback properly. "Enough showing off; you almost lost me a couple of times," Efran muttered. Kraken snorted.

Dismounting in the courtyard, Efran told Martyn, "Tell the kitchen that Humblecut gets his dinners free today."

"Yes, Captain," Martyn laughed, turning to sprint to the back kitchen door. When Martyn delivered this message,

Humblecut had just paid Loghry. Shrugging, Loghry handed the royals back to him. So Humblecut tipped him a royal, and tipped the three “nice young men” a royal each for carrying the dinners and flower arrangement down to Elvey’s for him. Thus, upon his return with dinners, flowers, and unspent royals, he was a hero once again in the eyes of all.

Efran led Kraken around the fortress toward the back grounds, musing, “Maybe I shouldn’t burn anything else down.” After considering that, he said, “Nah, it’s a very effective message.”

Then he looked over at Alcmund sweeping dirt out of the western entry. Seeing him, Alcmund dropped his broom to hurry over. “Look, Efran! New pets in the fortress!” Reaching into his pocket, he dug out a green frog. “They’re all over, and Tourjee wants them in the gardens. You won’t let the kitchen cook them, will you?” he pleaded.

“No,” Efran laughed. “Go tell the kitchen that the fortress frogs are not to be cooked.”

“Yes!” Alcmund exulted. When he turned to run back to the corridor door, the frog sprang out of his hands to freedom. Leaving him to hop away—as there were many others available—Alcmund embarked on his mission of mercy.

Resuming his walk beside the horse, Efran murmured, “I don’t even know if they’re real.”

Kraken nudged him. *Tourjee’s going to give me real apples.*

“Then you’d better finish moving his compost,” Efran said, so Kraken trotted off.

Fortunately for any frogs that might have remained at risk, Plunkett showed up at the back kitchen door with buckets of crayfish. Loghry bought them at once, and Plunkett took the royals back to his house in satisfaction, calculating in his head the amount due Reinagle and Folliott under their contract.

Meanwhile, Efran was looking around the back grounds for Minka. He found her on the bench under the walnut tree, chatting happily with the children—or anyone who passed by, apparently. And she was totally incurious as to what the emergency was about.

When he sat beside her, she snuggled up to his arm. “Will you still love me when I get fat with this baby?” she asked, grinning in confidence of his answer.

His brows drew down. “‘Fat’ for you is normal for everyone else.”

She inhaled deeply, closing her eyes. “I can’t believe it. I still can’t believe it.” And Efran became unaccountably uneasy.

With all the emissaries showing up at the gates demanding reparations, Efran continued to disallow the children’s going outside the wall to their play hut on the west side of the Passage. But they still had the black hydra, Jonguitud, to talk to. In fact, Efran only recently told them how Jonguitud had fished him out of the cavern waters when he was about to drown.

So when the hydra crept down to the east-west road today, the children (attended by Bennard and Chilcott) swarmed him. Toby, as spokesman, said, “Jonguitud, Efran told us that you saved his life by getting him out of the water!”

Jonguitud made strange grimacing faces on all three heads. “Nasty.”

“What?” “What was nasty?” the children cried.

“Wet people smell.” The hydra made a retching noise in one throat. A three-headed monster who ate snobbles while being fastidious about human smells was, of course, hilarious.

The children fell onto each other, but Hassie demanded in outrage, “Do *we* smell?”

One black head dropped down to her, its nostrils expanding. “Not as much stink. But big ones—” He pantomimed falling down dead, eyes closed and yellow tongues lolling out between sharp rows of teeth.

His audience screeched in laughter, including the bodyguards. Chilcott asked, “Do I stink?” He held an arm down to one black head. (Incidentally, Chilcott had been on laundry duty yesterday.)

It lifted up to sniff him, then said, “Not dead yet.”

Grinning, Chilcott stepped back, so Bennard said, “How about me?” The sleeve that he stuck under the black nostrils hadn’t been washed for a week.

Gurgling, the hydra rolled up into a rigid ball, heads on the inside. His stout, powerful legs began carrying him up the hillside toward his hole, with his eyes, ears and nostrils tucked away.

“Wait, don’t go!” Ivy cried. She scrambled up the hill to climb onto the ball. Apparently unaware, he continued scabbling toward his hole while the other children cried out and the bodyguards ran after him. Bennard fell on the rocky slope as Chilcott pursued Ivy, who didn’t seem to be afraid at all. Before he could catch up to her, Jonguitud dropped into his hole with her on his back.

The children gasped in horror, but immediately she came sailing out of the hole for Chilcott to catch. She wasn’t even wet. Jonguitud stuck all three heads out, wagging them to scold: “NO SWIMMING.” Then they disappeared. The children laughed in relief and Chilcott carried Ivy down to the east-west road before anyone else realized that anything had happened.

After dinner that evening, Minka fell into bed early, exhausted. But Efran hung a lantern beside the long mirror in the outer room to look at his hair. Yes, the new black growth was clearly visible under the white. Turning his head and parting his hair, he saw that the black was almost an inch long toward the back. He winced—black hair was best; white hair all right, but two-tone hair was beyond endurance. Who would take him seriously when he looked to be experimenting with hair colors?

Putting out the lantern light, he slipped into the bedroom to lean over her—she looked deeply asleep. But he whispered, “Minka?”

“Yes,” she said clearly, eyes closed.

“Minka, is it all right if I get Detler to cut off all the white hair?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, stirring.

“Thank you.” He climbed into bed with her, reaching over to extinguish the candle with his fingers.

Early the following morning, May 26th, Efran sent a replacement for Detler on door duty, Fellowes, who told him to go get his shears and meet the Captain out back. When Detler appeared with the requisite equipment, he found the Captain straddling a chair, shirtless. Looking back over his shoulder, Efran said, “Cut off all the white, please.”

Surveying his head with a professional eye, Detler observed, “That’s going to be short in places, Cap’n.”

“I already cleared it with her,” Efran smiled.

“Right-o, Cap’n,” Detler said, and got to work.

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Chapter 13

Not much later, Efran appeared in the second-floor workroom with short black hair (interspersed with a little gray). DeWitt and Estes both did double takes. “A lot of people are not going to recognize you again,” DeWitt noted.

“Good,” Efran said, flopping down to his chair to regard the faerie tree.

“Did you notice that Commander Wendt’s hair is reverting to brown?” DeWitt added.

“No,” Efran said as Estes looked up. “But I haven’t seen him for a few days,” Efran added.

DeWitt noted, “It’s subtle, since his hair was a light brown to start with. Because it was due to shock, as yours was, it’s interesting that you both began reverting about the same time.”

Efran looked off, whispering, “Will they give him back his eyes?”

The other men were silent, then Estes said, “That’s a heavy lift, Efran.” He lowered his head, nodding.

At that time, Minka was slowly waking. She looked up blearily at the morning light streaming through the small stained-glass window above the bed, then closed her eyes again. She shifted in discomfort, and her eyes shot open in alarm.

Scrambling up, she looked down at spots of blood on the sheets. She went rigid in fear, then leapt off the bed to run up the stairs to the doctor’s suite.

The front door guard, Allyr, came to the door of the workroom. He paused to assess the man in the Captain’s usual chair, then said, “Letter from Justinian, Captain, but I don’t see the lady.”

“She’s still in bed,” Efran said, reaching out for the letter, which Allyr handed to him. In fact, Minka was now running unseen down the second-floor corridor to the doctor’s suite. Then Efran paused. “Did the messenger ride through the night?”

“No, sir; he arrived late last night and got a room at Firmin’s. Melott at the gate said he looked sick,” Allyr said.

Efran grimaced. “If he’s still here, have Coghill look at him. The last thing we need is another fever going around.”

“Yes, Captain,” he saluted.

“Dismissed,” Efran said. (As it turned out, the messenger had just been tired and hungry.) Efran broke the seal on Justinian’s letter to begin reading out loud, ““To my white doe—”” and paused, a sudden lump in his throat. The endangered white doe, beloved of faeries.

He collected himself to continue: “I have no idea why I’m writing, as there is nothing to report but peace and quiet since the Gargoyle very nearly burned down the palace, to hear it told on the street. Baldassare is definitely gone; no one cares where. A few are querying the whereabouts of the beautiful Surchataine, but as the Councilors would rather she stay out of the picture, no one is searching for her, either. However, Surchataine Molyneux had inserted into the Proclamation of his Appointment as Surchataine a paragraph providing for her hanging if she does show up.”

DeWitt snorted and Efran briefly shook his head, then resumed, ““Our divine Lady M requests full and frequent updates on her darling Sybil, which other parties at Featherstone are keen to see as well. Since your Gargoyle’s rash actions precluded her emergency evacuation to the Abbey Lands, she is mulling the unprecedented step of coming down for a visit.”” Efran raised his watering eyes. “Oh, do come, Marguerite. Come soon.”

He was attempting to refocus on the letter when Leese appeared at the door. Efran looked over, then slowly stood. She said quickly, “She’s all right, Efran, but, it appears that she has miscarried.”

He absorbed this, then dropped the letter onto the table to follow her out. Estes sighed and DeWitt leaned back in his chair, stroking his forehead.

In the doctor’s quarters, Leese led Efran to a small back room where Minka was lying on a raised bed. Her face was pale and her eyes red. She turned her head as Efran came over to lift her off the bed and just hold her. She sank into his arms; he sat on the bed to lean back against the wall, holding her.

He dare not say anything, given her suffering, but—this news brought him overwhelming relief. She wouldn’t die in childbirth just yet. The threat still remained in the future, but he refused to think about that right now.

Holding her, he turned his head to Leese in the doorway to ask, “May I take her down?”

“Leave her for today, Efran; we need to keep an eye on her,” Leese said.

Acknowledging that silently, he pressed his cheek to Minka’s head. He told her, “Justinian says that Marguerite may come down for a visit.”

Minka blinked, then rose in his arms, her eyes alight. “Efran, are you serious?”

“You want me to go take the letter away from DeWitt?” he asked, smiling.

She sat up on her own. “She’s never left Featherstone, that I know of, except to make day trips to Wirrin Valley. Oh, Efran, can you make her come? Oh, but where will we put her? She’s used to luxury, and she’ll need a lot of room.”

An idea of where to put Marguerite blazed across his brain. He said, "If you lie there quietly for a little while, I'll go check on accommodations and send off a letter begging her to come."

"Yes, Efran, please do," she breathed, lying back down. He released her, bending over to kiss her forehead, and she murmured, "Spikes."

He paused. "You told me I could."

"When?" she asked.

"Last night," he said warily.

She thought about that, then waved it off. "All right. Go write Marguerite."

He grinned, pressing his cheek to her head, then hastened back to the workroom.

When he entered, he picked up the letter from Justinian first thing, to see if he had missed anything important. While he was reading, DeWitt asked, "How is she, Efran?"

He glanced up at him and Estes, who were both watching. "All right, as she has hope of Marguerite coming down. So I'm charged with convincing her to do it. Where is the stationery, Estes?"

"Right here." Estes shoved the writing apparatus toward him.

Efran sat to scrawl out a letter to Marguerite begging her to come down to the Lands, as Minka had suffered a miscarriage and the only thing that cheered her was the hope that her darling auntie would come visit. Also, there were a number of men who had enjoyed the divine Lady's hospitality and wished to see her. Also, she could bring any staff necessary for her comfort, as there would be ample accommodations for them all.

Since you've promised it, you'd better make it happen, he warned himself. He blotted the letter, folded it, addressed it, sealed it, and stood to put it in the hand of the man at the door with instructions to send it immediately via a pair of Abbey men.

That dispatched, he stood in the doorway, thinking. Then he asked, "Estes, who owns the new chapel?" While DeWitt oversaw most construction on the Lands, Estes had been in charge of the chapel from the beginning.

"The Fortress," Estes replied, writing.

"But who all contributed funds for the construction?" Efran asked.

"Besides the Fortress?" Estes inquired, looking up.

"Yes," Efran said.

"No one," Estes said, returning to the work in front of him.

Efran began, "But—at the opening, we were told—"

DeWitt glanced over as Estes got up to extract a bulging folder from the shelves behind him. "Have a look." He

tossed the folder onto the table in front of Efran. It was so full that twine was necessary to keep all papers contained.

So Efran sat to untie the twine and begin perusing work orders, receipts, correspondence, scribbled notes—everything.

At this time, Soames appeared at the door. “Excuse me, Captain—I’m looking for Lady Minka, to see if she’s coming to Law class.” Hair aside, the man was sitting in the Captain’s chair; ipso facto, that was the Captain.

Efran sat back, inhaling. “Not today, Soames, I’m sorry. She—miscarried, and is in Wallace’s quarters. Please tell Ella.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, Captain. I sure will. Administrator, Steward,” Soames acknowledged. They nodded, and he left.

Pausing over the folder, Efran said, “I’ll be right back. I need to tell the children—something” about the baby that was not to be. DeWitt and Estes mutely agreed, and Efran left the papers on the table to go down to the first floor and out the back door. “Are the children out yet?” he asked the door guard.

“Not yet, Captain.” Stephanos, on watch at the back door, saluted. One of the 40, Stephanos was not confused about who was looking for the children.

Efran nodded. “As you were.” He saw Joshua being pulled in his cart by Finn, accompanied by Nakam. But the children were still in class. Since Joshua was in good hands, Efran decided that he could wait to give the children the bad news. He told Stephanos, “I’ll be up in the workroom if anything comes up.”

“Yes, sir,” Stephanos said.

So Efran returned to the workroom to sit in front of the documents detailing the construction of the chapel. And he saw that every amenity pointed out at the chapel’s opening—the running water, the stained-glass windows, the kitchen tile—had been paid for with Fortress funds. And that was over and above the basic construction.

Finally, Efran drew out a summary of expenses from the back of the folder. He noted, “Geneve’s original estimate of the cost was six hundred royals. The final cost was over fifteen hundred. And we paid for it all.”

“That’s correct,” Estes said. DeWitt glanced up to nod. And Efran smiled. “Perfect. I can hardly wait to tell Minka.”

Leaving the folder in disarray on the table, he got up to go downstairs and out to the courtyard. Grunting, Estes rose to put the folder back together and replace it on the shelves.

From the courtyard, Efran saw Kraken lounging in the grass halfway to the stables. Seeing his human emerge, the horse hefted himself up to trot over. While the gate guards Cyneheard and Henris studied the Captain’s new hair, he stroked Kraken’s neck. “Are you going to behave on a short errand, or do I need to put a saddle and bridle on you?”

Kraken fluttered his lips, making all kinds of promises. “Huh. Right,” Efran muttered skeptically, but leapt up on the bare back anyway while the gates were opened to him. “I’ll be down at Lemmerz’ office,” he told Cyneheard, who saluted. “And we’re taking the slow route,” he informed Kraken, aborting any move to go straight down. So Kraken began trotting the long way.

Watching them go, Henris whispered, “That was the Captain?”

“Yes,” Cyneheard said. “If the hair gives you doubts, look for the boots with the holes in the toe.”

“Ah,” Henris said, enlightened.

On Main, Efran guided Kraken with his knees to turn right past the community well and pull up to Lemmerz’ construction headquarters. Sliding off him, Efran went to the door to look in. This small building had been reinforced and refurbished since it was first thrown up for Lemmerz to oversee the construction of Goadby’s (now Delano’s) next door.

As Efran entered, Geneve looked up from behind a desk. His hair did not confuse her; she knew him too well. “Hello, Captain. What can I do for you?” she asked amiably, only a shade wary. Efran didn’t make visits to chat like Minka did.

“Hello, Geneve,” he said, smiling. “I want the keys to the chapel.”

“Oh. I don’t have them. Bozzelli has both sets,” she said.

“Ah. Who do you use for a locksmith?” he asked.

She now looked mildly alarmed. Standing, she said, “Yaxley. Let me see if he’s here.”

“Thank you,” Efran said, idly looking away.

She went out a back door, then returned in a few minutes with a worker in overalls that had many tool pockets. He scrutinized Efran as Geneve said, “Captain, this is Yaxley, our all-purpose handyman. Captain Efran has need of you, Yaxley.”

Having been informed as to who the smiling Polonti with spiky black hair was, Yaxley said, “Yes, Cap’n?”

“Yes, Yaxley. I want you to change out all the locks on the new chapel and bring two sets of keys to Estes or DeWitt in the second-floor workroom of the fortress,” Efran said pleasantly.

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Chapter 14

Yaxley’s eyes widened, but he said, “Right away, Cap’n.”

“Very good,” Efran said. Yaxley glanced at Geneve as he departed through the back door again.

She turned back to Efran. Hesitantly, she asked, “Captain, may I hear what the problem is?”

“No problem, Geneve. I only just now discovered that the Fortress paid the entire cost of construction for the chapel, and I may have need of it,” he said easily.

“But, Captain, the residents expect to use it as a chapel. I—I have copies of receipts that I gave to Firmin, and Averde, and, several others who paid toward that end,” she stammered.

“Show me,” Efran said.

With slightly shaky hands, Geneve pulled a folder from a drawer packed with papers. This she opened on the desk to begin spreading out the receipts. “Here’s one to Firmin, and Coghill the doctor, and Lord Schmolck, Shardlow the bookseller—”

“What did you do with the money?” Efran asked, looking over the receipts.

“All of went to Bozzelli, to pay the contractors,” she said, pale.

“Show me,” he said. At her blank look, he said, “You didn’t get receipts from Bozzelli for the money you transferred to him.”

“No,” she whispered. “I should have. But it never occurred to me that I needed to.”

“I see. And we paid Bozzelli quite a bit,” he mused. He stepped out of the office, leaving the door open as he looked around to whistle.

Shortly, two Abbey soldiers came running in response to Efran’s summons. They paused a moment over his bristly black hair, but knowing his whistle, they saluted. “Captain?”

Efran told one, “Go to DeGrado, the window maker. Ask him who paid for his work on the chapel.” That man saluted before running off, and Efran told the second, “Go to Chetwode, the woodworker. Ask him who paid for his work on the chapel.” He also departed quickly.

Turning back to Geneve, Efran said, “And I know that we paid Lemmerz for his work on the chapel.”

“Yes, but we’re supervisors, not contractors,” she said with a touch of anxiety.

“All right, stand by,” he said easily.

A few minutes of silence passed while Efran waited, watching out the door. Kraken stuck his head in, but Efran pushed him back, stroking his neck at the same time. Then Geneve asked quietly, “How is Minka?”

Efran turned, eyes lowered. “She miscarried.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry,” Geneve said, and he nodded.

There was further silence until one man came running up to salute and report, “Captain, Chetwode says that he received payment from the Fortress for his work, and you should have his receipt.” Geneve sucked in a breath.

“We do. Dismissed,” Efran said. The man departed, and the other man soon came to report that DeGrado had also been paid by the Fortress. Efran dismissed him, then looked back at Geneve.

Swallowing, she asked, “What do we do?”

“Now that is a question,” Efran admitted. “Tell Lemmerz. And I’m going to inform my administrators that

Bozzelli is double-dipping. But I'm not going to bring charges at this time; I've got too much else to do. At any rate, the Fortress is claiming use of the chapel, if Bozzelli inquires."

"I think I had better tell him," Geneve said pensively.

Efran raised his brows at her. "Would you? That would actually be helpful. Thank you." He smiled warmly at her, crinkling his eyes, and she laughed, mildly discomfited.

Efran rode Kraken back to the fortress courtyard, to his disappointment. Slapping his haunches, Efran told him, "Go make yourself useful to Tourjee." So Kraken ambled around the western side of the fortress to the back grounds.

From there, Efran went up to the workroom. He stood in the doorway to tell Estes and DeWitt what he'd found out from Geneve. DeWitt tossed his quill down in disgust. "Now we have to dig up all the receipts to bring charges against Bozzelli."

Efran said, "No, he's covered himself on that. He got Geneve to hand over the donations without getting receipts from him."

DeWitt groaned, "So if he's accused, he'll just hang it on her." Estes nodded; none of them questioned whether Geneve might have actually kept the money herself. They knew her too well—her and her brother Gabriel both.

"Well, at least he won't be approved for any more work on the Lands," Estes said.

Efran agreed, "Right. Oh! I'm having the locks changed on the chapel, and the keys are to be brought up here. If I can convince Marguerite to come down for a visit, that's where I'm putting her."

Estes said, "That's good, Efran, but not for the long term. Is it?"

"I don't know. Why?" Efran asked him.

"The leaseholders petitioned for a chapel. That's why it was built—as a place of worship. Is it right to appropriate it?" Estes asked. DeWitt raised his brows in consideration of the question.

Efran lifted his face to think. "You have a point. But Bozzelli already appropriated it, turning a six-hundred-royal chapel into a fifteen-hundred-royal luxury hall—to which he had both sets of keys, by the way. But you're right that the leaseholders still need a place to worship. . . . Who were the main petitioners for the chapel? Do you know?"

Estes looked off, thinking. "Delano. Lowry. Averno. Those are the ones I remember."

"Ah, good. Be right back." And Efran turned out to trot down the stairs. By the time he remembered to take the stairs at a walk, he was on the ground floor. Emerging from the fortress into the courtyard, he looked around to issue a piercing whistle.

A dozen men ran up from every direction; Efran winced. "As you were; I'm calling my—" Kraken, neck arched, came loping around the northwestern corner of the fortress toward the courtyard.

The collected soldiers laughed, but Arne said, "Eh, whatever yer need yer horse for, yer need a bodyguard, Cap'n."

Efran eyed him a moment, then said, “You may be right. Well, then, anyone who’s off duty and bored, fall in. I’m going down the new switchback to the inn under construction.” About twenty men collected around Kraken as Efran hopped on his back and began walking him to the new switchback.

He dismounted at the front of the new inn, which faced the main east-west road just at the bottom of the new switchback. The inn sprawled over six plots, and while the ground floor looked to be mostly finished, the second and third floors were in various stages of construction.

Patting Kraken in a mute command to stay, Efran looked over the inn, particularly the southwestern corner of the ground floor. Walking over to the double doors, he eyed a nicely carved and painted sign above them that read, “Meeting Hall.” Efran opened these doors to walk in. His men followed, but Kraken only stuck his head in.

Here, Efran looked around at a large finished room with wood flooring and windows along the western wall. It had a nice high ceiling with hanging chandeliers and white walls. There was a raised stage along the back wall and a lectern standing off to the side.

As Efran was looking around, the construction supervisor stopped at an interior door to eye the group of soldiers. He scowled, “Is there a problem?”—not recognizing the spiky-haired Polonti laborer.

“No, Oxenham. This looks almost finished. What’s left to be done?” Efran asked.

Coming closer to peer at him, Oxenham said, “Captain Efran! Ah, not much, sir—we need to bring in the seating, equip the chandeliers, clean the windows—just detailing.”

“Who’s the owner?” Efran asked.

“That’s Rimbault, as his construction company, what used to be DePew’s, you know, is the financier,” Oxenham said.

“Do you have any idea where he is right now?” Efran asked.

“He’s on site, Captain—you want me to find him for you?” Oxenham asked, starting to move off.

“Yes, in a moment. May I ask my men to help you finish detailing this room?” Efran asked.

“Well, yes, but for how much?” Oxenham asked. “We’re already over budget—”

“You won’t pay them; the Fortress does that. But anyone who helps you gets double pay today,” Efran said, glancing over the men, who smiled.

“I’ll take ’em! Hold on,” Oxenham said, darting out. A moment later he returned to say, “I got a man off to find Rimbault, Captain, so he’ll be here shortly.”

“Thank you. Now you can give them directions.” Looking back to the soldiers, Efran said, “Arne, you’re to keep track of who’s to get paid double today.”

“Yes, Captain,” Arne said, saluting. After being plastered by the doctor, his twice-broken nose was almost straight again.

Nodding, Efran stepped out of the meeting hall into the foyer of the inn to watch the ongoing construction while waiting for Rimbault. At the same time, his men gathered around Oxenham to receive work orders. Kraken pulled out of the meeting hall door to trot around to the main entrance and poke his head in there. He had to keep an eye on his human, who was unaccountable.

Rimbault, wearing an elegant Lands Clothing Shop suit, entered the foyer to gaze around blankly until the assistant at his side pointed and said, “There’s the Captain, sir.”

Rimbault peered at him. “Captain Efran?”

(The fact that everyone seemed stumped by his new hair, again, didn’t bother Efran. After all, it wasn’t his fault.) He said, “Hello, Rimbault. I have men helping Oxenham make the Meeting Hall ready for use right away, if that’s possible. We have leaseholders wanting a place to worship. Who do they see to reserve times?”

“What about the fancy chapel right next door?” Rimbault asked in curiosity.

Efran paused, then said, “That turned out to be unsuitable for services, so is being converted to a private residence.”

“Really? I heard that Bozzelli had big plans for it,” Rimbault said, a sparkle in his eye. “No operas? Auctions? Performance art? He said he’d make it the premiere destination for high art in the Southern Continent while our Meeting Hall sat empty.”

“That’s not going to happen. So who is your reservations clerk?” Efran asked.

“There. Dowdeswell at the front counter. Talk to him,” Rimbault said, pointing.

“Excellent. I’ll send a couple of leaseholders to work out details with him. Thank you, Rimbault,” Efran said, smiling without the crinkling of eyes. Rimbault nodded with the air of a winning gamesman, then someone else hurried up to him.

On his way out, Efran paused by the door of the Meeting Hall to see his men swarming over it—loading candles in the chandeliers, cleaning windows, touching up paint—all according to Oxenham’s instructions. From there, Efran hopped up on Kraken to turn him west on the frontal road and then north up Main. *Just tell me where we’re going*, Kraken said.

“Delano’s,” Efran said, stopped at a crossing. “Ah. There he is. He and Wystan are unloading out front. Pull up behind their wagon.”

When Kraken did, Efran dismounted to walk over and pick up a case from the wagon. This he began carrying back to their storerooms. As Delano and Wystan stopped to eye him, Efran looked back. “I need a word with you, Delano.”

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Chapter 15

Father and son looked at each other to laugh lightly. “Sure, Captain. What do you need? We’ll get that,” Delano protested, gesturing at the case Efran was carrying.

“No, you don’t want these sitting out in the sun,” Efran objected. He carried it in through the open door, then went back for another case.

When all of the cases were in the cool storeroom, Wytan drove the wagon away and Delano turned to Efran. “Now, Captain, what did you need?”

Efran obliquely explained that the new chapel turned out to be unsuitable for worship services, so he had arranged for leaseholders to use the Meeting Hall of the new inn, which would be available immediately. “You, Lowry, or Averno need to go talk to Dowdeswell at the counter on the first floor to set up meeting times, whenever you need the Hall. Be sure to tell him that the Fortress will pay the fees. All right?” Efran asked.

Delano sighed, “I have to tell you, Captain, that’s a relief to hear. Madgwick had misgivings about trying to hold services in the new chapel; said it’d be better as lodging for a pampered aristocrat.”

“Exactly,” Efran laughed. “Let us know what you get set up; make sure Dowdeswell bills the Fortress.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Delano offered his hand, and Efran shook it, exhaling. Delano wasn’t the only one relieved.

Efran rode Kraken back up to the fortress courtyard, then on around to the back grounds. While Kraken was sent off for more compost, Efran took possession of his son. They stopped at the nursery for fresh wraps, then Efran took him up to the second floor to tell his administrators about the alternative facility he had found for the leaseholders. He also covered Bozzelli’s boasting to Rimbault of his plans for the chapel, and Madgwick’s reservations about it.

“‘Lodging for a pampered aristocrat!’” DeWitt laughed. “Madgwick got that right. By the way, here are the new keys to the chapel. Two sets.”

Holding Joshua on an arm, Efran said, “Good. Keep them up here.” Then he looked to Estes. “Is the Meeting Hall an acceptable alternative to the chapel?”

“Yes, Efran, and I’m glad you made good on it,” Estes said, getting up to put the keys in a locking cabinet.

“Good,” Efran exhaled. “Then I’ll be in Wallace’s quarters with Minka.” His administrators went back to work. But then he discovered he had take Joshua back downstairs to the nursery, as he was asleep on his father’s shoulder.

When Efran finally got to Wallace’s quarters to look in the back room where Minka was lying, she turned quickly to sit up. “There you are! You were gone for so long!”

“Don’t mock me,” he laughed, coming in to sit on her bed.

“I’m not; I mean it!” she protested, falling on him.

“Here I am. Do you want to know what I’ve been up to?” he asked slyly.

“Yes,” she said dubiously, unaware of his joke (of quoting her when she was about to present her birth certificate proving that she was of marriageable age).

“First, I wrote Marguerite a tear-streaked letter begging her to come,” he said.

“Did you really cry?” she asked.

“On paper. Then I did something even better. I found the ideal place for her to stay,” he said.

She looked at him, waiting, and he added, “The new chapel.” He told her about discovering that the Fortress had paid the entire cost of the chapel’s construction, and how he found the leaseholders another meeting place next door.

As she thought about that, her face cleared. “That’s perfect. That’s the perfect place for Marguerite, more perfect than Featherstone. The mansion’s too big, anyway, much too much to maintain. Oh, I want her here, Efran.” With a hand on her empty abdomen, she started crying again.

“Hush. Hush, now,” he said. He lay down on the narrow bed on his back, then pulled her over to lie across his chest. When she continued to cry, he said, “No, be quiet. If she won’t come after getting my letter, I’ll ride up and kidnap her.”

“Efran!” She raised up laughing with tears running down her face.

“No, I mean it,” he said solemnly. “I’ll get her down here one way or another. I promise.”

She sank back to his hard chest, sniffing, “Thank you.”

Minka was crazy from lying in bed all day, so Leese had her change bloomers and menstrual cloths, then allowed her to walk the grounds with Efran and go in to dinner in the dining hall. She was a little reluctant to appear in public, but almost no one (except Ella and Quennel) knew about her miscarriage, and the ones who did know (like Geneve and Melchior) kept quiet.

When Leese told her that she needed to sleep on the back bed in the doctor’s quarters for tonight only, Minka almost rebelled. But Efran helped her bathe and change, then took her back up to Wallace’s rooms and tucked her in bed. Then he lay down on the floor beside the bed.

She leaned over the edge. “Efran! Lie on the bed with me!”

“There’s not room,” he said reluctantly.

“I don’t care! I’ve lost the baby and I need to sleep beside you!” she cried.

With that, he could do nothing but climb into bed with her. But she wouldn’t lie on him; she wanted to scrunch into his side as usual, and the narrowness of the bed had him flailing over the edge once or twice. So he waited until she was deeply asleep, then carefully climbed down to lie on the floor again. And he woke hours later to find her scrunched into his side on the floor.

Freed from confinement the next morning (May 27th), she went walking with him on the back grounds. But she shrank from chatting with anyone, and the children weren't out here yet. So she just held on to Efran's arm as they walked while he carried Joshua on his shoulders.

After getting used to his father's white hair, Joshua was now confronted with black spikes. Since Efran was holding his hands so that he couldn't use those to explore this new feature, he leaned over to put his face on his father's head, using his lips and teeth. Efran quickly brought him down on his arm.

Beside him, Minka sighed, "It must have been very hard for Marguerite to have a baby as a single woman."

"Oh, I'm sure. You should ask her about it," Efran said.

"You think so?" she asked. "I don't want to pry or cause her pain."

"She may be wanting to talk about it. Those things don't ever really go away," he murmured.

She thought about that, and said, "I'll ask her, then. But you have to get her down here."

"It's all but done," he said.

She squinted at him, but Milo came up to salute. "Captain, Lady Minka. The doctor Wallace requests you come up to his quarters for a brief chat."

"*Just* 'a brief chat'?" Minka almost snapped. "Do you promise?"

"Those were his exact words, Lady Minka," he said sympathetically.

"Thank you; we're coming," Efran said. Milo saluted and turned back into the fortress. Efran and Minka followed, but stopped at the nursery to hand Joshua over to his caregivers first.

At that time, Bozzelli had emerged from his carriage in the courtyard, primed to speak with Efran. Yesterday, before he had a chance to discover that his keys would not work in the chapel locks, Geneve had found him to explain that Efran had appropriated the chapel for a different use. What that was, she was unable to say. Since she was incapable of answering any of his questions, she encouraged him to talk to Efran himself. As a courtesy, she mentioned that his hair was black again.

So the architect—clean-shaven, with his silver hair combed back from his forehead, wearing a subdued but costly suit from Crescent Hollow—approached Connor at the door to inform him, "I am Bozzelli, and require an interview with Efran immediately."

Connor broke off midsentence to eye him. Connor was not on door duty; he was delivering a message to the door guards from Captain Towner. A soldier who *was* on door duty, Lambdin, opened his mouth but Connor held up a subtle hand. "I'll take you right to him. Follow me, please." Connor turned to begin walking away.

Walking after him, Bozzelli jumped at the sudden appearance of a frog crossing the foyer. "Does no one clean this place?" he fumed, hastening after his guide.

Lambdin and Krall, the other door guard, watched them go. Then Lambdin quietly asked, "Why would he take that gasbag up to the Captain?"

Krall half-smiled. “There’s entertainment afoot.” Raising a brow, Lambdin looked down the corridor.

As Connor entered the stairway with Bozzelli behind him, he glanced up to see the Captain and Lady Minka ascending eight steps above them. So Connor walked slowly, so slowly that Bozzelli groused, “Can you pick up your feet?”

Connor stopped to turn and say, “Pardon, sir; the Captain prohibits running on the stairs.” Bozzelli squinted at him, but Connor continued to mount with majestic heaviness even after seeing the Captain and Lady turn off the stairs on the second floor.

Alighting from the stairway, Connor shot a glance to the side to see the Captain and his wife entering the doctor’s quarters. So Connor resumed a normal pace to the door of the workroom. Here he saluted and began, “Bozzelli requesting—”

Bozzelli nudged him aside to address Estes at the worktable: “Efran, why have you changed the locks on the chapel?”

Connor stood silent and unmoving; DeWitt looked inquiringly at Estes, who put down his quill and said, “The Fortress has need of it.”

Bozzelli spread in indignation. “That chapel was promised to the citizens of this district. It is illegal for you to seize it.”

Estes leaned back, hanging an elbow over the back of his chair. “Nothing I do is illegal.”

“The words of a despot,” Bozzelli snapped.

“What are you going to do about it?” Estes asked languidly.

“I will bring charges against you. And I will communicate your villainy to the citizens who sponsored construction of the chapel,” Bozzelli said through gritted teeth.

“Good luck to you,” Estes said, returning to his ledger.

Bozzelli stormed out as Connor saluted to the administrators. With a glimmer, Estes nodded to him, “You’re dismissed.” Then he murmured, “That was fun.” Hearing, Connor hunched to contain laughter.

DeWitt studied Estes. “I’m sure it was, ‘Efran,’ but what’ve you started?”

“The opportunity for Bozzelli to expose his double-dipping,” Estes said, writing.

“Ah,” DeWitt said, returning to his own worksheets.

In the doctor’s quarters, Efran and Minka were sitting down with Wallace in his tiny, paper-strewn office/consultation room. Wallace leaned over to close the door. Settling in his chair, he looked between Efran and Minka, one pensive and the other alarmed. Wallace said, “I apologize for keeping you down all day, Minka, but it was necessary to make sure of my findings.”

“F-findings?” Minka whispered. Efran’s face was a paper shade of white.

“Yes,” Wallace said heavily, looking reluctant. He removed his glasses to clean the lenses, then said, “The fact is, you weren’t pregnant, Minka.”

“What?” she barely exhaled. Efran’s color returned and he closed his eyes.

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Chapter 16

The doctor explained, “There was no foetus in the discharge. Even were you as little as ten weeks along, rather than three months, there would have been a foetus about the size of a strawberry. There was none.”

Minka stuttered, “But I—I didn’t have my period, and, Leese examined me—”

“External examinations are not an exact science. She was relying largely on the fact of your cessation of menstruation,” Wallace said, uncharacteristically gentle.

Minka looked off with glazed eyes. “So, I wanted a baby so badly, that, I simply decided I was pregnant, and my body played along, for a while.”

“I think it’s more complicated than that, Minka,” Wallace said. Efran was looking off with watering eyes. Mentally, he was on his knees in gratitude that she was not pregnant, and had not been pregnant, and he would not lose her to childbirth for the foreseeable future. But she was still suffering from one crushing disappointment upon another.

“I fooled myself,” she whispered.

Wallace was shaking his head, about to reply, when she lurched up to leave his quarters. Efran bounded after her.

Catching her in the corridor, he began, “Minka—”

She held up her hands. “I’ve got to clean out our quarters—all the baby things. I have to get those out.”

“Let me help you,” he said.

“No. You—have work to do. I’m all right. I need to get it all out so that someone else can use it.” Her face was blank; her speech a monotone, and Efran was deeply reluctant to let her go. But he did, going to the top of the stairs to watch her descend rapidly before turning off into the lower corridor.

He stood there for a few minutes, chewing on whether to follow her or not. Finally, he went up the corridor to the workroom.

Estes and DeWitt watched as he came in and dropped into his chair. He slouched down to rest his head on the chair back and fold his hands on his forehead. He whispered, “She wasn’t pregnant at all.” His administrators inhaled softly, straightening.

Downstairs, Minka gathered everything up quickly in bags, baskets, or just by the armload when she ran out of carriers. Then she took everything down to the cold storage room, though none of it required cold storage. She

was careful not to look at the frilly bassinet or the little white dresses that she piled into it, and she saw no one that she passed in the corridor, though they all paused in sympathy.

Soon, she had it all done. She checked both wardrobes and chests, even under the bed, to make sure there was no souvenir remaining of her deluded pregnancy wish. Then she decided that she needed to talk to the Librarian. His cool, compassionate detachment would help.

So she ran to the library, and paused in surprise at the soldiers on the floor. Ella looked over from the table and Soames said, "I'm so glad you could join us today, Lady Minka. The Librarian saved your seat."

Standing, the Librarian pulled out a chair. "Thank you," she said, coming over to sit. Then she paid earnest attention to the lesson today, while comprehending nothing of what was said.

Unseen, Efran passed by to glance in the library, and relaxed upon seeing her. From there, he went on to their quarters to look around at the new barrenness. He dropped his head in grief for her, then took a deep breath to emerge again into the corridor.

He waited at the door of their quarters for Law class to be dismissed. Soldiers or workers who passed saluted briefly or nodded, which he vacantly acknowledged. When soldiers began pouring out of the library, Efran straightened off the wall. But when Minka emerged, she turned down the corridor without seeing him. So he followed.

She went out the back door as though she had somewhere to go, but once outside, she paused uncertainly. Efran paused behind her, then she went on toward the orchard, where the apple trees were awash in white blossoms. She stopped among the trees, and he stopped about ten feet behind her.

At that time, three representatives of the chapel committee, having been alerted by Bozzelli of the outrage, were searching for the Captain. They had just been up to the workroom, where Estes waved them away. So they retreated to the courtyard to air their demand for a hearing.

The gate guards and door guards shrugged, but Hawk, who had been one of the soldiers detailing the Meeting Hall, perceived the opportunity for some slap-down entertainment. "I just saw him back here," he called. Complainants and guards looked over, and Hawk took the committee around the northwestern corner of the fortress to point: "That's the Captain, standing in front of the orchard, there."

So, led by a serious man named Theakston, the three began marching over. Hawk, grinning maliciously, followed to watch. A few other soldiers followed him in curiosity.

Seeing nothing but Minka, Efran came a few steps closer. She started, turning toward him to spill out, "You mustn't bother about me. I just—need to get my bearings. I'll be all right. It's only that I—never knew it was possible to take pretending to such lengths—"

He shook his head, holding out his arms, and she fell on him so that he could wrap her up. Quiet observers all around them kept their distance respectfully, although it added a few extra steps to their errands. For all of them, even the children, had heard of her miscarriage.

Soldiers—among them Cyneheard and Henris—collected nearby in case the Captain had orders. (It's relevant to know that both Cyneheard and Henris had been at university in Eurus.) Joshua was on Kraken's back, held in place by Lund, as the horse began dragging another load of compost toward the gardens from the far west end of the grounds, near the henhouses. Kraken's ears pivoted forward, detecting his human.

As Efran held Minka, she looked up. “You know,—”

“Captain, we’d like a word with you about the chapel,” Theakston said behind them. Minka pressed her face into Efran’s chest. He did not respond to the interruption, but workers and soldiers darkly regarded the trespassers. Bozzelli was watching from a very safe distance.

Theakston paused, belatedly seeing that someone who had small feet was standing with the Captain. Theakston hadn’t realized that his wife, or anyone, was with him. But having someone else hear of the Captain’s outrageous actions impelled Theakston to proceed: “I apologize for the interruption, but we are all stunned that now that the chapel is completed, you have apparently decided it’s too good for our use. Many of us *paid* toward this building, you understand, and after seeing the glorious work that the esteemed architect Bozzelli put in on it, we were doubly wounded by this preemptive exclusion.”

During this proclamation, Efran was leaning down to her to whisper, “I will love you forever. You’re the only one I can’t live without.”

She half-laughed into his chest, “You’re a charmer.”

“Is it wrong if it works?” he asked, smiling.

After having allowed a generous five seconds for the Captain to respond, Theakston resumed, “Captain Efran, I understand that you’re—”

“You *understand*? Are you insane?” a young male voice blurted, and everyone looked at Henris. Even Efran turned his head, and Minka raised her eyes from his arms. “What do you mean, haranguing him about a building when his wife is suffering? Are you blind? Feeble-minded? A fool? Or just so callous as to make a stack of wood and glass more important than human compassion?”

Others joined the crowd already there as Henris went on, “This chapel was to be your place of *worship*? And this is the priority of your faith, to ensure that you have the most elegant building in which to say your prayers? What religion is that? I don’t recognize it. But if you have any shred of decency left in you, apart from your religion, you’ll withdraw your arrogant demands and go bend your knees before the Creator on any old spot of ground. But I pray, ‘Rise up, O judge of the earth; render to the proud what they deserve!’” [Ps. 94:2]

As Henris stood breathing in indignation, Cyneheard began applauding. Hawk took it up forcefully, and all the bystanders joined in. The two silent members of the grievance committee turned to swiftly stride away, and Theakston caught up to them. By this time, Bozzelli had disappeared.

Efran was peering at the fount of passion, who now seemed abashed. “Henris?” Efran murmured. The young man looked around as if searching for the one named, but Efran went on, “I’ve never heard anything so eloquent. Surely there’s a way we can harness that natural talent.”

“Doesn’t the Fortress need a poet laureate?” Minka asked.

“Something like that,” Efran agreed. “Cyneheard, take him up to Estes and DeWitt; tell them what we just witnessed, and ask for their input on best use of his ability.”

“Yes, Captain,” Cyneheard said, saluting. As the object of praise was standing in shock, Cyneheard whispered, “Salute; say, ‘thank you, Captain.’”

Henris saluted so fiercely as to almost put his eye out. “Thank you, sir!”

“Dismissed,” Efran said, amused. Shortly, Henris’ father Lambdin, on front-door duty, was receiving a synopsis of his son’s amazing monologue and subsequent honor.

The workers on the grounds broke up after a roaring good show. Kraken stopped to snuffle his human and adjacent human to verify that they were undamaged from all the loud words. Joshua, supported by Lund, began rocking on Kraken in a demand to get going: “Ungh!” Kraken obeyed, lumbering toward the garden beds with his load of compost behind him.

Left to themselves again, Efran turned to brush Minka’s curls back with both hands. Tearing up, she sighed, “I feel so stupid.”

“For what?” he breathed. “Wanting to be a natural mother? Being glad when you thought you would be? Only a heartless clod would find fault with that. Or a—” he paused to recall, “a feeble-minded fool.”

She snort-laughed, wiping her face, and Efran put an arm over her shoulders to walk her over to the garden beds under construction.

Before they got there, they were met by a procession of children, led by Toby. All the children were behind him—Noah, Ivy, Alcmund, Beischel, Chorro, Elwell, Hassie, and Jera. Toby carried an armload of Forget-Me-Nots inexpertly tied with a ribbon.

As the children looked on solemnly, Toby presented the flowers to Minka. She sank to her knees to receive them at his level. “Minka, we wanted to let you know that we had a ‘Welcome to Heaven’ party for your baby. We had to go ahead and give her a name, so that you’d know her when you got there. And the girls thought the name Pia came up with, Ronayne, was best, because it means ‘light of dawn,’ and that means hope.” He had to stop and wipe his eyes, because Minka was pouring tears. Efran’s face was also wet.

Toby finished, “Anyway, she’s there, and she’ll be at your ‘Welcome to Heaven’ party, and yours, Efran.”

“Oh, Toby.” She clutched him, covering him with kisses. “I don’t deserve children like you, but I’m so grateful to have you all. Thank you.” She reached out to all the children, to hug and kiss them.

They gathered around her, even though the flowers got squashed. The bolder children went over to Efran, too. He picked them up to toss them in the air and catch them again—even the bigger ones, like Noah. So there was laughter mixed in with the tears, as well.

Estes and DeWitt, after hearing of Henris’ spontaneous defense of the grieving, decided to have him lead a philosophical/theological discussion group in the library one afternoon a week for any off-duty men. To encourage attendance, the kitchen would provide refreshments. Young Henris was most agreeable to this plan.

Following, Cyneheard took him around to the northwestern hillside to practice with the slings, and tell their Polonti teachers about the discussion group, with refreshments. They were interested in attending, especially Conte, who was a known intellectual. The Southerner Hawk committed to attending, and browbeat a few others who thought themselves sharp, as well.

Efran stood back to watch the children drag Minka over to their special projects in and around the gardens. The Archimedes screw which Toby had built with Tourjee’s help was in constant use. As Efran was watching a

garden helper turn the handle to bring up water, he was distracted by blur of gray. And he looked over at a large opossum running from the fortress in what appeared to be panicked flight.

Brows drawing down, Efran headed toward the point he—Nomus, obviously—had seemed to emerge on the eastern side of the fortress. The only door on that side was the one leading directly from the kitchen to the side grounds, the well, and the path to the grocers' gate in front.

Rounding the corner of the fortress to its eastern face, Efran spotted a door that he knew shouldn't be there. It wasn't the kitchen door; it was tall and broad, of ancient cracked oak banded with rusty iron. He stood before the door, evaluating it. As he looked, it seemed to be moving very slightly—expanding outward then receding inward as from pressure applied or withdrawn from the other side.

Efran reached for the handle, only to be sucked inside before he ever touched it. And then he was standing on the Firmament, with the sun, moon and stars below his feet and the waters above his head. He looked to a portal on his right to see Humblecut stopped on his horse in the crosswalk while Wrexall thundered toward him. A silvery hand reached out to tap Wrexall's horse, chastising, *"Stop right there."* And Efran realized, *That was Nonesuch.*

Looking to a portal on his left, he saw Minka sobbing when she thought she had lost the baby in her womb. There was a beautiful woman leaning over her, stroking her head. Efran somehow recognized her as Deirdre, the wife of the great Surchatain Roman, who had lost three infants of her own—all that were born after her only living child, Ariel. She was whispering, *"Shhh. All the little ones are yours, and you will see them above. You will embrace them all, and be comforted."*

Efran wondered at this, but not for long. The source of the pressure that had sucked him in through the doorway was at the other end of the Firmament, at the beginning of the Hall of Memories, slowly advancing. It was a blackness, a void of immeasurable depth. And as it advanced, it sucked the memories out of the portals into itself, leaving them empty.

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Chapter 17

One by one, the Hall portals were being stripped, and with the erasing of the Fortress memories was the loss of its purpose, its soul. The Fortress was crumbling from the inside. Even if it stood physically for another thousand years, it would be as an empty shell.

When Efran himself was sucked toward the blackness, he identified it: Abaddon. The Abyss. The eternal place of darkness. Straining against the suction, he held out a hand and said, "I am Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. You will stay."

The pressure eased; Abaddon had stayed upon his command. But it was still there, still a threat, waiting only for Efran to withdraw for it to continue consuming the soul of the Fortress.

What do I do? What do I do? Efran cast about for an answer. He glanced up to the waters pleadingly, but the moment he removed his attention from the Abyss, it began to pulse again. Jerking his head back, he ordered, "Stop!"

It did, but only to wait, Efran thought. The Lord of the Fortress was but a mortal, and all mortals died.

Efran stood in a standoff with the Abyss for an unknown length of Time. He was searching, searching for whatever weapons or strategy there were to make it withdraw. He could not go consult Ryal or the Librarian; he was trapped here alone, with no resources beyond himself—so it seemed.

Staring down the Abyss, he prayed continually for wisdom, help, or the strength to turn it back, but none of that appeared. So he stood on the Firmament against Annihilation, wondering how long he could stand here. He couldn't last the endless ages through which Abaddon had already stretched.

He glanced aside at the portal to his left, and Abaddon remained in place. Contemplating that, Efran looked pointedly at the portal to the left of that one, earlier in time. Abaddon did not move.

So Efran took a step toward it. The Abyss did not resist or advance, but neither did it withdraw. But Efran glanced at the next earliest portal on his right, where he was talking with the EurAsian Councilors Dromgoole and Undergrewp. When Efran saw himself say, "*You're buggy*," there was a palpable golden stream that accompanied his words. Seriously, it looked as though it could be handled.

With a wary eye on Abaddon, Efran reached in through the portal to see if he could touch the golden stream. His hand passed through his own form as if it were smoke, but he felt the solid resistance of the gold on his fingers. It felt like—threads that tingled in his hand. So he grasped the lot to pull it out of the portal, and it came.

He held the stream of power in his hands as though it were finely carded wool. "Now what?" he murmured. It just lay in his hands as if waiting to be used. So Efran tossed it toward the Abyss.

He expected it to disappear into nothing as everything else had, but it didn't. It stretched itself from one visible edge of the Abyss to the other, as though blocking a small portion of the entrance. "Ho, that's interesting," Efran murmured, studying it. "I need more."

Efran looked to the next earliest portal, which showed Estes bringing the indictment against De'Ath. From that scene, Efran was able to draw out a great ream of power, which he also threw against the Abyss. And he watched it seal off another portion of the opening from end to end.

From there, Efran went to every available portal to harvest power which he then threw against the opening of the Abyss. Each addition sealed off another bit.

But after Efran had gone to every portal he could reach (as the ones behind Abaddon were empty and he dared not get too close to the opening himself) he found his supply exhausted. The portals could yield their power only once, then that was all.

"I need more; I need more," Efran muttered in anguish. The strands he had harvested covered perhaps two-thirds of the opening that filled the Hall, but it was otherwise unchanged. It had not retracted in the slightest, and Efran didn't know if it would simply shake off the golden threads should he turn his back.

"What do I do?" he exhaled. "How can I get more?"

Looking to the portal that showed his speaking derisively to the Councilors, Efran thought, *These are merely echoes of the power that was produced when I spoke authoritatively as Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Why can't I produce that power by speaking now? What am I doing wrong?*

He thought about this for a long time before he realized, *I ordered it to stay and it stayed. I ordered it to stop and*

it stopped. But that's all I ordered it to do.

He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand in exasperation. Then he stared down the Abyss and said, “As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I order you to leave this fortress and return to the Great Deep where you belong.”

The Abyss vanished.

Efran stood in disbelief for a while, then slowly walked down the Firmament. With each step, he looked down at the stars, the sun, and the moon, and up at the waters above his head. He studied the empty portals that Abaddon had swallowed—the first six. “That’s bad,” he muttered. “But . . . maybe not irrevocable.”

His attention was drawn to the next portal that Abaddon had been about to empty. Efran saw the fortress courtyard as though he were standing on the front steps. There was a line of soldiers in chain mail inside the gates, holding spears at the ready. The tension of impending attack was palpable.

There was a great roar, and the view in the portal expanded to show a huge army approaching an iron fence where the Abbey Lands’ stone wall now stood. The army poured over the old stone bridge, the excess number wading through the shallow branch of the Passage on either side of the bridge. They were entirely on foot, and from their stocky bodies, their wiry hair, puffy faces and bulbous noses, he identified them as trolls.

They scaled the outermost fence easily, flooding the Lands like locusts. The Abbey defenders rushed forward with spears, bows, and swords. But arrows merely bounced off the trolls’ leathery skin, and they broke spears with one hand. They were armed only with clubs, with which they flattened the defenders all around them. When they weren’t swinging the clubs, they merely reached out a hand to swipe at anyone within reach—who then turned to stone. The defenders fell before the trolls like toy soldiers, and the residents began fleeing for their lives.

A great Polonti warrior then ran out from the fortress doors behind Efran. The sight of such a warrior sent chills down his spine, and he expected to hear him cry, “*Koa!*”—the Polonti call to a last stand.

But he didn’t. He took the chain of the gate bell to begin ringing it, but in a specific rhythm: *clang clang CLANG clang clang CLANG clang clang CLANG clang clang CLANG*—the Polonti war drums. It could be heard throughout the Lands.

Warriors, residents, shopkeepers, even children took up the drums, stomping, clapping, beating weapons, rocks, or even just sticks together in a rhythm which spread from the fortress to the outer gates. The reverberations shook the ground. And the trolls paused.

They became confused, disoriented, dropping their clubs to cover their ears or pull their hair. Soon they were thrashing their way north again, climbing over each other to get back out of the fence. When they couldn’t, they lashed out at whatever was in their way, which turned out to be other trolls.

All at once, the trolls were fighting each other. The Abbey soldiers having become invisible to them, they turned on each other with clubs, fists, and most often, teeth. Being unaffected by the stone touch, they merely tore each other apart. It was grotesque and bloody. And within a half hour, they all lay dead. The memory faded, and Efran stood rooted in place.

Blinking, he turned to walk back down the Hall to the end, but the door he had entered was now gone. So he walked back to the beginning, but there was no door here, either. Efran put his hands on his hips to say, “The

Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands needs to exit the Hall of Memories, please.”

The solidity evaporated underneath him so that he found himself falling and then rolling on the floor of the hidden library. As he was picking himself up, the Librarian entered with a lantern, again. “Lord Efran, are you injured?”

“No, thank you, Librarian. But I just evicted Abaddon from the Hall of Memories, and we really need to get the Atticitan back up to it, if we can find him,” Efran said.

“Once he determines that Abaddon is gone, he will return, Lord Efran. And may I say how grateful I am that you turned aside this attack, as well,” the Librarian said.

“You’re welcome, but, how did it gain access, and how do we keep it away in future?” Efran asked, aggravated.

“I fear that was my doing, Lord Efran,” the Librarian admitted. For someone who didn’t get excited about much, he looked genuinely disturbed.

“What? How?” Efran asked.

“I found several books on the tower that I suspected to be of demonic origin, and I opened them to look. The opening of those books would have drawn Abaddon,” the Librarian said.

Efran’s head jerked up to the ceiling, where the tower had been retracted. “Get me the rolling ladder. We need to get them out and destroy them.”

“Pardon, Lord Efran, but that I did, when I had determined their origin. That shut the doorway, but not before a tiny portion of the Abyss slipped through,” the Librarian explained.

“I see,” Efran said. “‘A tiny portion.’ Thank you.” Patting the Librarian’s shoulder, Efran staggered out.

As he went down the corridor toward the back grounds, he was muttering, “Nomus, the Hall of Memories needs your attention, whenever you’re available—” He broke off to see that the back door, standing open, led into the starry Firmament rather than the back grounds.

Cautiously, Efran stepped through the doorway, then looked around to see that he was indeed back in the Hall. And in the portal to his left was the Atticitan.

The little man was in his shirt sleeves, working intently. “One moment, Lord Efran, if you will. I am terribly pressed to make these repairs so that this portal may be revitalized.”

“Don’t mind me,” Efran said absently.

“However,” Nomus added awkwardly, “I am most grateful for your eviction of Abaddon.”

“That’s my job—if I can ever figure out how to do it,” Efran muttered, looking around. Nomus had already repaired the two portals adjacent to the one he was in. But their memories were different from those he had seen earlier; the first one here showed a Polonti in odd ceremonial garb locking a door. Doing so, he raised his eyes to say, “*As you have been bound, so shall you be unbound.*”

Efran recognized the short hallway, the door, and the lock. “Is that the Lord of the Fortress locking up the

Destroyer?" he asked. Impulsively, he stuck his hand through the opening of the portal.

"Yes. Lord Efran, IF you would be so kind to NOT play in the portals while I am TRYING to amend them," Nomus said fussily.

Withdrawing his hand, Efran asked, "What was his name? He looks—disturbed."

"That is Lord Caradoc, and yes, he was extremely concerned about the survival of the fortress should he consent to the Destroyer being detained within," Nomus said distractedly.

Efran watched while that Fortress memory faded, then he saw himself with Toby, Minka, Noah and Ivy after he had first brought them here. "The timing's off," he observed. "This memory should appear farther down the Hall."

Nomus paused in exasperation. "That will be corrected, if I'm given a chance to do it."

Efran didn't hear him because he was watching in alarm as Minka came to his room to kiss his face. Then he saw his struggling to stay away from her the next night. "I didn't know that all this would be included," he blurted.

"Well, now you do," Nomus said, glancing over. He'd seen that scene before. He'd seen all of them before.

"That's rather unfair, to have my whole life open to scrutiny just because I got roped into being lord of this place," Efran vented. He was thinking specifically of all the married women.

"Calm down," Nomus said, working. "Everyone has a Hall of Memories that will likewise be open to scrutiny at the end of the ages. You're blest to see yours beforehand."

Efran turned to him. "*Everyone* will have a Hall of Memories?"

"Yes, except that it's usually referred to as a 'book.' It amounts to the same thing. The Librarian showed you how large books can get when they're opened," Nomus said, placing the final touches on a portal that Efran wasn't even looking at.

Sweating profusely, Efran said, "I was told—'there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.'" He was again reading the words in the sky above the water giant. "But I—have many sins."

Nomus paused in his work to look at him. "That you're hiding? Or that you confessed to someone?"

"I confessed to Minka," Efran said, breathing in fear.

"Ah. That is a high-quality confession, then," Nomus observed.

"What? What's high quality?" Efran asked. He was sick to his stomach at the sins he'd confessed.

"A confession that entails a high risk of consequences," Nomus said, stopping his work. "That type of confession is valuable in its effects, whereas a low-risk confession, made without any danger to oneself, is practically worthless."

"I don't understand," Efran said, wiping his lip.

“Let us look at one of these confessed sins, then,” Nomus said. He tossed a hand up to look at a selection that was invisible to Efran. “Oh, my, you were busy,” he commented. Efran wilted. Then Nomus said, “This one will do as an example; there are many just like it.”

Before Efran could object, Nomus flung a hand toward an empty portal, and Efran watched himself as a 19-year-old soldier walking down Rye Street in Westford. A richly dressed woman glanced at him as she passed, and he paused, rolling his eyes. His thoughts were visible: *I don't even like her. But, I've got nothing else to do right now.* So he turned to follow her into a house. She shut the door behind him and—

The portal went blank, except for the silhouette of a groaning man hanging on a broken tree. The only thing that was clear in the picture was the placard nailed up above the figure that announced the crime for which he was being executed: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”

While Efran looked on, someone's hands nailed another placard beneath it that read: “Efran's 8th sin of October 12, 8145.” And the portal went blank. That memory no longer existed. It was like looking at a page in a book which had once contained writing that had been blotted out. “And that's it,” Nomus said briskly.

“I sinned *eight times* on that one day?” Efran asked, discomfited.

“No,” Nomus said. “In total, there were twenty-three sins that day, all accounted for as number eight was.” He spoke rather absentmindedly, being busy rearranging elements of a nearby portal, which appeared to be spots, circles and lines of light hanging in the air.

“But I—I can't even recall them, to confess them,” Efran said unsteadily.

Nomus paused again. “You confessed the behavior and stopped it. It's not a matter of bookkeeping, but of the heart and the will. The illustration you just saw in the portal was merely a visual representation of realities that are beyond your understanding.”

As Efran stared at him, Nomus stepped back to study the pattern of lights, gesturing left or right with the fingers of one hand. Watching him, Efran forgot all about what he did with what's-her-name.

“Ah. There it is.” This memory he pulled out of thin air and coaxed into its cubbyhole with a light touch. Then he and Efran stood watching the construction of this fortress.

Peering, Efran said, “What are they wearing? What are they using? Who are they? When was this?”

“The fortress in which you are standing was completed on August the Tenth of the year Thirty-Four Forty-Two from the creation of the world,” Nomus said, surveying the restored portal in satisfaction.

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Chapter 18

“That’s impossible,” Efran sputtered. “That’s over—four thousand years ago. Nothing stands that long.”

“You’ll have noted in your short stay here how many times the fortress has been rebuilt,” Nomus observed, making minor adjustments to the portal.

“But you were here, then. You were here for its construction. That means you’re—just as old,” Efran said, gaping.

“Yes, and I’d say I’m fairly well preserved, wouldn’t you?” Nomus asked, lifting a pert chin, of which there was only one.

Efran was looking for a place to sit down. “But—during the reigns of Ares and Henry, it was an Abbey, under the Order of St. Benedict—‘The Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea,’” Efran protested.

“It has endured under many names when no one was found worthy to exercise the authority of lordship, but always for the care of orphans. And when the occupants failed to care for orphans, they were turned out until a suitable lord was found,” Nomus lectured, moving on to the next empty portal.

Efran followed in a daze. “Am I doing enough?”

“Are you still here?” Nomus returned with a trace of impatience.

“How will I know if I’m not?” Efran asked. “I mean, not doing enough.”

“Minka will tell you. Or Estes, or DeWitt. Go on, now; you’re in the way.” Nomus pointed behind him.

Turning to see that there was a door, Efran walked down the Firmament in a stupor, then looked up. “Windows,” he murmured. “Windows in the water. . . . All right.”

He got a grip on himself to open the door, from which he looked onto the back grounds. It was apparently one minute since he had left. Minka was on her knees loving all the children, and Lund was bringing Kraken over with Joshua. Lund didn’t even bother to hold the toddler anymore; Joshua was balancing on Kraken’s back just fine by himself.

Efran walked over to stand behind Minka, lifting her as the children scattered to their individual pursuits. Some went over to pet Kraken or pat Joshua on the leg while he sat high above them, babbling and waving. Others ran to help pick blackberries. Tourjee might have preferred that they didn’t, so that there would be some left for the kitchen, but he just scratched his hair and looked to the rhubarb, which was unmolested.

Leaning into Efran, Minka laughed wryly at the drooping remains of flowers with the wrinkled ribbon trailing from them. Then they both glanced up at Tourjee scolding Cyr for bending over too much. At six months along, she was getting unstable. So Tourjee sat her on an upturned bucket to pick and shell peas.

Minka turned away, lowering her eyes, and Efran walked her back into the fortress with an arm around her shoulders.

The following day, May 28th, was Dominica, the Lord's Day. While Earnshaw read Scripture to a group of soldiers and fortress workers in the keep, the Meeting Hall in the new inn was opened to the leaseholders to hold worship services. Soames' father Shardlow, the bookseller, brought his personal copy of the Holy Canon, as well as fifteen songbooks from his shop. Lowry paid him two silver pieces each for the books so that they could be set aside and used strictly for this group.

After Shardlow's reading from the Gospel of John, Delano got up to say a few words of encouragement to the group, which included Madgwick and Wytan, Commander Wendt with Gabriel and Barr, Averno, Bethune and Howe, Flodie, Geneve and Melchior, DeWitt and Tera, Estes and Kelsey, Kane and his son Chuk, Lemmerz, Giardi and Ryal, Minogue, Oxenham, Plunkett, Coghill, Schmolck, Wade, and Yaxley, plus a half-dozen others with their families. Even that many people filled only a third of the benches in the hall. So there was room to grow.

Because Oxenham gave his workers Dominica off, there was no construction noise to interfere with the service. And just as they were getting started, Efran and Minka slipped quietly into the back, so that only a few were even aware of their presence. But after the benediction, when the worshipers were dismissed, they all stayed another half-hour to chat. And they all agreed that this hall suited them far better than the elegant chapel next door, especially those who had rowdy children.

Oxenham asked, "But what are you going to do with the chapel, Lord Efran? Is it just going to stay locked up?"

"No," Efran said. "It's going to have a very special resident, even if I have to tie her up and haul her down here."

Those listening laughed or groaned, and someone demanded, "Who?"

"You'll see," he grimly promised. Minka hugged him tightly.

As he and she exited the hall, they heard Barr say, "Captain."

Both turned, and Efran said in surprise, "Commander! I—I saw you from the back, and didn't recognize you." That was for a reason: Wendt's hair was now almost fully brown again—a light brown, with a sprinkling of gray. Nonetheless, the white was gone.

"Yes, I didn't recognize you, either," Wendt said dryly, still blind. "I hear you have black spikes again, and no one can keep up with your hair without a status report."

"True," Efran winced, feeling his spikes. "But it grows fast."

"Who else is here?" Wendt asked.

"Gabriel, sir," he said, stepping up. "I just had a word with Melchior. Do you want him?"

"Yes," Wendt said.

"Estes and DeWitt left with their wives, but Ryal is still here with Giardini. She's talking," Efran said critically.

Minka laughed in rebuke, "Efran! I do that all the time."

"I know," he said wearily.

While the others laughed again, Wendt said, “Yes, let’s have Ryal.”

While Gabriel brought Melchior and Geneve over, Efran beckoned to Ryal. He touched Giardi’s shoulder before leaving her to join the group loitering outside the Meeting Hall. “Hello, Commander,” Ryal said upon approaching. “Since I’m sure that Efran has already commented on your hair, I’ll refrain.”

“Not directly,” Efran said as though offended.

“No one’s accusing you of flippancy, Efran,” Wendt said. Efran squinted suspiciously and Minka laughed again. Some people believed that Wendt made such comments simply to evoke that rich, warm laughter. But he went on, “I had a pair of scouts return last night from Eurus. There’s apparently a war on between the Councilors and the faeries.”

The whole group stared at him, and Efran asked, “How is that possible?”

Wendt said, “The Council found out somehow that their former Surchataine Solace was a faerie, so they made contact with a rogue band of faeries in the Fastnesses to do away with her. Since she has disappeared, the rogues have turned on the residents.”

At Minka’s gasp, Wendt said quickly, “They’re not being injured or killed, Minka, just inconvenienced, apparently, with Snodsbury Spunkles, dragonflowers, moonflowers. Oh, and pranks—cows are giving green milk, pigs are lecturing on Euripides, anyone stepping on a sidewalk makes it start moving. The city is in chaos because no one knows what’s causing it or how to stop it. The scouts believe that unless it ends quickly, the humans in Eurus will start warring against each other.”

“Or against a rich old woman who lives alone?” Minka asked, pale.

Wendt paused. “They don’t believe that Lady Marguerite is in danger, Minka. She’s just dealing with the repercussions like everyone else.”

“What repercussions?” Efran asked.

“Oh, servants leaving, unreliable services and deliveries. Things like that happen when the fishmonger finds his shrimp up and dancing, or bottles of molasses pop their corks to spew all over the grocer’s shop. The irrationality of it makes people violent,” Wendt observed.

“All right,” Efran said. “I’ve been patient; I’ve been restrained, but importing foreign faeries is beyond the pale. We’ll answer with our own. Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin, I would have a word with you, please.”

The two faeries immediately appeared, standing on the Commander’s shoulders. “Yes, Lord Efran,” Ditson said, sweeping his top hat from his head to bow. “We are most eager to hear how we may assist you in the utterly unaccountable situation in Eurus. Are we not, dear Nutbin?”

The squirrel in vest and monocle on Wendt’s other shoulder fairly barked in excitement: “You have s-stated the case in a n-nutshell, dear Ditson, and I am all atwitter to receive Lord Efran’s directions.”

“Perhaps you could find another place to stand,” Efran said, wincing slightly.

But Wendt said, “That’s all right, Efran; I like being in the middle of things.”

“A good sport as well as a great military mind!” Ditson cried.

“I like to think so,” Wendt said blandly.

“Very well,” Efran exhaled. “Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin, you appear to be aware of the Faerie Wars in Eurus.”

While Nutbin’s tail twitched, Ditson said righteously, “We heard the scouts’ report, Lord Efran, and a more outrageous situation cannot be imagined.”

“Probably, but we won’t try to imagine one,” Efran said. “What we require of you is to get Lady Marguerite and Hartshough—”

“And Justinian,” Minka said quietly but firmly.

Efran almost swayed, but quickly agreed, “—and Justinian out of Eurus and down to the Lands. See that they are able to bring what staff or goods that they require for comfort. You’re to follow Lady Marguerite’s instructions regarding the departure, except that it must be at once. You may tell her she has my word that she will be returned to Featherstone any time she wishes once the Faerie Wars have ended.”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Ditson said, a strange, fierce light in his eyes. “To our duty, dear Nutbin!” he cried, and they vanished.

Looking at the smiling faces around him, Efran wiped sweat from his lip. “This won’t spin out of control, will it? Not like sending Solace up with Baldassare did. Right?”

After a moment, Ryal said, “I believe that Lady Marguerite will retain a firm hand, Efran.” Minka nodded emphatically.

“Good,” Efran said. Turning to her, he said, “Can you go through the chapel to stock it—make it ready for residents?”

“Oh, yes!” Minka cried. “Oh, this will be so much fun!”

Wendt said, “We’ll have a regiment report to you, Lieutenant Commander.”

She squealed, “Where’s my hat? Anyway, I’ll need wagons, and slave labor, and purchasing agents—oh, and the keys. . . .” She continued to enumerate the essentials as Efran gestured for their horses. And the worshipers departed to their own homes.

Within the hour, the Lt. Commander’s force of uniformed slave labor emerged from the chapel armed with lists to drive wagons to Walford’s Ready Furniture, Twombly’s Dry Goods, Besiana’s Bath and Bed Supplies, Froggatt’s Indispensable Everyday Needs, and numerous other specialty shops (all of which were persuaded to open on Dominica for emergency purchases).

A number of Landers watched this furnishing of the chapel in great interest, and quizzed each other about who the lucky resident would be, but no one seemed to know.

Two other observers stood apart, watching as well. One was the architect Bozzelli; the other was Theakston, the chairman of the complaint committee who had been brutalized by Henris. Bozzelli murmured, “When all the soldiers leave, we may be able to catch the lady and find out what she’s about.”

“Yes,” Theakston said. “But we shall inquire courteously; we will not browbeat or frighten her.” He was still smarting from Henris’ thrashing—especially the applause following.

“Of course not. Good heavens, no,” Bozzelli said, then both looked back complacently on the furnishing underway.

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Chapter 19

When Efran stopped by the chapel with Joshua a few hours later to check on progress, he had to thread his way past laborers who kept saluting him while he shook his head at them. He was looking around at the open space—the main hall—that had been transformed into a luxurious dining/sitting area with furniture and rugs. He checked the kitchen to see it already equipped to a gourmand’s expectations.

Seeing a stream of slaves go in and out a door off the kitchen, Efran, with Joshua, looked into a stairwell that led down to a basement, where he glimpsed wine racks. He backed out, bumping into several laborers, then returned to the hall to begin up a curving stairway leading to a loft, and beyond that, rooms.

Efran literally ran into Minka on the loft as she was coming out from a nearby room to meet him and Joshua. She clutched them both in joy. “Oh, Efran! There are *four* rooms up here, each that could be used as a bedroom, and a bath with *piped-in water*. I don’t know how the architect did it, but it’s glorious. I’m not going to put beds in all these rooms yet; we’ve got to see who comes with her and what she wants.

“Oh, Efran.” She squeezed him as tightly as she could, which he enjoyed. “I can’t believe it. I’m so happy, I could die.” She certainly had forgotten about not being pregnant.

“Not yet,” he said with mild anxiety. “Just be happy.”

“I am,” she breathed. “Oh, I hope they make it down all right.”

At this time, Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin, cloaked, were perched on top of high drying rods in Featherstone, looking down on a scene playing out around the kitchen work table. Marguerite sat at one end of the table, looking placid but tired as she folded and refolded her napkin. Justinian was sitting around the corner beside her. Hartshough was standing to keep an eye on their uninvited guests.

For the three residents of Featherstone were surrounded by trolls—dark, lumbering creatures with wiry hair and thick eyebrows, under which their bulging eyes darted about in relentless suspicion. They were smelly and filthy, plunging dirty fingers into every food receptacle in the kitchen. They mostly mumbled to each other through crooked teeth, but every now and then one banged a staff on the table.

This troll was obviously the leader, being dressed in human clothes—a suit, actually—instead of rags or skins. He even wore a top hat. True, the clothes were dirty and ragged, bloodstained in places, which indicated how he probably acquired them.

He banged his staff on a cracked, empty platter. “Where more dis?” he demanded.

Marguerite sighed, "I'm very sorry, but that was the last roasted pig in the house." So the troll smashed everything remaining on the table.

"We eat people, too," a very large red-headed troll said. His beady eyes were fixed on Justinian.

"Not wrinkly people. No meat," a third sniffed.

"No meat on skinny people," a fourth said in disgust, eyeing Justinian.

Before the red-headed troll could counter that, Justinian replied languidly, "There are consolations. I happen to know a farmer nearby who has preserved sheep brains."

This got their attention. "Uhn uhn uhn uhn uhn uhn." They all emitted something that could be construed as laughter, showing their crooked, stained teeth in between their canines. One said, "Uhn. Farmer Pensum got no brains left. Uhn uhn uhn."

Justinian narrowed his eyes in revulsion, wondering if they meant what he thought they meant. Beady eyes on him, the large troll licked his thick lips with a black tongue to observe, "He got brains."

While the others evaluated the size of Justinian's head, he offered, "I know where there are more. And that's not here." All the trolls focused their tiny brains on that statement, but Marguerite uneasily eyed the large redhead.

Ditson and Nutbin disappeared from the kitchen to zip through the mansion, counting trolls—another 26 were roaming throughout the house, breaking mirrors (which they hated), smashing furniture, slicing upholstery with their claws, all for fun. Then the two faeries reappeared on top of the stables. Inside, they heard a horse rearing and stomping the ground, whinnying in fear. They peered through cracks in the roofing to see a handful of trolls with knives surround one of the two horses left.

Ditson whispered, "Time for a Pig Diversion, dear Nutbin, over the pond."

"Indeed, dear Ditson!" While Nutbin flew to the edge of the pond about a hundred feet away, Ditson cloaked himself and began squealing like a pig. The trolls immediately forgot about the horse. As they poured out of the stables, Ditson the Disembodied Pig Voice drifted toward the pond, where Nutbin, in the shape of a cutter pig, hovered over the water.

Brandishing their knives, grunting, "Uhn uhn uhn," the trolls ran on stumpy legs to the pond. But the luscious ham hovered over the water just out of reach. So, beginning with the first arrivals, the trolls plunged directly into the water to wade out in pursuit of Ham until the water was over their heads. And as trolls are heavily built but unable to swim, their feet promptly sank into the mud at the bottom of the pond and stayed there.

One by one, they waded out until only one remained: the last in the train who had watched all those before him disappear into the water. Then he followed them to do likewise.

Ditson and Nutbin hurried back to the stables to tend the panicky horses. The faeries soothed them with horsie lullabies, then cloaked them to keep them safe from other hungry trolls. "Well. Round One goes to us, dear Ditson. What shall our next step be?" Nutbin inquired, tail thrashing.

"Oh, no question, my dear Nutbin. We must return immediately to the kitchen to see how our friends fare," Ditson said firmly.

“You are so correct, my dear strategist. Back to the kitchen!” Nutbin replied.

While Justinian was elaborating on the location of fresh sheep brains, the large redhead burst out, “Skinny man knows nothing! I break your face!” Justinian exhaled, sitting back, as all the other trolls roared in agreement and the hatted leader smiled in permission.

But before the perceptive troll could do any pounding, the leader put out his clawed hand to stop him, eyes bugging out. His huge, fleshy nose quivered, and he uttered, “Faerie stink. Faerie stink!” The three human hostages looked quickly at each other.

“To doors!” The leader banged his staff on the wall. “Stand at door! Door!” He waved the stick at the door into the dining room, then to the other door leading outside. And two trolls positioned themselves in hiding by the doors.

As the light began fading, Lieutenant Commander Minka had dismissed her troops for dinner, but she stayed behind in the chapel just a moment to fluff a pillow on the divan and straighten a fringed corner of the rug. Then she looked around to clap her hands in excitement, squealing softly. With a happy sigh, she turned to the door.

It opened suddenly before her, and she started. Two unsmiling men entered to stare her down. She recognized the architect, Bozzelli, but not the other man (because during his beatdown, her eyes had been locked on Henris).

The three stood looking at each other. Minka grew tense, as there was no one around to call for help. “Lady Minka,” Bozzelli opened pleasantly, “I’m consumed with curiosity to know who the lucky residents of the chapel will be. You and your husband, perhaps?”

Minka moved to go around them, saying, “Excuse me, but—” Theakston stepped aside to block her with a cool stare. (He had no intention of frightening her, as he had children himself. In fact, Minka reminded him much of his strong-willed teenage daughter. The most reliable way he’d found to make her look at him was to block her path with a level gaze—which, in fact, mostly made her angry.)

Bozzelli said softly, “Please don’t go yet.” Minka started shaking.

At this time, the owner and operator of Schmolck’s Shifting Shop (that no longer shifted) was passing by the chapel on his way back to his shop with a nice boxed dinner from Firmin’s. (He had gone out of his way in order to pay his lease for the month at the notary shop, which had recently begun accepting payments on behalf of the Fortress.)

Noting the two men going into the chapel, Schmolck paused. Aware that a great deal of furnishings and accessories had just been delivered there, he was not entirely sure that anyone should just be walking in. So he went over to the doors himself. Meanwhile, someone coming down the switchback on foot saw all this, so began trotting down at a slightly sideways gait, eyes on the chapel entrance.

Bozzelli took a step toward Minka, and she turned to run. When he impulsively caught her arm, she turned back to rake her fingernails across his face. He gasped, letting go in surprise at the violence. “Why did you do that?” he demanded, affronted.

The door opened behind them. While Schmolck assessed the tableau before him, Bozzelli casually covered his stinging cheek and said, “Yes?”

Schmolck inquired, “Lady Minka, may I escort you up to the fortress?”

“Thank you, Lord Schmolck,” she exhaled, running forward to take his proffered arm. Behind them, Bozzelli and Theakston grimaced at each other; this had not gone as they wished at all.

As Schmolck began to escort Minka out with the other two following, they all came face to face with Efran, who had run from the switchback to the chapel. Breathing hard, he looked at Minka, then Schmolck, then to the architect (with fresh scratch marks on his face) and the spokesman for his grievance committee. Efran said nothing, but lowered his head to spread like a hooded cobra.

Minka poured out, “Thank you so much, Lord Schmolck, but I won’t keep you from your dinner. It smells divine!” She paused as Schmolck bowed to her, then nodded to Efran and went on his way. “Oh, Efran, I just need to lock up, then I’m coming in to dinner. Who has Joshua?” As she talked, she pulled out her keys to lock the chapel door.

Efran returned to human form. “Quennel,” he replied, looking to her. The two men made abbreviated bows and turned to quickly walk away. Watching them walk off, he murmured, “What happened?”

“Nothing,” she said firmly, returning the keys to her pocket. “Bozzelli wanted to know what we were doing with his chapel, and I encouraged him to not be nosy.” He draped his arm around her shoulders with a light laugh.

As Theakston and Bozzelli strode away, Theakston said, “I’m terribly disappointed for you, old boy, but I believe I’ve lost interest in the chapel. And you’re going to have to come up with an explanation for those scratches before you walk in your door.”

Bozzelli put a hand to his cheek, wincing.

At Featherstone, Ditson and Nutbin were flying invisibly through the back door into the kitchen when a powerful troll hand reached up to knock both of them out of the air at one blow. When they hit the floor, Marguerite, Justinian and Hartshough started in horror: the two faeries had been turned to stone, which was the result of the troll’s touch on living flesh.

Ditson and Nutbin lay on the wood floor as detailed granite statues—eyes widened in surprise, mouths gaping open. Sir Ditson’s top hat was faithfully preserved as falling off his head at the moment of conversion. Sir Nutbin’s opaque monocle was frozen in the act of swinging from its slender stone cord.

“Uhn uhn uhn uhn uhn uhn!” The trolls around the table grunt-laughed, then the leader with the big stick waved it at the humans: “Take them down hole while we look for more stinky faeries.” That was the basement, which the three knew for the trolls’ having spent much of the day down there already.

In leaving the kitchen, Marguerite, Justinian and Hartshough formed a tight cluster so that the trolls would have no need to push them along. They shouldn’t have worried, however, because the trolls didn’t wish to turn them to stone. These wrinkly and skinny people had good big brains.

In bed that evening, Efran moved to lie beside Minka. He sighed in contentment as she ran her hand over his hair. “It’s growing enough so that it’s not so much spiky as just short,” she said, evaluating.

“As long as you’re happy,” he murmured, turning to press his face into her neck.

“Oh, Efran, I can’t wait. I hope Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin get her down here quickly. I spent *a lot* on the chapel—you don’t want to know how much. But I’m hoping that she’ll like it enough and be comfortable enough to *stay*,” she exhaled.

“Me, too,” he breathed, his eyelids dropping. *Thank You, God of heaven, that she’s forgotten about not being pregnant. Thank You that she’s not pregnant.*

“Oh, dear Lord, get them down here,” she murmured, almost asleep.

“Amen,” he whispered.

Marguerite, Justinian and Hartshough sat in a tight group in the dark basement, listening to faint thumping, whoops and crashes as the troll troop continued their rampage through Featherstone. “Isn’t there an opening to the hidden passageways down here?” Justinian whispered.

Marguerite said, “Yes, but they’ll smell us through the walls. We’d best find another way out.”

Shifting, Justinian noted, “I seem to remember stairs to an exterior door.” He was tightly clutching his soiled, battered hat.

“Yes, there is a storm door in the southern wall,” she said.

Justinian shifted, trying to peer through the dense darkness. “Hartshough, do you think you can find it?”

“I shall attempt it, Lord Justinian,” he said, standing.

Marguerite also stood. “We must stay together.”

“True.” Justinian rose as well.

With Hartshough leading, arms outstretched, they shuffled like chained prisoners in the darkness. He stopped at an obstruction and whispered, “This is the great wine vat close to the eastern wall. So we must follow it to the right.”

“Right,” Justinian said.

“Correct,” Hartshough confirmed. They all made a quarter turn. Again, Marguerite and Justinian allowed Hartshough to lead.

After an indeterminate amount of shuffling, Hartshough stopped again. “Here are the wine racks along the southern wall. The storm door is to the right of these.”

“That’s right,” Marguerite said.

“Lead on, Hartshough; you’re doing famously,” Justinian said. They all turned to the right again for Hartshough to lead with a hand on the southern wall.

Shortly, they came to an abrupt obstruction. Marguerite banged her shin; Justinian fell over, and Hartshough was stopped dead at the wall.

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Chapter 20

It took several minutes of scrabbling, backtracking, and blind groping for the basement prisoners to even determine the nature of the obstruction. Panting, Hartshough said, “There appears to be a large pile of trash here—I’m finding broken cases, bottles, casks, dishes, and . . . bones.”

“Ohh,” Marguerite exhaled.

“Nonetheless, if I am correct, the stairs to the storm door lay behind all this. We must move it.”

“Then let’s do that,” Justinian said. “What should we do with the trash we move?”

“I would suggest piling it at the bottom of the stairway, Lord Justinian, to hopefully delay our occupying guests from reaching us,” Hartshough said.

“I’m in favor of that,” Justinian said, lifting a broken case full of broken bottles of unopened vintage wine, rare and valuable—at one time.

After some trial and error, they had Marguerite stand at the bottom of the stairs and speak softly, giving the men a direction in which to make a trail of debris leading from the south wall to the stairs. With the trail established, they all began diligently moving the obstruction from under the storm door.

Rather than block the stairs, however, Marguerite guided the men to dump the trash on either side of the stairway. Periodically, she stooped to make sure that the last step of the stairs remained clear. And when Hartshough and Justinian brought over pouches, she kept these on the outside edge of the piles.

In the kitchen, Ditson whispered, “Are they all gone? My ears are clogged.”

Nutbin’s stone form moved slightly. “Yes. I’m coming out.”

“*Gently*, dear Nutbin,” Ditson reminded him. Their words were condensed due to the constriction of the stone around their jaws. Fortunately, however, it was porous enough for them to breathe. This the trolls never realized.

“No fear, my dear friend,” Nutbin replied. His stone body began moving a bit this way and that, then the stone cracked at the neck so that the head fell away from the shoulders.

Upon more wriggling and shifting, Nutbin partly emerged from the neck opening. Fortunately, his tail had been extended straight out upon calcification, so it slipped out easily with the rest of his body from the stone mold.

When his arms were free, he carefully lifted the stone shell off his head and ears so that it remained intact. However—“Oh, dear,” Nutbin whispered. “I’ve broken the stone that covered my monocle cord.” But he extracted the rest of himself without breaking anything else.

“That is not a problem, dear Nutbin; the dense creatures will never notice,” Ditson said generously from within his own hard cover.

“Thank you, my dear Ditson; I am entirely trusting your perspicacity regarding trolls,” Nutbin said. He screwed his monocle back into his eye to carefully realign his stone head on the shoulders and invisibly seal the crack.

“How are you coming along?” Ditson asked, shifting in mild impatience.

“All done,” Nutbin pronounced. “Now, where would you like me to start with you?” He stood over his friend to critically evaluate the weak points of his entombed figure. Moonlight streaming in through the great kitchen windows aided this task.

“I believe we should separate the edge of the hat from the forehead,” Ditson said. “Then you may safely break my neck.”

“I will follow your directions to the letter, dear Ditson, but please use happier wording,” Nutbin fretted. Leaning over, he executed a perfect break of the hat brim from the forehead. Murmuring, “Going for the neck now,” Nutbin carefully pulled the head forward while standing on the chest, and the stone cracked.

“Are you all right, dear Ditson?” Nutbin asked solicitously.

“Well as ever, good Nutbin, but I fear I shan’t be able to pull out my arms without damaging the structure,” Ditson said. Yes, his arms were stretched out before him, whereas Nutbin’s had been curled close to his chest in preparation for a lateral roll.

“No fear, Ditson; I shall enact repairs,” Nutbin said crisply. After breaking each arm at the shoulder, he pulled his friend bodily from its stone case, then pulled the stone mold off his head. In removing the hat, he had to scrunch it a bit. So while Nutbin reassembled Ditson’s stone figure to appear completely intact, Ditson effected repairs to his top hat, blowing a great deal of dust off it.

At last, they hovered over the rigid forms, inspecting them. “Excellent work, dear Nutbin, artistic in recreating the appearance of wholeness. Our troll friends will not see anything amiss,” Ditson said firmly.

“You are too kind, worthy Ditson. But now we must locate our human targets of acquisition,” Nutbin said.

They paused in the kitchen, listening. Ditson said, “I do believe they’re in the basement. But there are also a great many trolls between the house and the stables.”

“Oh, dear—they must be relocated, don’t you think, dear friend?” Nutbin asked, brushing stone dust off his vest and blowing on his monocle.

Replacing his hat firmly on his head, Ditson said, “Indubitably, my resourceful Sciurus. Let us inspect the grounds.” And they disappeared through a partly open window.

While Marguerite, Justinian, and Hartshough continued their labor in the pitch-black basement, Ditson and Nutbin were out inspecting the grounds. The trolls were celebrating their capture of Featherstone by enjoying a great feast of all the remaining animals they found on the grounds (including a few squirrels, rodents, bats and garden snakes). Fortunately, the two remaining horses in the stables were still alive, and cloaked.

But there were three great bonfires scattered around the grounds, and as the trolls were negligent regarding fire safety, a few slender fingers were already creeping through the grass toward the house. The fifty-odd trolls were also in varying stages of inebriation, having carried out a great quantity of alcohol from the basement to add a sparkling finish to their repast.

Nutbin murmured, “Oh, dear. What do you think? Another succulent pig over the water?”

Ditson deliberated. “That was effective for a few, but I fear that there are enough here to perceive the trap before all of them succumb. And they look to be fairly well stuffed as it is. However, we may entice them in like manner to fight to the death. And what troll doesn’t love a fight as much as a Polonti?”

They winked at each other, and Nutbin’s tail bristled in anticipation. “What say we use an Enhanced Impostorization, facilitated by recent events?—such as Lord Efran’s call to fight on the barricade.”

Ditson gasped, “Oh, what a marvelous plan, worthy Nutbin! You do the visuals; I will supply the voice.” And they turned together toward the pond.

Suddenly Efran appeared in the middle of the pond, standing on a row of tree trunks extending up from the water. He called joyfully, “Fight me! You want to end this now? Come fight me up here!”

The trolls spun as one to the larger-than-life Polonti grinning atop his precarious stand. “Fight me! . . . Come fight me up here!” he repeated.

The trolls began roaring at him, throwing bottles, firebrands, and half-eaten shanks to splash ineffectively in the water while he grinned maliciously at them. Then he added, “Finish it, trolls! [which word was shouted in a slightly different voice] Throw me down, and we will open the gates to you! Are you troll men or water boys [likewise]?” (Ditson and Nutbin assumed, correctly, that the questionable comment about opening the gates would fly right over the trolls’ thick skulls.)

The leader of the trolls was running around in a frenzied rage, spitting and tearing at his hair. Then he ordered the rest of them, “Down! Down! Down in water for bridge! Link up for bridge!” And he began to throw his hapless underlings into the pond one after another, making each man hold on to the shoulders of the man in front of him. That way he began constructing a troll bridge from the edge of the pond to the trunks on which the infuriating Polonti stood grinning. He was all wet, too.

In the basement, the three prisoners had finally cleared away enough debris so that they could access the metal stairway leading to the storm door. Justinian ascended the stairs first to throw his shoulder against the outward-opening doors—

Which almost rebounded him back down the stairs. “It’s barred on the outside,” he exhaled, rubbing his shoulder. Below him, Marguerite leaned faintly on the hand rail, and even Hartshough hung his head.

But flickering firelight showed in between the doors. Justinian, brows creased, pressed his ear against the crack. “There’s a great hubbub going on out there. If you didn’t think me insane, I’d say that Efran was challenging them to fight.” The other two peered up at him in the faint red light.

Outside, Nutbin and Ditson began stealthily flying across the back grounds while watching the trolls collect in and around the pond. The leader had succeeded in forcing about twenty men into a bridge of shoulders across the pond to the defiant Polonti grinning on the tree stumps. And now the leader was endeavoring to walk over these shoulders to fight as the Polonti demanded.

Ditson paused to shove the illusion back another three feet from the troll bridge, lest the leader reach it too soon. The trolls continued to roar at the maddening Polonti, who periodically wished they'd come fight him. Then Ditson and Nutbin landed at the storm doors on the south side of the house, adjacent to the pond.

Ditson flipped up the bar securing the doors so that he and Nutbin could open them. They looked down on three weary faces blinking up at them. "Quickly, friends," Ditson urged, whisking them out by faerie levitation. Then he closed the storm doors again.

Nutbin cloaked them all. "To the stables, dear friends, while our hosts are distracted." The troll leader was floundering at the end of his bridge, but the Impostorization was also fading, as its creators were exerting a great deal of energy elsewhere. So the faeries had to let their people run on their own footpower.

Justinian half-carried Marguerite while Hartshough ran ahead to the stables. Ditson threw out another refreshing burst toward the illusion, but as he was preoccupied at the moment, he accidentally supplied the, er, wrong audio. Instead of Efran calling the trolls to fight, they heard taunts from a favorite faerie play. From his posts in the pond, Efran recited:

"For this, be sure, to-night thou shalt have cramps,
Side-stitches that shall pen thy breath up; urchins
Shall, for that vast of night that they may work,
All exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinch'd
As thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging
Than bees that made 'em."

And he laughed.

The trolls stood still to listen—except their leader, who was floundering on the next-to-last man's shoulders. As they finally apprehended that they were being threatened, they began roaring even louder.

Meanwhile, Hartshough was hitching the two remaining horses to Marguerite's carriage as fast as he could. After Justinian had sat her gently on the padded seat, he darted around to help with the hitching. All this time, Nutbin kept them thoroughly cloaked. When the carriage was ready, Ditson threw one last audio out to the illusion, again from the faerie play.

While the trolls looked on, blinking, the smiling Polonti said,

"Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

The trolls watched in dazed bewilderment as the Polonti went silent and slowly faded. And then they understood

that they had been bedazzled, bewitched and—worst of all—beguiled as fools.

Since their leader and about twenty of their fellows had drowned by this time, the remaining trolls went on a rampage, swarming over Featherstone to destroy everything not already in shambles, then running outside to grab fistfuls of burning wood which they tossed into every level of the mansion. And a few trolls who stayed too long to dance around the flames couldn't get out again before they became fuel for the conflagration.

By this time, Justinian was climbing up with Hartshough into the driver's seat to urge the horses south at a fast canter. Ditson and Nutbin rode on the back top of the carriage, throwing out concealing scents and misleading sounds. Marguerite lay rocking on the cushioned seat with the roll of the carriage, exhausted but thinking.

An hour later, the trolls looked around at the utter destruction and realized that something was missing. Their captives were no longer in the basement. But moonlight illumined the fresh carriage-wheel tracks leading south out of the stables.

And a few trolls lifted their great lumpy noses to sniff: "Horses. People. Faeries."

"South," others said. "South on road."

And they began following the carriage tracks south.

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Chapter 21

Efran was up early the following morning. After conferring with the Commander, he sent a couple of scouts riding north until they should happen upon anything he might need to know about. There was more that Minka wanted to do in the chapel, so Efran authorized a day's supply of slave labor. Also, he told several men that she was not to be left alone at any time, nor was Bozzelli to be allowed into the chapel.

On a thought, Efran went up to the second-floor workroom to ask DeWitt, "Minka said she spent 'a lot' on furnishing the chapel. How much is that so far?"

DeWitt glanced aside at several receipts, then said, "Not too much, Efran. After all, it was basically an empty building, and we don't know what Lady Marguerite will be bringing down." He leaned over to ask an unrelated question of Estes, who replied vaguely before showing him a sheet of numbers in another folder.

Watching all this in mild concern, Efran asked, "Is that chapel expenses, Estes?"

Estes looked up. "What, Efran?"

"That sheet that's covered in numbers. Are those purchases for the chapel?" Efran repeated.

"This?" Estes said, lifting the sheet. "No, these are Garrett's requests for new cultivars. The hilltop has a unique growing environment that he wants to more fully exploit."

"Oh," Efran said. Returning to DeWitt, he asked, "Then, her purchases have been reasonable?"

“As far as I know,” DeWitt said without looking up. But then he did look up at someone else. “Ah, Pieta. Have we got Goyne’s monthly report yet?”

“He’s working on it, Administrator,” she said, rounding the table to hand him another folder. “But here are the nursery requests.”

“Have you looked at them?” DeWitt asked, flipping the folder open.

“Yes, it all looks in line with past expenditures, considering the number of children, but Felice is asking for finer quality cotton for wraps and blankies,” Pieta said.

“‘Finer quality’?” DeWitt repeated tentatively.

“Maybe I should let her talk to you. She is—rather unhappy about scratchy wraps on baby skin,” Pieta said.

“I heard she threatened to stuff them in the ovens,” Estes said absently.

DeWitt glanced at him, then said, “Oh. Well, yes—get her what she wants.” He handed the folder back to her, then saw Efran watching all this as though it were a foreign language skit. “Yes, Efran?”

“I—just want to know how much Minka is spending on the chapel,” Efran said dubiously.

DeWitt shrugged, looking at Estes, who shrugged back at him. Then they both looked at Efran to shrug. Estes said, “We’re not really tracking it, Efran.”

Efran had his mouth open in mild consternation when DeWitt said, “She can spend whatever she wants.”

Estes confirmed that with a nod. “For Marguerite? Yes, Efran. Minka can spend whatever she wants.”

Efran studied them, then they all jumped at the courtyard alarm bell ringing. Efran turned to trot down the stairs, waiting to run until he got to the foyer. Then he careened into the courtyard to look down Main. The wall gate guards were ringing the alarm bell as they slammed the gates shut.

Only one vehicle had entered: a carriage that he recognized as Marguerite’s. The horses were stumbling in exhaustion up Main, with Justinian and Hartshough in the driver’s seat. The scouts that Efran had just sent out were riding alongside as the carriage stopped at the sidewalk. Here, they pivoted their horses to shout at the soldiers who had run over. They sprang away to gear up. Efran marginally noted Minka running up to the carriage to open the door.

Then he saw the problem: large manlike creatures with thick wiry hair, overlong arms, and stumpy bodies had arrived at the wall gates to begin climbing over them. Archers ran out to shoot them point blank, only to see their arrows bounce off. Swords barely nicked them. They were not armed at all, except for their hands. All they had to do was simply push away whoever tried to come at them. And whoever they touched turned to stone. Efran watched the first wave of Abbey defenders fall down like statues knocked from their pedestals.

“Trolls,” Efran whispered. “The ‘faeries’ that came down from the Fastnesses to fight at the Council’s summons are *trolls*.”

But Efran knew what to do, having seen a like scenario in the Hall of Memories. Watching as they thronged up Main, Efran began pulling on the alarm bell in a certain rhythm: *clang clang CLANG, clang clang CLANG, clang clang CLANG, clang clang CLANG*.

At first no one paid any attention, as they were already fending off a surprise attack. But the courtyard soldiers caught on to support the war drums he was attempting to start. Men ran out to begin clanging their weapons together or beating on the iron fence.

But not enough. Not enough were replicating the drums for it to have any effect on the trolls. They were spreading out on Main, brushing aside anyone in their path. So as he was clanging, Efran began shouting: “*Bom bom BOM! Bom bom BOM! Bom bom BOM! Bom bom BOM!*” And the men around him began shouting as well, stomping as they clanged their weapons.

Pedestrians below began to carry the war drums, and Efran saw the trolls veer away from anyone who was doing it. Other Landers finally realized that, for some reason, the Captain was insisting on the drums right now.

Soldiers who had lost their weapons took up the drums, which began reverberating down Main. A few brave shop owners came out to sound the rhythm. Suddenly all the men were doing it instead of ineffectually getting themselves turned to stone. And civilians poured from their shelters to shout or stomp the war drums.

The trolls paused, surrounded by the sound, and began wheeling in confusion. The ones farthest up Main, near the carriage, covered their ears to begin running in any direction—which meant that they began running into each other. And when they collided, they started fighting—each other.

It was as Efran had seen in the Hall of Memories. Mere men had disappeared as enemies; only the trolls’ kin were worthy of battle. So they grabbed each other’s heads to pound them with their own, cracking both skulls. Or one troll would grip another’s throat, who would gouge out the other’s eyes, who would blindly hold on until he had strangled his enemy.

They used no weapons but their heads or hands or feet or jaws to crush and to pound. One troll grabbed another in a headlock, who then opened his great mouth to bite a chunk out of his attacker’s side. Two trolls had each other by the arms; the stronger ripped the other’s arms from their sockets. The desperately wounded troll then fell in such a way as to shove his profusely bleeding shoulder into the other’s face, and drown him in blood.

The fighting was so brutal that civilians scurried inside their homes or shops and the Abbey men watched from a distance. But they were diligent in keeping up the war drums.

Finally, there were no more trolls standing, and the drums died while everyone looked around. There were stone bodies scattered all down Main. While Wendt ordered a contingent to load up troll bodies—or pieces of them—and cart them off the lands to burn them in pyres, other men began searching through the statues for their friends, or trying to find out if there was anything they could do to help them.

Coish was anxiously looking everywhere for his partner. “Jehan. Jehan!” They had gotten separated when the trolls first struck. “Jehan!” he turned, calling. Then, with his heart in his throat, he began looking at the stone figures littering the street, especially up against the gates. They were all Abbey men.

Coish was scanning the figures at the wall gates, who were the first on the scene when the trolls started coming over. Then he saw one lying on his side as though he’d been tossed. Teeth chattering, he went over to kneel in the dirt to look at the stone face. It was his partner. It was Jehan.

Choking on wordless sorrow, Coish laid his hands on the stone arm. When it wobbled slightly under his touch, he lifted up, raising his face to the sky. Then he looked back down at his partner’s form, and paused. Was it moving?

Efran had just come down off the switchback to assess the situation. Connor ran up to report, “Captain, there are thirty-three men that have been turned to stone. We don’t know what to do.” Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin were nowhere to be seen.

“Check with Ryal. He may have some information on it,” Efran said. The Hall of Memories had not shown him that.

Efran continued down Main, glancing at the troll bodies. They gave off a foul smell, so that the men carting them away had to cover their faces as well as their hands. The blood was especially noxious.

Grimacing, Efran walked on down to Marguerite’s carriage, where it sat with the door open. Going around to the side, he saw Justinian and Hartshough, looking blank and haggard. As he drew up, they just looked at him.

Then he realized there was something on the ground near the carriage, and he looked down.

It took him a minute to perceive what he was seeing. It was a stone sculpture. There were two figures. One was crouched over the other in a protective posture. The one below it was a larger figure, who was nonetheless clinging to the arm of the one who was bending over her.

Her. It was a woman. And the smaller figure on top . . . with curls of stone. . . .

Efran dropped to his knees to look in the downturned face of the small figure on top. It was Minka, bending over her auntie to protect her from the trolls. And they had both been turned to stone.

He remained on his knees while the world dissolved around him. There was nothing left, nothing real, nothing meaningful. There was only darkness and chaos.

It was impossible, but there it was. She was gone, just like that. Everything he had worked for, everything he had ever believed, came melting down in the heat of this moment.

While he knelt there, surrounded by silence, two figures came running up. Both were in Abbey red, but one was covered with dust. The dusty one fell down before the double statue and talked to it: “Minka, I’m going to take your arm and try to break it free. All right? Just relax and don’t fight me.”

The words made no sense to Efran, but he looked over as Jehan reached for the delicate stone arm draped over Marguerite, touching her only at two points. Efran put a restraining hand on Jehan’s arm. He wanted to say, *Don’t destroy that as well*, but nothing came out of his mouth.

Coish leaned over to pat his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Captain; we’ll get her out.” Blinking in incomprehension, Efran slowly turned to him, but Jehan took the arm to lift it up and then back, and the cracking almost drove a spike through Efran’s heart. Men all down the street came running up.

But then Jehan pulled the stone sleeve away, and Efran was staring at Minka’s arm, dusty but moving. Men began crowding around them to watch. Jehan and Coish cooperatively took hold of her waist to lift her up, which produced a crack that encircled her midsection like a sash. While Coish held her up, Jehan said, “All right, Minka, I’m going to push your head down. Just relax your neck.”

Everyone watching was still as a statue while Coish held her waist and Jehan took hold of the stone curls to bring her head down a few inches. When the stone of her neck cracked loudly, several people jumped. Jehan

reached into the opening to begin breaking away small pieces, and then larger chunks, until he popped the main part away from her head in two pieces.

And there was her face, covered in dust but talking, of course. “Oh. Thank you. That was—yes, I’m fine, thank you, but, before you do any more on me, get Auntie out, please,” she gasped. “Oh, Efran—oh, you look—I’m fine, Efran. Really. I just want Auntie out so I can show her the chapel.” Some observers let down in laughter, so Efran could finally cry.

But many men, having seen enough, peeled away to start working on their fellows who lay likewise encased in stone. Efran, silent tears pouring down his face, continued to watch Jehan and Coish separate Minka from Marguerite so that they could be freed of the hard façade.

Croft’s hostler and his assistant had come up to drive the carriage with its exhausted horses back to the stables, where they were unhitched and tended. Justinian and Hartshough sat blankly on the sidewalk to watch Minka and Marguerite being freed in bits and pieces.

Then Ackley and Elspeth, bartender and server at Croft’s, brought out plates and ales to Marguerite’s companions, who accepted them gratefully. But neither ate or drank yet. Efran looked at Justinian to ask, “What happened?”

“Oh, not much.” Justinian looked down at the ruins of his new suit. “If Surchatain Molyneux thought to have the trolls evict Marguerite from her home so he could move in, he’s going to be a tad disappointed.” Then he told them about the invasion of Featherstone, its complete destruction, and their rescue by the brave and resourceful Sirs Ditson and Nutbin.

“The trolls who followed us down here were only half of the original number,” Justinian said, gazing around. “While Ditson and Nutbin were running us to the stables, we saw Efran standing on pylons in the middle of the pond begging them to come fight him. And then you started reciting poetry. It was quite a moving performance,” he told Efran, who blinked.

Finally, when Minka was standing, Efran reached over to break a great chunk of stone away from her dress. Leaning on him, she was then able to kick off the remaining pieces from her feet and lower legs. “Once it’s cracked anywhere it comes right off,” she said knowledgeably. She watched anxiously as Coish held Marguerite upright for Jehan to break pieces of stone away.

Minka leaned over her to wipe away dust from Marguerite’s arms and dress. “Oh, don’t worry, Auntie dear, we’ll get you all new things. There are so many shops with beautiful clothes here, you’ll find something you like, and then we can stop at Flodie’s, too—you’ll enjoy that,” she rambled. Efran smiled, tears standing in his eyes.

And when Marguerite was fully free as well, Efran took her hands to kiss them. “Welcome to the Abbey Lands, Lady Marguerite.” He kissed her cheek, and she patted his back. He paused to wipe his face and say, “I believe Minka has something to show you.”

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Chapter 22

“Yes!” Minka cried. “Bring your plates, Hartshough, Justinian, and, Elspeth, please bring us another for Marguerite—No, to the chapel.” Despite Efran’s desire to carry Marguerite, or Minka, or both, Minka took her hand to walk her up Main and east on the road to the front of the glorious chapel. A small crowd followed to watch Minka say, “My darling Auntie, here is your new home.”

Marguerite looked up at the beautiful building in mild disbelief. “But, dearest Sybil. . . . No, your name is Minka. I must call you by your right name.”

Minka hugged her tightly. “You can call me anything you like; I don’t care. Everything I enjoy now—all of this exists because of what you did for me. Oh! Hartshough, and Justinian, there is plenty of room for you as well. Oh, come in, let us show you. Have you got Marguerite’s breakfast? Oh, good. Come in; I have the keys. Except that it’s not locked right now. Oh, wait—Jehan and Coish, you must come eat, too. Elspeth, please bring them plates and ales as well. We’ll be in here. Just walk in.”

Light laughter followed as Minka led them up the walk to open the beautifully carved double doors. While she ushered in the three refugees with the men attending, Efran paused outside to hear a report that all of the men who had been encased in stone were in the process of being freed; also, there were only minor injuries. Coghill was seeing to them now.

Efran sent up a man to report to Estes and DeWitt (without knowing that they had witnessed all of it from the second-floor balcony) then he went into the chapel to sit at the dining table with their guests while they ate and drank, slightly overwhelmed.

Minka chatted endlessly, which they were free to attend to or not, as they wished. She told them all about the upper rooms equipped with garderobes and a washroom with running water—“Oh! Efran, please have the men bring in two more beds in two rooms upstairs, with covers and pillows, please.”

Efran turned to gesture to Koschat and Martyn behind him, who saluted and trotted out through the crowd. Because the doors stood open, onlookers were peeking inside the furnished chapel as word spread that the lady wanted it for her dear auntie who had been dispossessed of her home by the nasty trolls. Efran could only lean his elbows on the table and drink in the sight of his wife, stone dust clinging to her curls, alive and vibrant and victorious in her preparations to receive Marguerite.

Sirs Ditson and Nutbin suddenly appeared at the far end of the table, causing several forks to drop. “Oh! There you are!” Minka cried. “We’ve been hearing of your heroics, but where have you been?”

They bowed extravagantly to her. Ditson said, “You are too kind, Lady Minka, but we felt that our task was unfinished until we checked in with the Council of Eurus. They have viewed the destruction of Featherstone in dismay, which ruins have now become a local attraction, by the way, with rumors of great wealth remaining under the ashes and rubble.”

Marguerite raised astute eyes, but said nothing. Ditson continued, “And of course, there is now infighting among the councilors. The two friends of Lady Marguerite who were on the Council resigned when that august body agreed to hire trolls to fight the faeries—as if they could,” Ditson sniffed, and Nutbin’s tail was twitching hard.

Efran said, “But—all we heard about were faerie pranks, and that there was nothing malicious in it. How did it escalate to trolls?”

Ditson said, “It seems that one councilor who was afflicted with roaches in his clothes convinced them all that the tricks were life-threatening, and called for stern countermeasures.”

“Oops,” Efran said quietly. Looking aside, he murmured, “Undergrewp is no longer buggy”—which he hoped was sufficient.

“Worse, however,” Ditson went on, “now that the trolls are aware of easy pickings south of the Fastnesses, more may be on the way.”

Efran turned to the soldiers behind him. “Alert all the men that whenever trolls come into view, they’re to start the war drums at once. We all saw what that does to them,” he added with a sardonic smile. The men saluted to run out.

Minka was looking at him in adoration. “Efran, how did you know that? I never heard that you had fought trolls.”

He had, but shook his head slightly. “I saw it in the Hall of Memories. Some earlier lord a couple of hundred years ago used it against them.” While the others murmured about this, he thought, *Why can't we have a Universal Hall of Memories?—a historical authority to tell us what is true and what isn't, what works and what doesn't. By the time a man discovers that on his own, his life is near well spent.*

At that time, a train of men entered with additional bed pieces, mattresses and bedding, so Minka sprang up to direct them. She paused to tell the new residents, “Whenever you’re done, you’re welcome to bathe and rest and make yourself at home.”

The three refugees immediately got up from the table, so Minka came back to take Marguerite’s arm. As she led her up the elegant curving stairway, she said, “If the stairs are troublesome for you, there are rooms down here that you can use as a bedroom instead. I’ll get men to move you. I’m Lieutenant Commander now. No, really! Commander Wendt said so. Oh, and when you’re rested, you need to check your back grounds—you have a double plot here, and it’s got a fountain. It just needs landscaping. Yes! The architect did a wonderful job. His name is Bozzelli. I’ll introduce you.”

Justinian paused to pat Efran’s shoulder. “I’m still sorry that I didn’t marry her, but you’re a good second choice.”

“You’re welcome, Justinian,” Efran smiled. He paused to watch them ascend the stairs, then returned his attention to the faeries. They had produced their own refreshments, which they now sat on the table to enjoy. Efran said, “I apologize for interrupting your report. Please continue.”

Ditson and Nutbin looked at each other a moment, then Nutbin said, “The only other matter of incidental interest is that many of the faeries are tired of Eurus, and wish to come home to the Lands, Lord Efran.”

Efran replied dryly, “Good faeries are always welcome, as they know there will be no Snodsbury Spunkles, dragonflowers, moonflowers, or other such pranks. Seasonal decorating is permitted.”

“Oh, that’s very good of you, Lord Efran. Most reasonable,” Nutbin effused.

“Quite so,” Ditson agreed.

When Minka had directed Marguerite to her suite and the beds were set up in two additional rooms on the second floor, Minka left the keys and a kiss with her, then descended the stairs with a sigh. The table had been cleared and Efran was the only one remaining.

Before allowing herself to collapse, Minka conscripted another pair of soldiers to go shopping for essential food. The kitchen was already stocked with dry goods, but she gave them a list of fruits, vegetables, ale and meat. As they were leaving, she suddenly grasped Efran's arm. "Oh! There's even a *cold storage* cabinet, Efran, under the floor! But I forgot to tell her about it!"

"Your shoppers will leave her a note," Efran said, glancing at Pleyel and Lund.

The latter saluted. "Yes, Captain. The Librarian says that my script is 'eminently readable,'" he said, carefully enunciating the last two words.

"Excellent," Efran smiled, and they all left.

Minka was staggering up the switchback, as they were both on foot. So, despite her objections, Efran picked her up to carry her. In his arms, she protested, "No, Efran, this is ridiculous. I'm perfectly capable of walking. Yes, it was annoying to be turned to stone, except I wasn't really, only . . . veneered, in a way. . . ."

When she trailed off, he looked down at her face pressed against his arm. She was asleep. So he laid her in bed in their quarters, then went out back to check on Joshua.

As he suspected, he was out here with the children, Nakam, and—Kraken. None of the horses had to stay in their stalls all the time; there were large paddocks in which they could graze and socialize. But Kraken had apparently developed a preference for human company, especially children, who petted him and talked to him.

At this time, Joshua was on Kraken's back again, balancing all by himself. His guardian was standing a few feet away, talking with someone else. Efran scowled mildly; he wasn't close enough to catch Joshua if he fell.

In fact, while Efran was watching, a ball sailed close enough to Joshua that he reached out for it, and started slipping off. His guardian looked over, but Kraken whipped his head back to nose the toddler upright again, so the man on duty had nothing to catch. Efran relaxed, getting the impression that this was something that happened regularly.

He was still conflicted, knowing how seriously Joshua could hurt himself falling from that height, but—denying a privilege that he'd already been enjoying, and for no other reason than it's being dangerous—didn't seem like the right way to raise a warrior.

As Efran contemplated that, Milo ran up to salute. "Captain, the Lady Marguerite requests your company."

"Ah. Yes," Efran said, mildly surprised that she wasn't resting. With another glance toward the horse and his boy, Efran turned back into the fortress.

He walked down the switchback again, since the chapel was so close. He mounted the broad steps, then paused at the double door. If she wasn't close by the door, she'd never hear him knock. So he rapped loudly, then opened the door.

She turned from the divan, waving. "Come sit, Efran."

“Thank you. You need a bell pull at your door,” he said, crossing the hall to sit beside her.

“I’ll get one,” she said, unruffled. “I am deeply grateful to lodge in your chapel, but I think you should use it for its original purpose.”

Efran laughed lightly. “The long story behind that proves that lodging you *is* its purpose. Leaseholders who wanted a place to worship have found the Meeting Hall of the new inn to be better for that.”

“Minka says you’re a charmer,” she observed, eyeing him sideways.

“And you’re not nearly as flighty as you pretend to be,” he noted.

“Caught out,” she smiled, shifting. “Don’t tell anyone. Regardless, I think you may want to take a few men and ride back up to whatever’s left of Featherstone. Specifically, the basement.”

“What do you need from it? Your money?” he asked.

“There may be some left; I don’t know. Do bring what you find, if it’s not too much to carry,” she said.

He eyed her. “But that’s not primarily what you’re interested in.”

“No, it’s not. I want family records that are stored in a silver fireproof box. It’s hidden under the tread of the last, that is, the lowest step of the stairway going down to the basement,” she said.

“All right. We’ll head up there tomorrow morning.” They sat quietly for a moment, then he said, “Minka is beside herself that you’re actually here. She’s napping, by the way; I think the excitement wore her out.”

She laughed lightly, murmuring, “Such a precious child. She was always so full of love, just looking for someone to pour it out on. Funny thing, though—before she’d ever met a Polonti, or even seen one, she told me that she was going to marry the Polonti boy she’d seen in the tree.”

“What?” he said.

“Yes, she was only—three or four? She said she’d seen a Polonti boy eating an apricot in the tree, and he was such a handsome boy, she was going to marry him. She said she’d told him she would,” Marguerite said in amusement.

“That—did happen,” he said, pausing in surprise. “But that was, like, eight months ago. When she was a little girl, she couldn’t remember something that hadn’t happened yet.”

Marguerite turned piercing blue eyes to him. “Minka is special, Efran.”

He sat gazing at her. She was telling him something, but he wasn’t sure what. At that time, Hartshough appeared from the kitchen with a tall glass on a tray. “Lady Marguerite, I—ah! Good afternoon, Lord Efran. May I fix you a refresher?”

Efran rose from the divan. “Perhaps later, Hartshough. Thank you.” He looked back down at Marguerite, who was smiling at him with just a touch of impishness. Efran leaned down to kiss her head. “Special,” he murmured, then went on out.

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Chapter 23

Upon leaving Marguerite's, Efran's destination was Ryal's notary shop next door.

He entered the shop to tap impatiently on the counter. When no one appeared, he called, "Hello?" Then he realized that there was something he had not heard. Wheeling toward the door, he saw no bell. The tinkling bell that always announced his entrance was *gone*.

When Ryal came to the counter, Efran turned to him in outrage. "Your *bell*. Where is your *door bell*?"

Ryal laughed mildly. "My goodness, Efran; you sound upset. I had a customer enter a little too energetically and knock it off when the trolls swarmed up the street. I just have to screw it back in. I can do that now that your men cleared out the trolls."

Efran shook his head as though recovering from a blow and asked, "Where is it?"

"Oh. Here," Ryal said, leaning down to bring it out from under the counter.

Taking the bell with its bracket and screws, Efran went to look out the door. Spotting someone, he whistled. Skalbeck came running up to salute. "Yes, Captain?"

"Put this back up on Ryal's door, please," Efran said.

Taking the bell contraption, Skalbeck came in to look at the place on the head where it had been dislodged. Then he turned to ask, "Do you have tools, Lord Ryal?"

"Yes, let me get them," Ryal said, turning to the back room.

Shortly he emerged with a toolbox, which Skalbeck appropriated. "Thank you, sir."

As he began to haul over a chair, Ryal said, "I have a ladder in back."

"May I get it, sir?" Skalbeck asked.

"Yes, it's just in the corner of that back room," Ryal said, nodding. There was a rolling ladder at the wall of shelves behind the counter, but since that ladder *rolled*, it was not one Ryal chose to use for painting or repairs.

"Thank you, sir." Skalbeck darted out for the ladder, and was soon climbing it to examine the gaping screw holes.

Watching Skalbeck's preparations, Efran exhaled in mild relief, and Ryal studied him. "Thank you for stopping by to notice my bell gone, Efran."

"You're welcome. Minka's Auntie Marguerite just moved into the chapel next to you," Efran said pensively.

Ryal said, "Yes, Efran. Giardi and I took her a basket of raspberries a little while ago. Lovely lady; I am

delighted that she, Hartshough and Justinian made it down safely. I see that it was rather harrowing.”

In fresh indignation, Efran demanded, “Where is Giardini?” He looked around Ryal to the back room.

“Visiting a friend, Efran. I do let her out now and then,” Ryal said.

“You’re acquiring a sarcastic streak, Lord Ryal,” Efran said peevishly.

“Not at all, Lord Efran. What can I do for you?” Ryal asked, unruffled.

Efran looked back at Skalbeck pounding new holes with the awl into the door head. “I want Marguerite titled Lady Commander of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

“Oh, excellent idea,” Ryal said. He turned to the shelves behind him to pull out a folder. “Is she settling in all right?”

“Yes, she seems to be. Minka passed out after the troll attack, but Marguerite acts as though it was just a—minor inconvenience. I’ll be going up tomorrow to look around Featherstone,” Efran said pensively. “Ryal, she said that Minka is ‘special.’”

“She is,” Ryal half-laughed, pulling out his quill set.

“No, in a different way,” Efran mused.

“There you are, Lord Ryal. Captain,” Skalbeck said. He opened the door for the bell to tinkle as usual, then shut it again. “I’d like to patch the old screw holes, if you have patching compound.”

“That’s not necessary, thank you,” Ryal told him.

“Yes, he’s got compound in the back somewhere,” Efran contradicted him.

“Yes, Captain.” Skalbeck trotted to the back room again while Ryal eyed Efran, who looked off indifferently. Conceding, Ryal brought out a fresh entitlement form.

It took Skalbeck moments to patch the holes, then he returned the compound and tool box to the back room. “Is that satisfactory, Lord Ryal?”

Ryal made an effort to look at it, and said, “Yes, thank you.”

“Dismissed,” Efran said. Skalbeck returned the ladder to the back room, then saluted Efran before leaving.

Ryal asked him, “What cause do you wish me to put down for the lady’s entitlement?”

Efran looked off, then said, “Her kind and generous humanitarian efforts.” Ryal began writing that down and Efran added, “When you get that done, have it sent to Whately for a—button or whatever made. Then let me know so I can give it to her.” Still distracted, he said, “Oh,” and laid a royal on the counter to overpay as usual. Then he walked out, pausing to hear the bell tinkle. Ryal shook his head.

Still thinking, Efran walked down Main clear to Barracks A. He entered to salute. “Captain Efran reporting, Commander.”

Wendt, behind his desk with Gabriel at his side, leaned back and said, “At ease, Captain. What are you reporting?”

“I’m—trying to decide,” Efran said haphazardly, and Wendt’s Second in Command Gabriel had to choke back a sudden laugh.

“No, I remember now,” Efran said. “Marguerite requested certain records from Featherstone, if they’re still accessible, so I need—oh, four men to ride up there with me tomorrow morning.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged, Efran. How is she doing?” Wendt asked.

“Placid as Willowring Lake,” he replied in mild astonishment. “Hartshough is back to mixing specialty drinks but Justinian is probably passed out for the rest of the day and night.”

“Ah. How is Minka? I understand she got the stone treatment as well,” Wendt said.

Efran nodded. “Jehan and Coish broke her and Marguerite out of the rock, and, aside from a little dust, you’d never know anything happened. Minka was too excited, having her auntie down here to play with.”

“Excellent. Well then, Gabriel or Barr will have four men ready and waiting here at the gates tomorrow at daybreak,” Wendt said.

“Thank you, sir,” Efran said. He continued to stand there. “Commander, Marguerite said that Minka is ‘special.’”

“She is, Efran,” Wendt said, and Gabriel nodded with raised brows.

“How?” Efran asked, looking up at the unseen.

Wendt considered that, then said, “What I see is that her childish exterior covers a depth of fortitude, compassion, courage, love, and . . . something else.”

“Yes, exactly—the ‘something else’ is what I’m trying to nail down,” Efran said.

“Well, you’ll probably hammer around in the dark until Marguerite tells you,” Wendt said.

“She knows what that is,” Efran said.

“Yes, and she’s priming you to find out,” Wendt observed.

“I’m in over my head,” Efran muttered. Then he inhaled. “All right; I’ll be back at daybreak. Thank you, sir.”

“Dismissed,” Wendt said with a slight smile. Gabriel eyed him.

After Efran had left, Gabriel quietly asked, “What do you think Lady Marguerite was getting at, Commander?”

Wendt smiled. “That we are such stuff as dreams are made of, Gabriel.” The Second drew his brows down, uncomprehending.

Upon returning to the fortress, Efran found Minka on the back grounds with the children. Sitting on the bench,

she had Joshua in her lap, as Kraken had been returned to his stall for grooming and feeding. So Efran sat beside them, and Joshua fell onto him. “How are you feeling?” he asked her.

She exhaled, “Tired, happy, excited—still not believing we have dear auntie down here. I want to go back down to see her, but, I need to give her a little space to get settled in and rest,” she scolded herself.

“She asked for some family records from Featherstone, so I’m taking a few men tomorrow to get them,” Efran said.

“Oh, they must be important,” she murmured.

“Must be,” he agreed.

“How long are you going to be gone?” she asked.

“Long enough to find the records; then we’ll ride straight back again,” he said. This was not really feasible, as it was a seven-hour ride each way, but he intended to make the trip as quickly as possible.

“Good,” she breathed, snuggling him and Joshua.

Early the next morning, May 30th, Efran on Kraken arrived at the lower barracks where Barr, Melchior, Martyn and Tourse were waiting by their horses, loaded with gear, stamping and snorting in their eagerness to be off. Commander Wendt and Gabriel were standing nearby to oversee their departure.

Efran dismounted, glancing at the riders that the Commander had selected. Saluting, he said, “Captain Efran reporting, Commander. I wasn’t intending to take Eurus, but it appears that’s what you had in mind, with this group,” Efran said.

Wendt replied, “Just making sure you have adequate manpower, Captain. We don’t want to disappoint Marguerite.”

“You think the trolls are still in the area?” Efran asked.

“We can’t rule it out. Keep your heads on a swivel; remember that they prefer to travel through woods rather than by open road. Barr and Martyn are carrying the odor cloaks; wait till you get close to Eurus to put them on.” These were thin, faerie-made cloaks that blocked human body odors from reaching the trolls’ highly sensitive olfactory organs.

“Ah. Excellent. Thank you, Commander.” His traveling companions mounted; Efran swung up on Kraken and the wall guards opened the gates for them. They rode out with Efran and Melchior leading as Martyn, Barr and Tourse fell in behind.

They made good time while the horses were fresh and ready to run, then they slowed to a gentle lope that they could sustain for several hours, and talk as well.

Melchior idly asked, “If you don’t want to take Eurus, what should we do instead?”

Efran half smiled. “Marguerite asked for family records that are hidden in the basement of Featherstone. She also gave permission for us to take what money we find, if there’s any left.”

Martyn said, “Trolls don’t bother with coins, do they?”

“No,” Tourse said. “They prefer to fight, kill and eat. That’s pretty much the sum of their talents. You remember the troll attack on the vineyards southeast of Eurus, don’t you, Captain?”

Efran appeared startled. “No. Yes, but—I’d forgotten all about it. Pindar—” he broke off.

When he failed to continue the thought, Tourse said in a hard, unironic voice, “It’s all right to talk about it now, Captain.”

Efran exhaled, looking to the right. “Here’s water. Let’s rest the horses.”

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Chapter 24

The riding party pulled over to dismount and release their horses to drink from a shallow, fast-running brook. Kraken waded in to paw the water, so the other horses joined his play. Efran was silent while Tourse, Martyn, Melchior, and Barr looked at him.

Tourse finally said, “Let me narrate. Field workers came riding down to Westford to raise the alarm about a band of wild men that were pillaging villages around Eurus. Surchatain Loizeaux was on a boar hunt and his Council declined to act, as the threat wasn’t strictly against Eurus. So Surchatain Lietes of Westford instructed Commander Wendt to send troops. The Commander took it seriously; sent the Blue and the Red, led by Captain Pindar and Captain Gores.

“When we got to the area, we found that the wild men had moved on to attack a brewery southeast of Eurus. Its workmen were putting up a brave defense, but they were inexperienced fighters against bloodthirsty savages. Our Captain led us directly against them, didn’t he, Efran? He led the charge against bulls that used clubs, and we followed. The only advantage we had was surprise, and once the monsters saw that there were new men to play with, they turned their clubs on us.” The men listened silently, watching their horses splash in the shallow brook.

Tourse resumed, “Captain Gores was the first to fall, and sixty of our Regiment followed because Pindar *held his men back*. None of us in the Red knew it until it was all over; half of us were dead while the Blue—the elite of the Army of Westford—were prancing around the carnage in clean uniforms. By then the owner of the brewery, Lord Takoda, was also dead. The only reason any of us survived was that Fairfoot discovered that a knife or arrow to their eyes, mouth or throat did the job. But the third troll killed him. Oh, and—any men they turned to stone, they also turned to stomp on them. There was no use breaking them free.

“I looked over to see blood in your hair, running down your face; you could hardly stay in your saddle. None of us would have survived had the trolls not tired of us; they took armloads of dead victims and trotted off to their meeting place—what was it? Oh, yes, Villalobos. Our survivors had some words with the Blue, then we hauled our dead back to Westford and reported Pindar’s treachery to the Commander. Pindar denied it, of course, and it was our word against theirs—but the fact remained that all those dead or wounded were from the Red.

“Wendt was reluctant to court-martial an officer without hard evidence, so he left Pindar alone. As for Captain

Gores' replacement, new officers were always drawn from the Blue, weren't they? Always. But the Commander bypassed the Blue altogether and chose this wild young Red to be its new Captain. We who survived will never forget," Tourse said.

Efran was looking off with tears in his eyes. He worked his jaw for a moment, then said, "Mount up." They coaxed their horses out of the brook and resumed their ride north.

In the late afternoon, they arrived on the outskirts of Eurus, where they dismounted to put on their odor cloaks. Approaching Featherstone by a circuitous route, they finally entered the grounds by the back road. They drew up to the mansion gaping, and Tourse swore softly.

It was just blackened rubble. The gorgeous white three-story mansion with gardens in back and a long drive ending in a courtyard with a fountain was now just a black pit. "We were here when you beat Master Crowe," Martyn breathed. "It seems impossible that this is the same place. We stood on the balcony to watch him ride up with his troops"—of which Melchior had been one. Now nothing stood above ten feet off the ground.

Barr said, "I don't see how we can even find the basement, Captain."

Efran stood still, thinking. "There's an outside door to it along the—south wall, I think."

They walked their horses south around the ruins, studying what had been the foundation. "Here, Captain," Martyn said. The burned doors still stood in a portion of remaining wall.

Tourse released their horses to graze around the pond while Martyn and Melchior investigated the doors. The wooden bar in the iron cradle disintegrated when Martyn tried to lift it, then he and Melchior pried open the door in fragments.

Melchior stuck his head in and pulled back, observing, "There's a stairway, but it's hard to see much beyond it." Efran came beside him to look.

Turning to climb onto the first step with the aid of the handrails, Efran glanced up to say, "Get us lights." Barr took out his firesteel and Tourse scavenged for wood. Efran started down the basement stairs with Melchior following.

At the bottom, Efran stepped away from the stairs to look around the murky darkness. Afternoon light poured in for a short distance from the broken storm doors. The first thing he saw—and stepped into—was the dark red liquid that flooded the entire basement several inches deep. The aroma told him what it was, and he looked aside at hatchet marks in the great wine vat, from which a trickle of wine still flowed.

Rising from the shallow pool were piles of debris, and in between the two largest piles was the stairway leading up to the house. The upper portion of the stairway was filled with fallen rubble, but the lower portion was accessible. Efran focused on the last stair, and saw a glimmer of light between the tread and the riser, which sat just an inch above the flood. Melchior stepped off the metal stairs, sloshing behind him.

Efran knelt in the pooled wine before the step while Barr, Martyn and Tourse descended into the basement with pieces of burning wood. "Look around for anything interesting," Efran said absently.

Barr splashed over to the pile at Efran's right. Bending, he picked up a wine-soaked leather pouch from the shallow pool. He opened it and paused. "It's full of royals."

“Congratulations,” Efran said. Pulling up on the nosing of the tread exposed a burlap bag with something shiny inside. He lifted it out to slide the burlap off a slender silver box, completely untarnished. “This is it,” he said, standing. His pants from the knees down were soaked.

Observing that the bag had long strings from its mouth and bottom, he replaced the silver box in it to tie it around his waist underneath the odor cloak. Then he noticed that the box was slightly rounded so as to sit comfortably on his stomach.

He looked around at the other men, who had all found dripping pouches—Melchior was carrying two. “All right, let’s go,” Efran said.

They climbed up the metal stairs to emerge into the shade of heavy clouds. “Where did the cloud cover come from? We’ve been riding under a clear sky all day,” Martyn muttered.

When Efran whistled for the horses, Kraken looked at him, shaking his head. “Wha—?” Efran mouthed in disbelief. Tourse was calling his horse—this being his personal animal—without effect. None of the horses seemed interested in resuming the ride.

“Something’s interfering,” Melchior observed.

Efran turned to shout, “I *order* you to come!” Kraken lowered his head in submission to trot to him, and the rest of the horses followed.

The men mounted under darkening skies. “This is not natural,” Melchior said.

Efran put a hand to the silver box at his waist to feel it humming. “Ride,” he said, turning Kraken’s head. They took off at a fast lope down the back way to the main north-south road.

When they gained the road, a cold wind hit them—in late May. “Go!” Efran ordered as the horses balked.

They rode on, and a hard rain began to pelt them. The horses whinnied and balked at the stings. “It’s hail!” Martyn exclaimed. “It’s hailing.” Pellets of ice hit the road all around them and Barr’s horse reared.

“Over to the trees,” Efran said. They pulled off the road to continue riding south through the woods of maple, basswood, beech and a smattering of white pine. They had to go much slower, of course, but the horses had calmed and they were still moving.

Half an hour later, they noticed a brightening beyond the trees. “It’s stopped,” Tourse observed, so they turned their horses back on the road.

They had been riding for only minutes when Barr looked behind them. “We’re being followed.”

“Trolls?” Efran asked, glancing back from the front. The silver box was practically burning him now.

“Yes,” Melchior confirmed. The horses, smelling the trolls behind them, began galloping in panic. No matter how the riders tried to slow them, they only went faster.

We can’t let them do this; they’ll drop dead and the trolls will catch us, Efran thought. He put a hand to the box, which was pulsing in a particular rhythm: *mm mm MMM, mm mm MMM, mm mm MMM, mm mm MMM*.

Synchronizing with the box, Efran began in a singsong, “Down, down, DOWN, down, down, DOWN, down, down, DOWN, down, down, DOWN.” The other men took up the drums at once, and as its pace was slower than the horses were running, they began to ease up until their hoofbeats blended with the rhythm.

As they loped gently to this music, the daylight faded to darkness until Efran called, “Hold up!” And they stopped on a clear stretch of road. The moon had not yet risen, so it was intensely dark where the four gathered close to hold still and listen. The horses’ chests were heaving. “I don’t hear anything. Do you?” Efran whispered.

“No,” Barr said.

Efran put a hand to the box, which was warm but quiet. “Let the horses graze and rest a moment.” They all dismounted for the horses to nose around the springtime grass while the men relieved themselves or ate and drank from their packs. But less than an hour later, they were on the road again.

They pressed on, though the horses were too exhausted to lope now. The party could not afford to stop and rest with trolls pursuing them somewhere back there. Kraken, in the lead, kept up a stubborn trot, so that the others followed him.

This last long stretch to the Lands was the worst. They were all overcome with extreme drowsiness, and when the horses sensed their riders slipping away, they slowed until they were walking. Martyn’s horse stopped completely, and Efran didn’t realize they’d left him behind until he received a jolt in the stomach that woke him.

He whistled sharply, and the men’s heads shot up. Martyn kicked his horse to a reluctant trot to join the others. Efran gasped, “We can’t rest; we have to keep going, and we’re still hours from the Lands.”

Tourse raised his head to shout, “I left my home!” Upon the others’ silence, he repeated, “I LEFT MY HOME!”

“I left my home!” the other four shouted, and their horses sprang forward.

“I left my wife!” Tourse shouted.

“I left my wife!” the others repeated.

“I left my dog!”

“I left my dog!”

“And my whole life!”

“And my whole life!”

For the next three hours, until arriving at the Abbey Lands, the men rode to the marching cadence of the Army of Westford, led by Tourse. The fact that most of them didn’t know the words was irrelevant; all they had to do was repeat what they heard.

When Tourse had exhausted all known variations, he resorted to creating chants on the fly, which the men dutifully echoed:

“There goes a tree!”

“There goes a tree!”

“That’s foll’wing me!”

“That’s foll’wing me!”

“It’s creepin’ near!”

“It’s creepin’ near!”

“Right up my—ear!”

“Right up my ear!”

When they arrived at the wall gates, drunkenly weaving, the laughing guards opened the gates to them and their drooping horses. Tourse, Martyn, Barr and Melchior dropped off their pouches of royals in Barracks A before stumbling back to their own or someone else’s cots.

Efran rode Kraken at a walk up the switchback, and almost fell when he tried to dismount. He was sore all over, but especially his stomach, which the silver box was continuing to burn.

He staggered up the steps to the fortress door, where the door guard, Verrin, saluted and said, “Captain, Lady Marguerite requested that you and Lady Minka come down to the chapel immediately when you have returned.”

Efran had to blink for a moment. “Right now? In the middle of the night?”

“Yes, Captain,” Verrin confirmed.

“I guess I’d better go wake Minka, then,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Verrin agreed.

“All right, then. Get us a couple of fresh horses, please,” he muttered, to which Verrin saluted. Proceeding through the foyer, Efran stepped around several frogs that leaped away for him to get to his quarters. In the outer room, he paused to try to untie the burlap bag from around his middle. When he couldn’t do it within fifteen seconds, he gave up and went into the bedroom.

Minka was sleeping soundly, so he knelt beside the bed to kiss her neck. “Later,” she murmured, rolling over.

He laughed, “Yes, it will have to be later, because Marguerite wants us to come see her right now,” he said, his speech only slightly slurred for weariness.

She blinked awake, then sat up straight. “Efran! You’re back! We need to go see Marguerite? What time is it?” She looked up at the dark stained-glass window above the bed.

“Very late, or very early, depending on where you are,” he said groggily. “Get dressed and I’ll tell you on the way down.”

She tossed aside the bed covers to throw on a riding dress and shove her feet into boots. Then while they rode at a walk down the switchback, he told her about their quick trip to Eurus.

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Chapter 25

A pair of lanterns was burning at the chapel doors when Efran and Minka came up the steps for him to knock. “Marguerite?” he called softly. “I know it’s late, but—”

He and she both jerked up, turning to look back at the fortress. “The bells,” she murmured. “The rooftop bells are pealing—what is that?”

“The—triumphal march,” he said in astonishment. He had heard it only once that he could remember, played by grateful musicians in Westford when Wendt’s troops had routed a particularly nasty band of cutthroats.

The doors were opened so that the visitors swung around to Hartshough bowing. “Good evening, Lord Efran, Lady Minka. Please come in and be seated; Lady Marguerite will be right with you.” He looked as though it wasn’t at all three o’clock in the morning.

“Thank you, Hartshough,” Efran said, almost falling over the threshold. Minka caught him.

They went over to the divan, surrounded by floor candelabras. Hartshough asked, “What may I get you to drink?”

Minka shook her head and Efran said, “Whatever you gave me—milk or hard ale—would knock me right out, but thank you.” He stood beside the divan to pick at the knotted strings of the burlap bag, trying to get it off. “Or maybe a knife,” Efran added. But Hartshough had gone to another room on the first floor.

By the time Minka had sprawled over the divan, Marguerite appeared in a flowing embroidered robe. Minka shoved herself up, gasping, “Oh, Auntie, that’s beautiful! Is it from The Lands Clothing Shop? They do such lovely work.”

“Yes, dear, it is. I’m glad you like it.” She sat in an upholstered chair, smiling. “Do you have something for me, Efran?”

“Yes, but I can’t get it off,” he muttered as the burlap bag and contents fell into his hand. Since he was blinking stupidly at it, Minka took it, bag and all, to hand to Marguerite with the strings dangling loosely.

“Thank you, dear,” Marguerite said, taking it.

“The men found—ah, four or five pouches of royals that are in the—the barracks right now, but we’ll get those to you tomorrow. I mean, later today,” he said, finally sitting heavily on the divan.

But Marguerite was opening the thin box to take out a single sheet which she laid on the table in front of them. There were only a few words in thick silver lettering on mottled brown parchment. They were arranged like this:

Everleigh
Regina Pixie
|
Marguerite
|
Larisse
|
Kewe
|
Minka

Minka and Efran leaned over to study the arrangement. Efran, hampered by exhaustion, saw only a bunch of names. But Minka looked up to gasp, “Auntie, are you my—great-grandmother?”

“Yes, Minka, I am,” Marguerite said. “It’s a long story that I won’t trouble you with tonight, except that my daughter Larisse was something of a wild child who went her own way, and I wasn’t able to catch up with her until I found Kewe.”

“Oh, my own kin, my own lovely, darling. . . .” Minka was crying, reaching out to her, but Marguerite, on the other side of the low table, was a little too far away.

Efran was suddenly awake, studying the second line of the chart. He looked up at Marguerite with astute eyes. “Everleigh was your mother.”

“Yes,” she said, composed. Minka wiped her eyes to focus on the chart again.

“And what area did Everleigh rule?” Efran asked.

“The Southern Continent,” Marguerite said. Minka, bewildered, was studying the chart.

“I knew it,” Efran said, looking at Minka. “Somehow, I knew it all along. That’s the only explanation for—everything.”

Minka barely heard him. “What does this mean—‘Regina Pixie’?”

Efran smiled at her, brows uplifted. “‘Faerie Queene.’”

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on May 31st of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

Praise Him, sun and moon,
praise Him, all you shining stars.
Praise Him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens. . . .

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork. ([Ps. 148:3-4](#); [19:1](#))

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Phenomenological language—such as that relating the view of space that Efran saw in the Firmament—“describes the way things appear to the naked eye. The language used is descriptive of the ways things look from our perspective and is not necessarily asserting precise scientific fact. An example of this is the description of the sun rising. Unless we understand the use of phenomenological language, we might think that the Bible teaches that the earth is at the center of the universe. When we realize that the Bible describes things according to appearance, we see that the Bible is not really saying that the sun revolves around the earth. Rather, it is merely saying that the sun rises because, to our naked eye, it looks like the sun moves and the earth does not. This use of language is still current. The meteorologist gives us the time of sunrise, but nobody assumes he is teaching that the sun revolves around the earth.” [Ligonier Ministries](#)

Another take on this perspective, particularly relating to the Firmament, is that “Genesis 1 and 2 tell the story of creation, and it says things that are at odds with what modern people know to be true of the world and universe around us. One of those issues concerns the second day of creation (Genesis 1:6-8), where God made the ‘expanse’ or the ‘firmament.’ The Hebrew word for this is *raqia* (pronounced *ra-KEE-ah*). Biblical scholars understand the *raqia* to be a solid dome-like structure. It separates the water into two parts, so that there is water above the *raqia* and water below it (v. 7). The waters above are kept at bay so the world can become inhabitable. On the third day (vv. 9-10), the water below the *raqia* is ‘gathered to one place’ to form the sea and allow the dry land to appear.

“Ancient Israelites ‘saw’ this barrier when they looked up. There were no telescopes, space exploration, or means of testing the atmosphere. They relied on what their senses told them. Even today, looking up at a clear sky in open country, the sky seems to ‘begin’ at the horizons and reaches up far above. Ancient Israelites and others in that part of the world assumed the world was flat, and so it looked like the earth is covered by a dome, and the ‘blue sky’ is the ‘water above’ held back by the *raqia*. The translation ‘firmament’ (i.e., *firm*) gets across this idea of a solid structure. . . .

“Genesis and modern science are neither enemies nor friends, but two different ways of describing the world *according to the means available to the people living at these different times*. To insist that the description of the sky in Genesis 1 must conform to contemporary science is a big theological problem. It is important to remember that God *always* speaks in ways that people can actually understand. In the ancient world, people held certain views about the world around them. Those views are also reflected in Genesis. If we keep this in mind, much of the conflict can subside.” From [BioLogos](#)

In writing the Abbey Chapters, I used this description of the Firmament because it has a mythological feel that fits with my approach to these stories. (For more on that, see the Afterword.)

The fountain of blood that Efran saw in the portal is based on Zechariah 13:1, about which William Cowper wrote the hymn “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood.” See more [here](#).

The verses that the Impostorized Efran recites are from *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare.

As Sir Nomus said, everyone has a Hall of Memories (usually referred to as a book):

“We will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.’ So then, each of us will be accountable to God.” [Rom. 14:10-12](#)

“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books.” [Rev. 20:12](#)

“But nothing unclean will enter [the new Jerusalem], nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” [Rev. 21:27](#)

Finally, hear the loon wail [here](#).

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran in the Hall of Memories*
(Book 21)

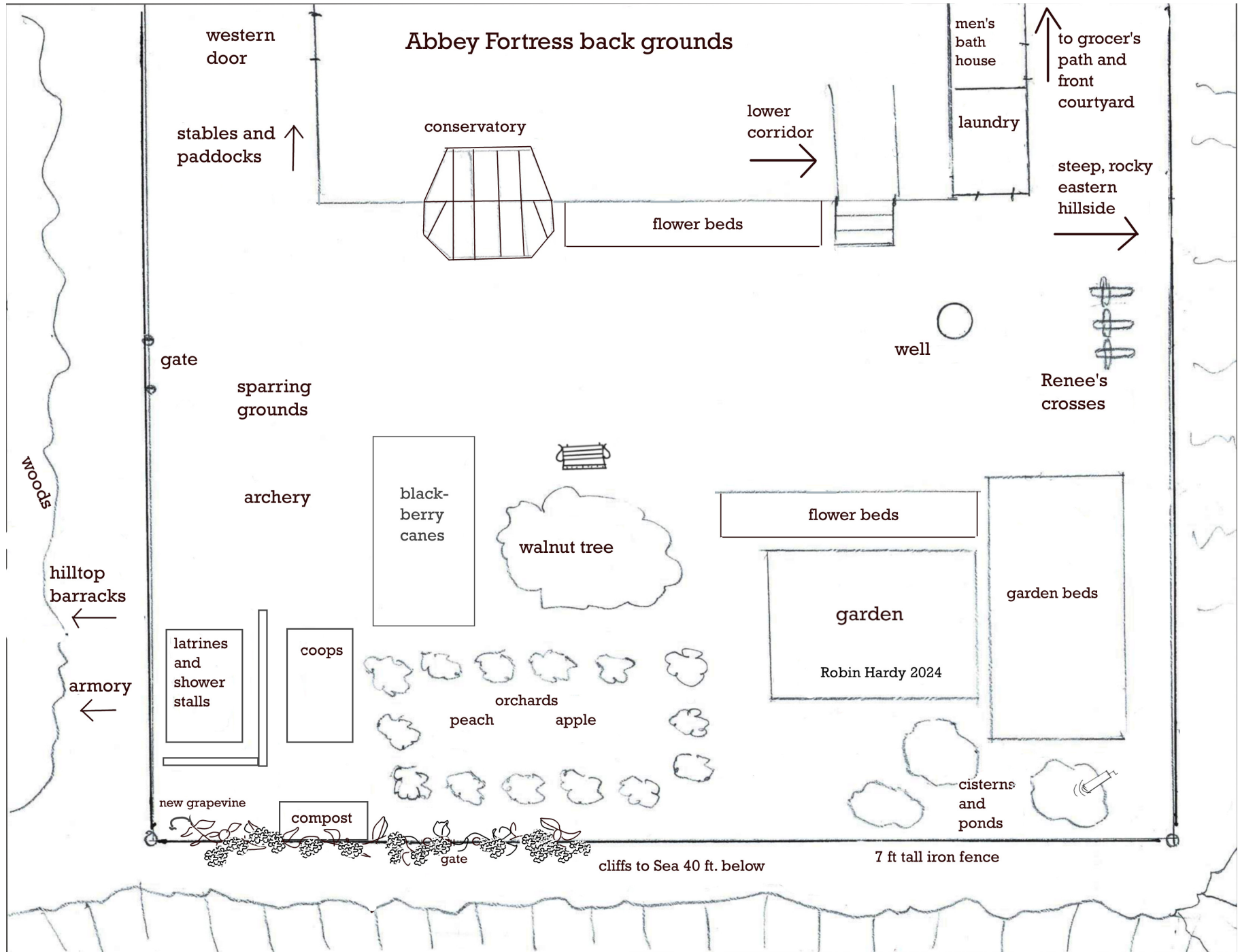
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| | |
|--|--|
| Aaro—AIR oh | Everleigh—EH ver lee |
| Adele—ah DELL | Eymor—EE more |
| Allessandrini—AL ess an DREE nee | Felice—feh LEESE |
| Allyr—AL er | flambé—flam BAY |
| amanuensis—uh man you EN sis (plural: -ses, -seez) | Flodie—FLOW dee |
| Archimedes—are kuh MEE deez | Folliott—FOH lee uht |
| Ares—AIR eez | garderobe—GAR de robe |
| Ariel—AIR ee uhl | Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g) |
| Arne—arn | Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g) |
| attaché—ah ta SHAY | Goadby—GOAD bee |
| Atticitian—at eh SISH un | Gores—GORE ez |
| Averne—ah VURN | Goyne—goyn (hard g) |
| Baldassare—BALL de sar | Graeme—GRAY em |
| Barthelemon—BAR thuh luh mon | Hadewidis—hay DWEH dis |
| behemoth—buh HE muth | Hartshough—HART soh |
| Beischel—BESH ull | helleborine—HEL eh bohr een |
| Bennard—beh NARD | Heus—rhymes with the noun <i>use</i> |
| Besiana—BES ee an ah | <i>hookama</i> —HOO kah mah (prostitute) |
| Bethune—beh THUNE | <i>hopui</i> —HOPE we |
| Borghese—bor JEESE | hors d'oeuvres—awr durvz |
| Bowrie—rhymes with <i>dowry</i> | Imelda—eh MEL dah |
| Bozzelli—bo ZELL ee | Inglese—ENG lees |
| Caradoc—CARE ah doc | Jasque—JAS kee |
| Chetwode—CHET wood | Jehan—JAY han |
| circuitous—sur KYOO eh tuhs (roundabout) | Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd |
| Clough—chloh | Justinian—jus TIN ee un |
| Conte—cahnt | Kele—kay lay |
| Cordelia—cor DEEL yah | Kelsey—KELL see |
| Cyneheard—SIGN herd | Kewe—CUE ee |
| Cyr—sear | <i>kilana</i> —keh LAH nah (white hair) |
| Dallarosa—dal ah ROW sa | <i>koa</i> —KOH ah (fight to die with honor) |
| De'Ath—dyath | Koschat—KOS chat |
| DeGrado—deh GRAW doh | Kraken—KRAY ken |
| Deirdre—DEE dra | Larisse—la REESE |
| Delano—deh LAN oh | Lemmerz—leh MERZ |
| demesne—the same as <i>domain</i> | Leneghan—LEN eh gan |
| Doane—rhymes with <i>own</i> | Lietes—lie EE teez |
| Dolivo—doh LEEV oh | <i>loco</i> —LOW coh (crazy) |
| Dominica—dah MIN ee ka | Loghry—LOW gree |
| echelon—ESH uh lahn | Loizeaux—lwah ZOH |
| Efran—EFF run | <i>mahalo</i> —mah HAY loh (thank you) |
| Eledith—ELL eh dith | Marguerite—mar ger EET |
| Elowen—EL oh win | Mathurin—mah THUR in |
| Elvey—ELL vee | Melchior—MEL key or |
| Enon—EE nun | Melott—meh LOT |
| Estes—ESS tis | Milo—ME low |
| Euripides—your EH pah deez | Minka—MINK ah |
| Eurus—YOUR us | Minogue—men OGE (hard g) |
| Eurusian—your uh SEE un | Mogridge—MOH gridg |

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran in the Hall of Memories*
(Book 21)

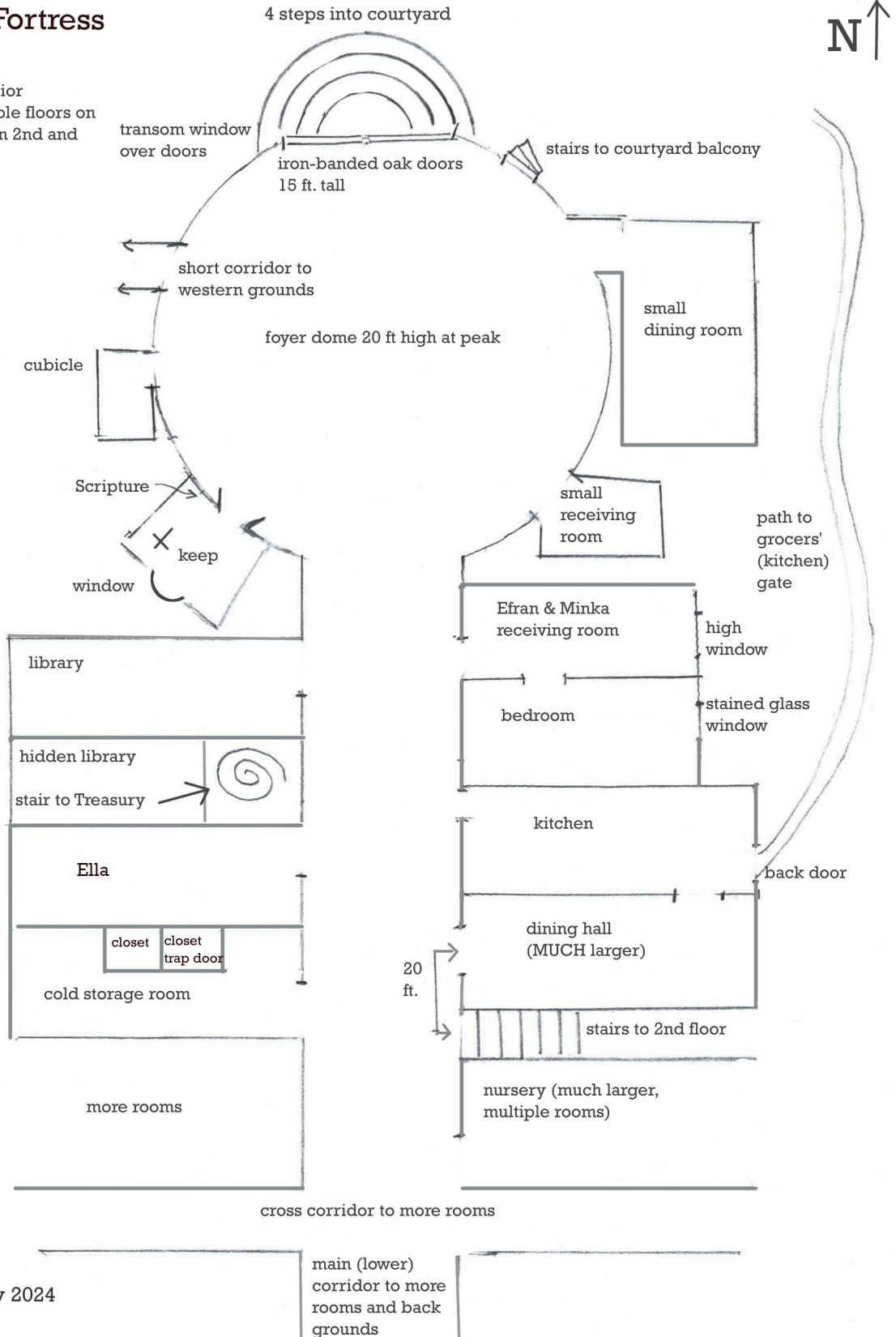
© Robin Hardy 2024

Molyneux—MOL eh new
Mounoussamy—mawn AH sam ee
Nomus—NO mis
perspicacity—per speh KAH seh tee (insight)
phenomenological—feh nah muh nuh LAH juh kuhl
Pia—PEE ah
Pieta—pie ATE ah
Pindar—PIN dhur
Pleyel—PLAY el
Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Reinagle—REN ah gull
Ronayne—roh NAIN
Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
Sciurus—SIGH ur us
Serrano—suh RAHN oh
Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Stites—stights
Suco—SUE coh
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Sybil—SEH bull
Takoda—teh KOH da
Tera—TEE rah
Teschner—TESH nur
Theodulph—THE oh dulf
Tourjee—TUR jee
Tuiren—TOUR en
Venegas—VEN eh gus
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
Verlice—ver LEESE
Verrin—VAIR en
Villalobos—VILL eh low bos
Vychan—VI kan
Whately—WOT lee
Wirrin—WEER en
Wyse—rhymes with *vice*
Wystan—WIS tan



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



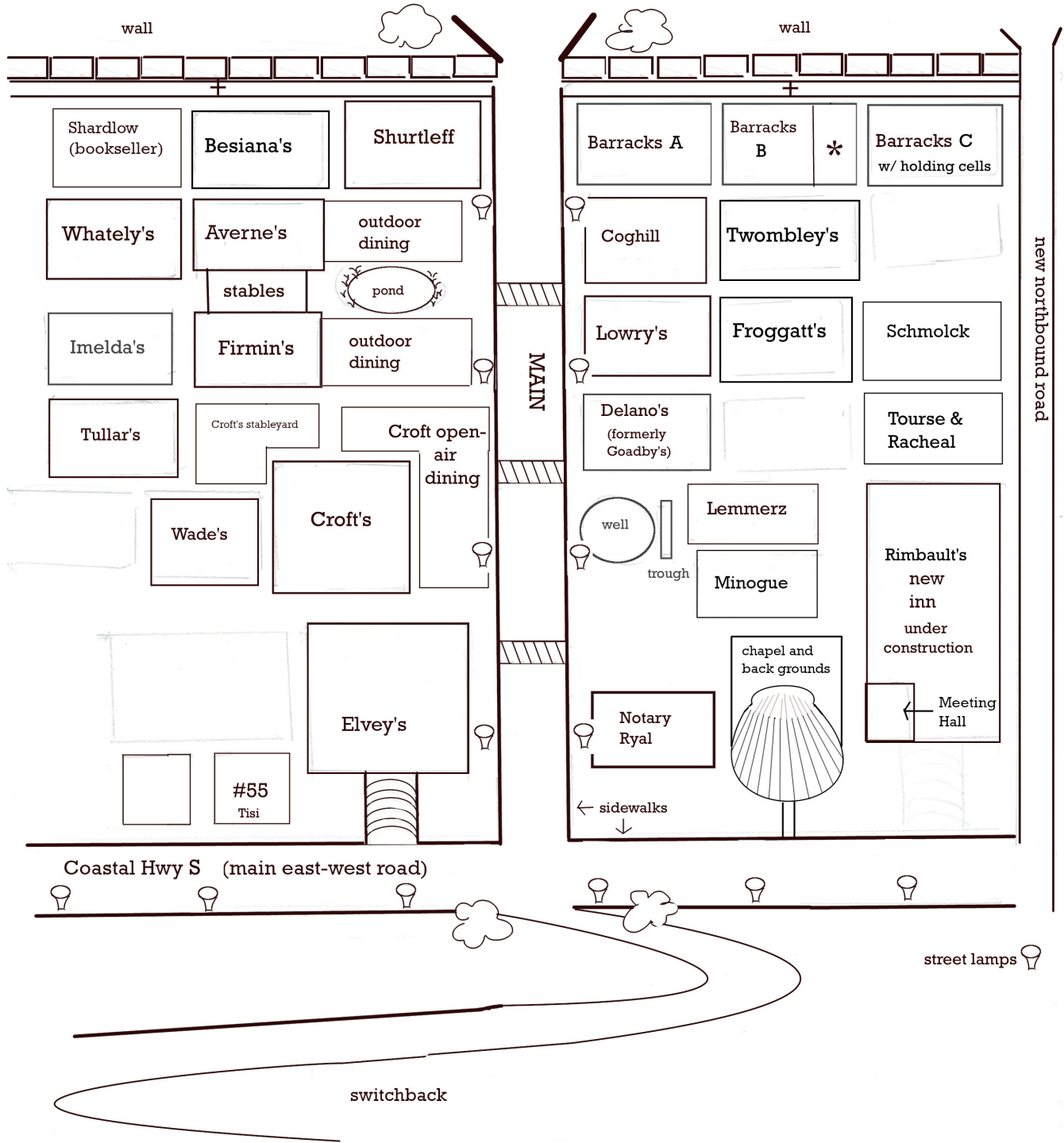
NOT TO SCALE

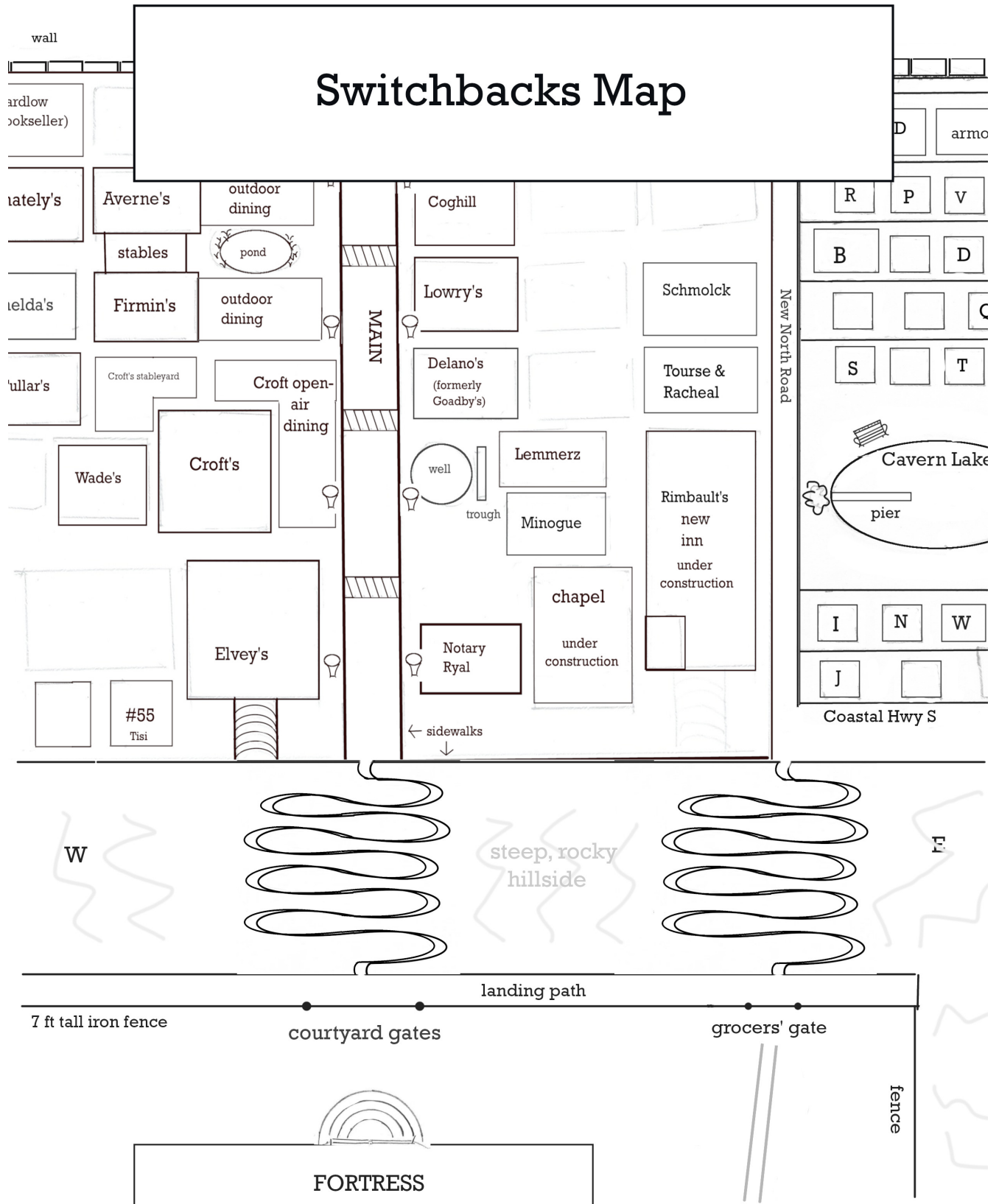
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Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

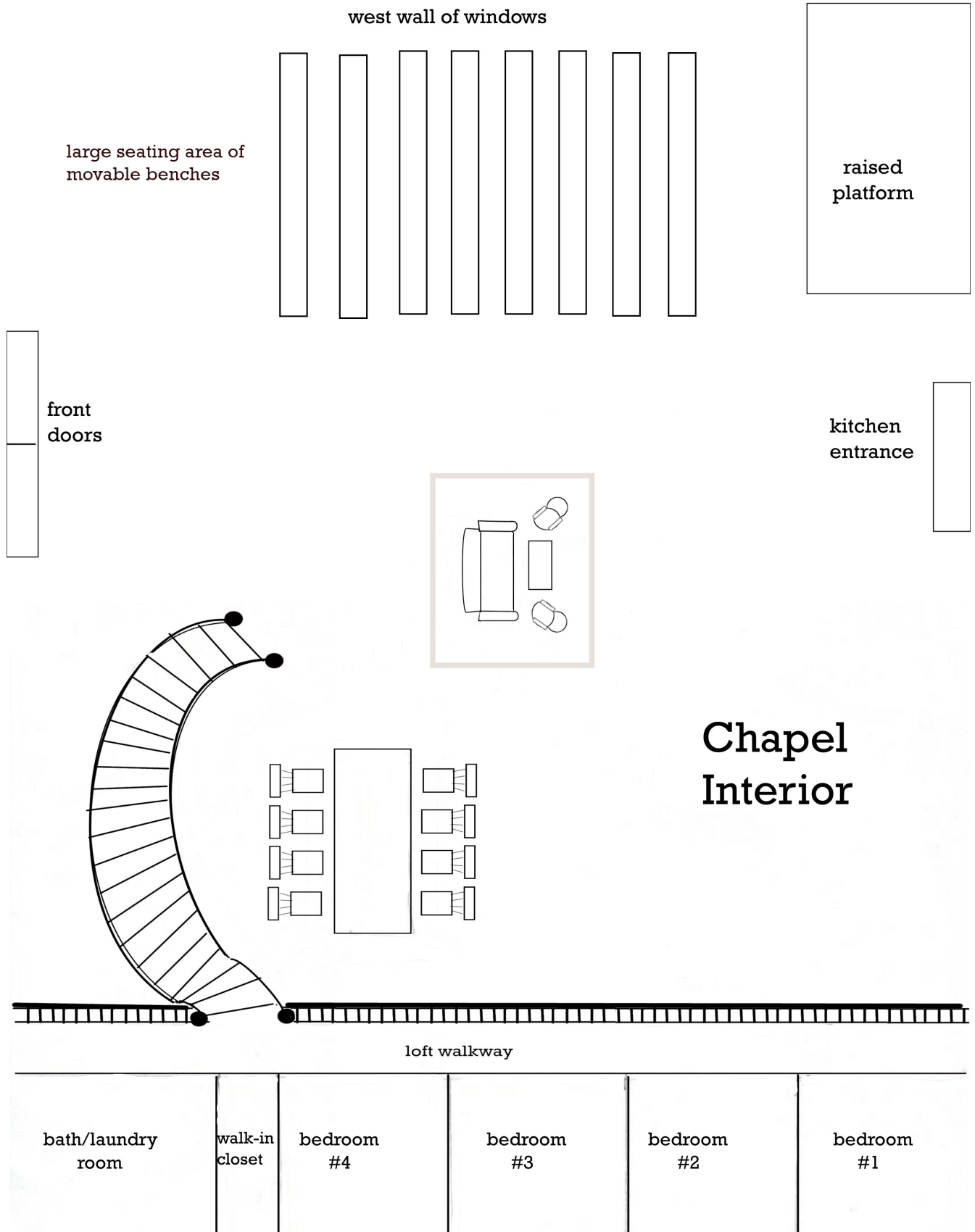
+ easements



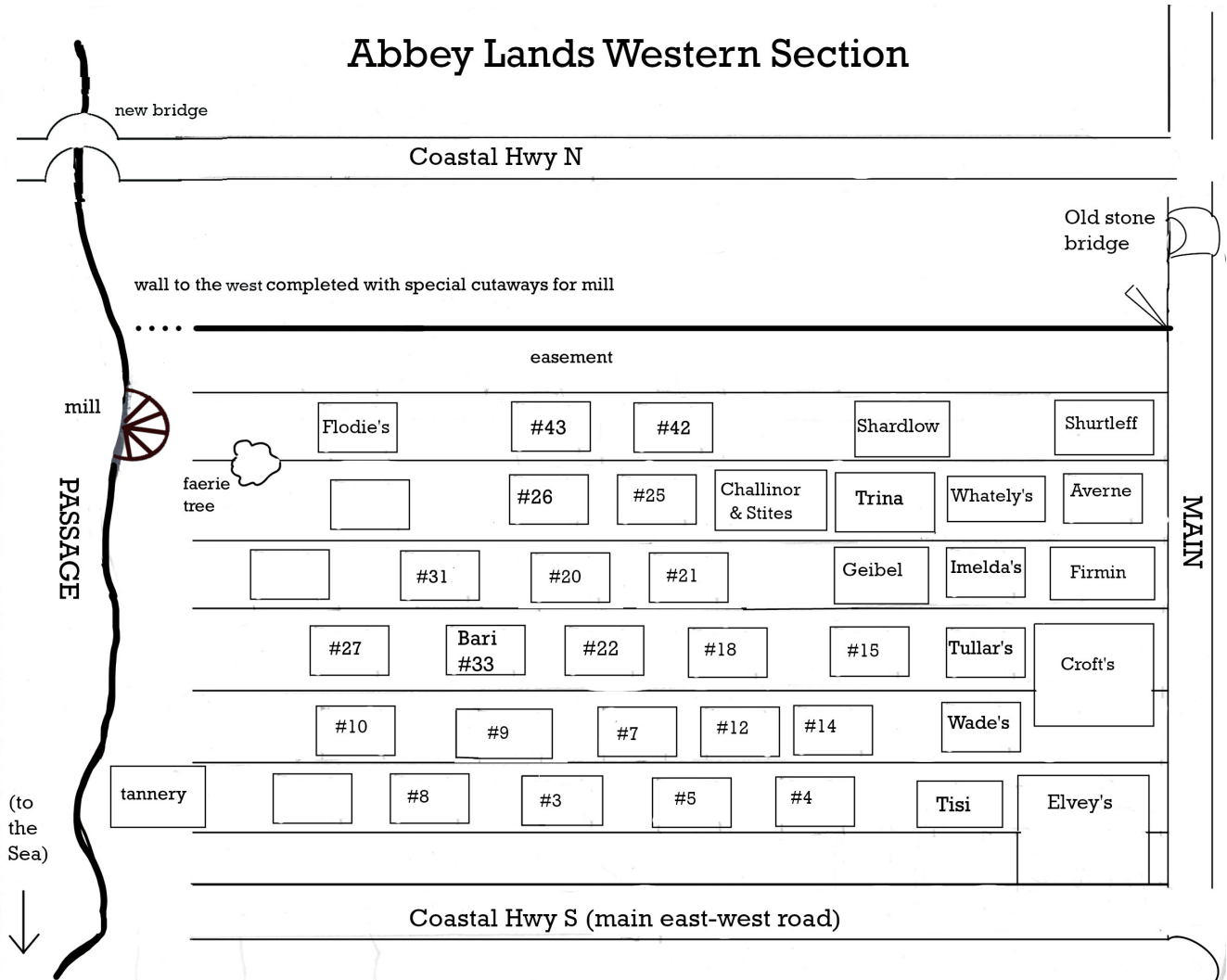


Map 5 Chapel Interior

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Abbey Lands Western Section



rocky NW hillside

switchback--4 bends on west side, 5 on east



KEY

- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
- 43 - Dallarosa & Enon



7 ft tall iron fence

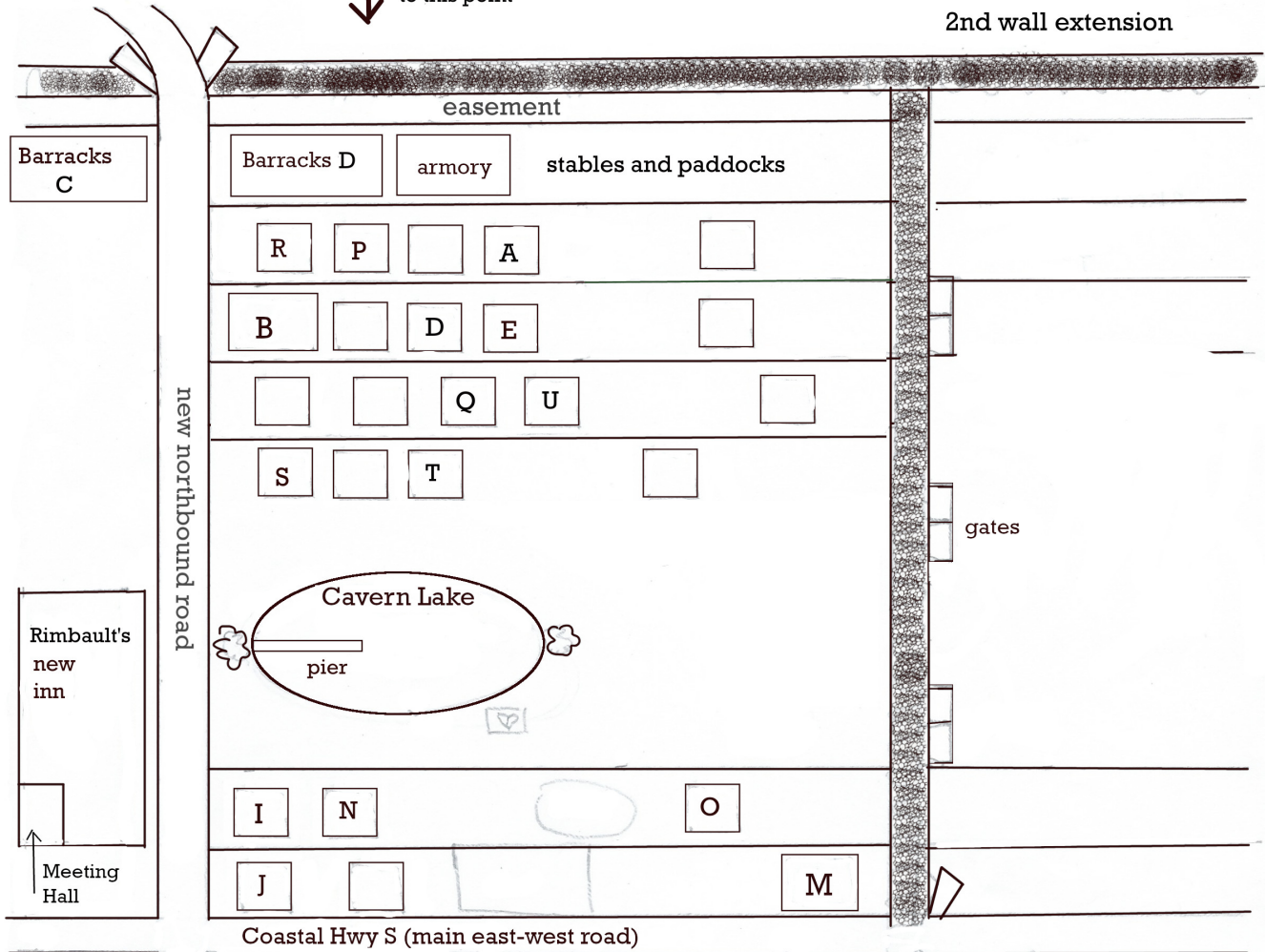
FORTRESS

woods

road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

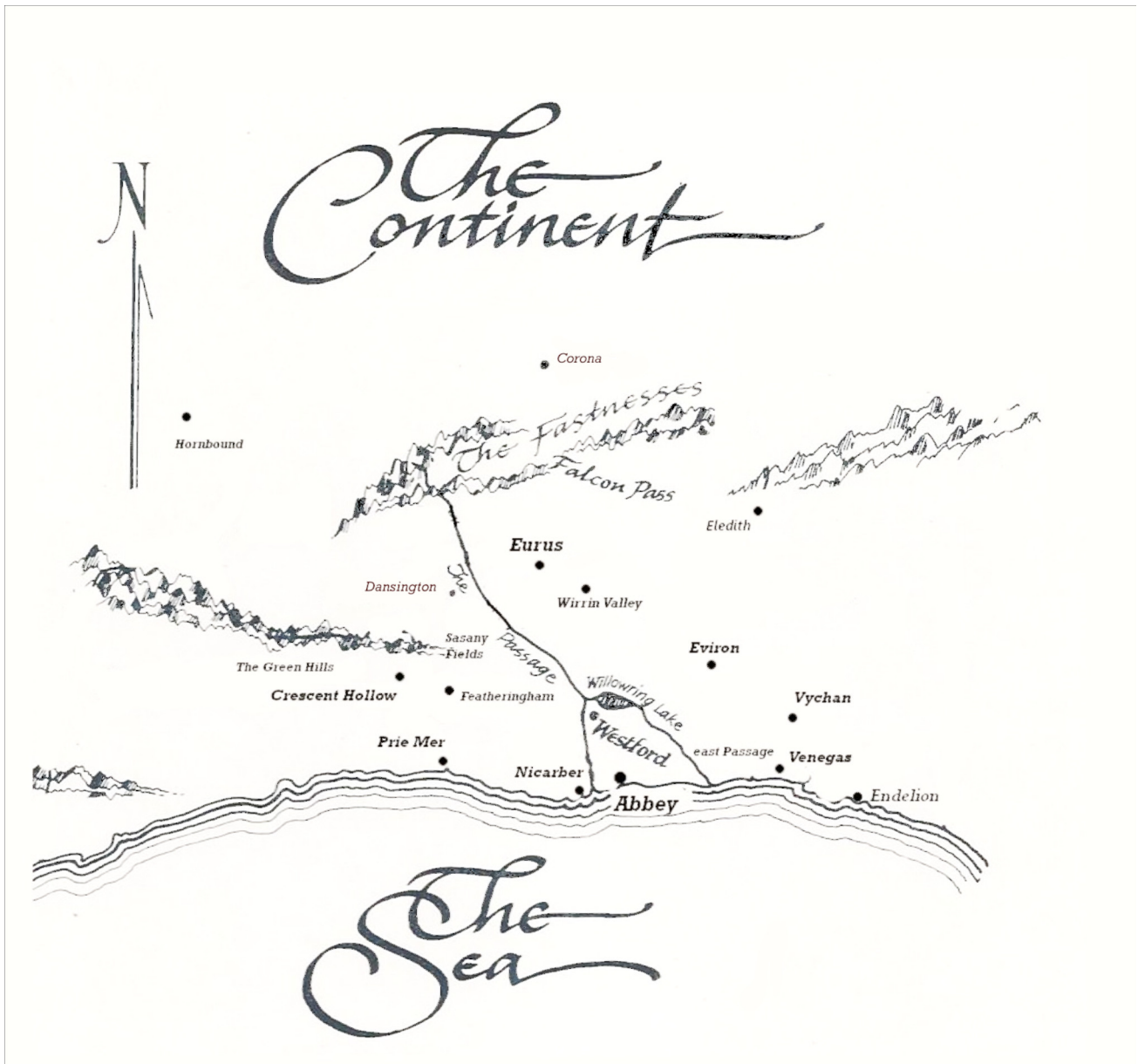
East Central Abbey Lands

↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point



new switchback
to courtyard gates

- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring's House
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office
- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking



More Sheep Brains (Book 21:
Lord Efran in the Hall of Memories)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



This was interesting, in that I decided I needed six individual personages in this illustration, all interacting with each other. Actually, I wanted Hartshough in there, too, but there just wasn't room. He'll show up before we're done.

First, the setting: Marguerite's mansion Featherstone is represented by the kitchen of Mosteiro de Tibães (Portugal) on [Wikimedia Commons](#).¹ I found Auntie Marguerite on Pexels [here](#)², and Justinian also on Pexels [here](#).³ The mess of broken dishes came from Unsplash [here](#).⁴ The hungry red-headed troll is a Neanderthal on display at the [Gallo-Roman Museum, Tongeren](#).⁵ The head of the troll chief in fancy dress came via the [World History Encyclopedia](#).⁶ (Yes, I gave the chief a troll nose. His reconstructed face is too handsome.) His outfit arrived unexpectedly via the French version of [PxHere](#).

Apparently, photographers love squirrels, because I had many options for Sir Nutbin. I chose [this brown squirrel](#)⁷ on PickPik. Now, Sir Ditson was the most fun. For his body, I found an adorable kid on Pexels whose photo has now been removed. I'm assuming that someone didn't want his picture all over the internet, so I'm not going to post it here. However, [David Jackmanson](#), who has a wonderful sense of humor, invited anyone to use his face for any purpose. The moment I saw it, I knew I had found the satisfied smirk of Sir Ditson as he looks down upon the room of tumult. (By the way, his self-confidence is entirely justified by future events.)

And there you have it!

Robin Hardy
May 22, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright for this illustration.

1. Photographed by [Joseolgon](#)
2. Photographed by [Teona Swift](#). The napkin Auntie is playing with arrived via [PickPik](#). And her chair! This [gorgeous](#) piece, photographed by [Eric Polk](#), is from Herter Brothers.
3. Photographed by [Ali Ahmed](#)
4. Photographed by [Chuttersnap](#)
5. Photographed by [Troughnoul](#) (Benoit Brummer)
6. Photographed by [Tim Evanson](#)
7. Nutbin's monocle came from [pngtree](#), and his vest from [rawpixel](#), via the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#).