



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

Book 26

Lord Efran
at the Faire

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

One week after the sculptor Hime began constructing the singing tree near the old stone bridge—outside the walls of the Abbey Lands—everyone discovered that it wouldn't work.

Guests and residents going in and out of the Lands were so curious as to what he was doing that they blocked traffic to stop and watch. They pestered him with questions and got in his way while he was trying to work, even handling the pipes that he had prepared for installation. Worse, after working all one day on it, he came out the next morning to find a number of pipes gone and the rest disarranged.

So on September 19th, Efran instructed him to forget that location and just erect the one on the far southeastern hilltop. Residents were warned not to touch, pull, push or climb on it—not that they would damage it, but that someone was sure to get hurt on it. To make the point plain, fortress workers began installing a fence around it even while Hime was working. When he was done, they closed up the fence entirely. The singing tree required no maintenance.

Then the residents stood back and listened. The structure resembled a tree, in that the trunk was fashioned of four-foot-long pipes laid horizontally in a spiral. The lower edges of the crown were formed by increasingly longer pipes spiraling upward until the topmost and longest pipes were set like rays tilting upward and farther to the east. Almost thirty feet in height, it looked as though the upper branches were caught in a strong wind.

The hilltop winds determined the sounds that emanated from the tree. Sometimes it moaned in discordance; other times it shrieked in laughter. Occasionally, harmonies emerged. This the hilltop faeries definitely preferred, so they began experimentally altering the openings in the pipes to see if they could achieve uniformly harmonious sounds. But the wind had to cooperate for this, and sometimes it didn't.

To accommodate Minka's and Rondi's desires for the upcoming Faire (scheduled for October 15th-17th), Hime constructed a smaller tree on the northern edge of Cavern Lake. Not receiving the playful hilltop winds, this smaller tree sang quieter songs. But it was also highly manipulated by the faeries, who considered anything around the lake fair game for their efforts (because of the two large faerie trees on the east and the west edges of the lake).

This tree was not fenced, being shorter (only about ten feet tall) with its center pole buried deep. So lake visitors—children and adults—climbed all over it. Shortly, the Notary Ryal had his assistant Soames affix a sign at the bottom of it that read: "Climb if you must; the Lands' doctors charge one royal to set broken bones which the Lands' administrators will not pay for tree-climbers." So many would-be climbers were dissuaded by parents or saner heads.

At this time, the Abbey Lands was experiencing another great influx of visitors and prospective residents. Remembering how the first influx had led to conditions that permitted the insurrection of six months ago, the administrators DeWitt and Estes tightened controls on both categories—visitors and aspiring residents. Single men who had no occupation nor relatives in the Lands weren't even allowed past the wall gates without a compelling reason. And approval for new plots or houses slowed to a trickle.

DeWitt appointed Tourse to a new administrative rôle which he dubbed, "The Enforcer," and gave him wide latitude in carrying out his duties. A large part of his responsibilities was to prevent the collection of men into military-style compounds in or near the Lands. Tourse's first big test was when Abbey scouts reported

unauthorized building by a group of about fifty men in the far eastern Lands, almost at the east branch of the Passage.

So, on September 21st, Tourse rode out to this area with one hundred soldiers on loan equipped with weapons and incendiaries. Leading this group into the midst of the construction, he and they looked around at framing for large buildings going up, horse stalls already constructed, and eight or ten tents in the area. The men working here paused to eye this intrusion.

Tourse shouted, "I am Abbey Fortress Administrator Tourse, here to tell you that you are building on property you don't own. Before we burn it all down, I'm going to give you a few minutes to take down your tents and load your wagons, but you'd better hop to it."

The interlopers looked at each other, then began to come together in a group, holding shovels, hammers, or knives. Tourse issued a whistle, and mounted archers spread out on either side of him to nock, draw and anchor. Tourse shouted, "I'm not a patient man." Then he turned to point behind him, instructing, "Start with the framing farthest away here."

Two riders dismounted to head for the partially built structure. While one splashed it with oil, the other applied a lit torch. They went around to the other support beams to set fire to them as well.

The interlopers quickly dispersed to begin throwing supplies into wagons and dismantling tents, whose occupants came streaming out. Loseby, at Tourse's right, pointed: "Couple of women there, Administrator." They looked shabby and scared.

Tourse ordered men behind him, "You four ride over with Loseby; see if those women want to leave with that group or come to the fortress."

Those so directed loped over to ride in between the two women and their handlers, who backed off. Tourse watched as Loseby leaned down from his horse to speak to the women, who came over to him quickly. Loseby gestured, and two mounted Abbey men reached down to assist them up behind their saddles, then walk over to Tourse. Nyarko reported, "They want to come over to the Lands, Administrator."

Tourse nodded. "Take them up to the women's matron Gayla."

"Yes, sir." Nyarko and Elowen set off at a walk west with their refugees.

Tourse looked back at the structure that was now fully ablaze, then pointed to one across from it. "That one, now." The men with the oil and the torch trotted over to the new target, halfway framed out. Tourse returned his attention to the land-grabbers. "Better hurry, gentlemen." With tight, angry faces, they did.

While this was going on in the eastern Lands, Efran was standing in the courtyard of the fortress, eyes fixed on something below and beyond the hill, past Rimbault's new inn and New North Road. Minka and Rondi were walking around the lake with a sheaf of papers, directing a man with a measuring rod and another with a can of white paint. Obviously, they were marking off booth placements for the Faire, which would take place in a little over three weeks. Their bodyguards were standing behind them, looking around, as they should.

Efran looked aside as another Abbey man, Henris, rode through the courtyard gates and dismounted to salute him. "Captain, two women from Crescent Hollow, Lady Barrueta and her daughter Colletta, are at the main gates, asking to come in to talk to Rondi."

Efran considered this, then nodded toward the girls. “Minka and Rondi are at the lake; ask Rondi but do what Minka tells you.”

“Yes, Captain.” Henris saluted smartly again, then remounted. Seeing that several large wagons were slowly ascending the old switchback, Henris turned his horse to descend the new one—which was closer to the lake anyway.

While keeping an eye on Minka—and Henris’ progress toward her—Efran scanned the Lands. The number of people here now both encouraged and dismayed him. He wanted people to come live and work here, but the sheer number reminded him too vividly of the insurrection.

However, as far as he could tell, those he saw were not looking to riot or rob the Treasury; they were families wanting a safe place to live. Suddenly, chaos had swallowed both Eurus and Crescent Hollow, so that across most of the Southern Continent, Efran was the longest-surviving head of a city, at two and a half years.

Westford was slowly rising from the ashes; Bortniansky was striving mightily to have the new inn there ready for occupancy by the time the Abbey Lands’ Autumn Faire took place. Here in the Lands, Rimbault had the first two floors and stables completed of his new inn next to the chapel house and conveniently close to the lake. Amusingly, he had erected a large signboard over the main doors with the name, “The Lands’ Best Inn.” Its restaurant and outdoor lake-view dining area were open, and visitors already in residence on the first and second floors.

Efran was distracted by smoke rising in the distance, way to the east past the lake and livestock pens. He smiled vaguely at Tourse’s handiwork, then noted the two riders approaching at a walk with two women sharing their horses. He nodded: being hangers-on for a group of renegades wasn’t all the fun and glamour it was cracked up to be.

He then looked back toward the lake to watch Henris approach Minka and Rondi with his message. Minka looked at Rondi, then nodded to the messenger. As he rode off, Efran watched Minka take Rondi’s hand. He could almost hear Minka tell her, “*I’m here for you.*” Efran sighed, then looked down in irritation to rewrap the dirty bandage around his hand. It was mostly healed. Mostly. He wouldn’t be punching any more stone walls for a while.

At the lake, Rondi dubiously watched young Henris ride off. She murmured, “I don’t think I’d talk to Lady Barrueta unless I had you for bodyguard.”

Minka laughed, then said, “You don’t have to talk to her at all unless you’re sure you want to.”

“I feel like I should. She’s probably carrying a letter from my uncle. I know that Lord Ryal did the right thing, but, I wish I could just be invisible to Windish—I mean, without being around him,” Rondi clarified.

Minka said, “I understand. But you don’t have to be invisible to be safe anymore. He truly can’t take you again.”

“I know,” Rondi sighed. Behind them, their bodyguards Truro and Skalbeck turned to watch a bright green carriage roll up Chapel Road toward the front of The Lands’ Best Inn. Gesturing with her folder of booth placements, Rondi noted, “There they come. Will you walk over with me to meet them?”

“Of course! Besides, you look adorable in the pants,” Minka told her, tugging lightly on her waist sash.

As they began crossing New North Road, Rondi demanded, “Where are your pants?”

Minka shook her head. "I have to feel daring to remember to put them on. But if you tease me enough about it, I'll go change," she threatened. Rondi laughed, then they and their bodyguards stopped in front of the inn to watch the green carriage draw up.

The footman Schwall descended preparatory to opening the door. But as he reached out for the handle, Lady Barrueta emerged violently, hitting him in the face with the door before hopping down from the carriage without waiting for the step. Minka and Rondi gaped at her advancing in great excitement.

Truro and Skalbeck stepped out from behind them to stand at their sides. Normally, they wouldn't bother with a matron, but Schwall was just now picking himself up after that full face-on hit with the door. The woman's daughter, still in the carriage, looked to be asleep with her head back on the cushion, mouth open. Moises, the driver, climbed down from his high seat to help Schwall up. Then they both walked back down Chapel Road and across Main to Croft's Tavern.

"Rondinelli!" Barrueta gasped with heaving bosom. "Why did you not answer your uncle's letter?"

Rondi blinked. "He wrote me a letter? I never saw it." Minka was watching warily. No, she knew nothing about the letter, either. Efran had taken it from a young Hollowan messenger who had been told that he would be put to death if he didn't bring back a reply from Rondinelli exonerating her uncle by the following morning. The youngster was now earning good money running messages from Choules' group in the far eastern Lands to businesses all over the rest of the Lands, as well as to rebuilt businesses in Westford to the north, and Venegas to the east. (In so doing, he discovered the growing port city of Endelion, less than two hours east of Venegas. This he reported to the Fortress administrators. Although they already knew about it, they were glad to hear that it was thriving.)

A hand at her vast chest, Barrueta exclaimed, "Oh, that's terrible! What a terrible miscarriage of justice! But how could you tell the Council such terrible things?"

While Rondi stood speechless, Minka said, "What 'things' are you referring to? She hasn't talked to the Council since we got her out of Plumptree."

"She had to," Barrueta said stiffly. "No one else would know what happened that terrible night."

Minka looked cautiously between the two. Rondi raised her face to the faerie tree in the near distance, whose leaves were undulating like flames. "The night of the fire," Rondi whispered, looking back in time. "That night I saw uncle arguing with my father, then he hit him with something, and someone took me away."

She turned her gray eyes to Barrueta, who was shocked into stillness. "He killed him, didn't he?" Rondi said, still whispering. "He killed both of them, didn't he? Because she wouldn't leave his side."

Barrueta stared at her. One of the men marking booth spaces approached within a few feet, then paused. Rondi asked Barrueta, "What happened to uncle?"

"They hanged him for murder when you didn't come forward to defend him," Barrueta said. Her accusation was considerably weaker than she had intended it to be.

Looking up to the white fortress, Rondi glimpsed Efran loping easily down the switchback on Kraken. But she looked higher. "The bells are tolling a requiem," she breathed. With tears standing in her eyes, she turned to Minka, who hugged her tightly.

Efran approached to dismount and lay a hand on Minka's shoulder. When she turned to him, he leaned down for her to whisper urgently in his ear, and he raised his eyes to Barrueta. Meanwhile, the man who had been marking booth plots said tentatively, "I'm not clear about the spacing between the booths here."

"There isn't any," Rondi answered.

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Chapter 2

"Eh?" said the man with the measuring rod.

Rondi explained, "The booths share a wall with those on each side. Since they're just temporary structures, this makes them more stable."

"Eh?" he repeated.

"Here, let me show you." Rondi opened her folder to take out a diagram of booth layouts, and he leaned over to look.

Colletta appeared at the carriage door, then had to climb down without benefit of steps or footman. Marching over to the group, one of whom was contentedly enclosed in another's arms, she said, "I want Vonk."

Efran snorted, "Vonk was dismissed from the army for a bad attitude. Besides, he's not the one who was at Lady Marguerite's dinner. I'm afraid the men, ah, had a little fun with you."

Colletta blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Vonk wasn't at the table with you," Efran said.

"Of course he was," Barrueta harrumphed. "She asked his name, and he said, 'Vonk.'"

"Polonti lie," Efran told her. He knew this because he was Polonti. Minka began snickering, so he muttered to her, "Shut up." Kraken fluttered his lips.

After explaining the setup to the man with the measuring rod, Rondi looked back to the group around the carriage. But the man with the paint can then approached, having lost the chart.

While Colletta was trying to absorb the fact that someone who was not Vonk said he was, Barrueta said, "But that is despicable. At least Bullara would not lie to me."

Efran winced, "I'm afraid that—"

"Bullara would not lie to me," Barrueta insisted. "We had an instant spiritual connection." Genuinely intending to be helpful, one worker who passed their group on his way to the fortress had Bullara summoned.

“It must have been a very heavy connection,” Efran mused, as the chair had broken under the two of them. By now, Marguerite had come out of her chapel home. Seeing her dinner guests from Crescent Hollow, she hesitantly advanced. Rondi looked over to her, grinning.

Barrueta watched Minka give the chart to the worker with the paint can so that he could continue to mark out booth locations, with numbers painted in each eight-by-ten-foot space. As he began walking back to the lake side, Barrueta demanded generally, “What are you doing?”

Minka said, “We’re getting ready for our Autumn Faire in October!”

“It will be so much fun!” Rondi said, flipping through her list of confirmed booth spaces and entertainers.

“You can’t do that,” Barrueta insisted.

Colletta asked, “What all will you have?”

In reply, Rondi showed her their list. Colletta looked at the sheets in astonishment. “You have all these coming?”

“Um hmm!” Rondi nodded, smiling. “And you’d better go ahead and get you a room. Croft’s and Firmin’s are all filled up through the Faire dates with paid reservations, but Rimbault has a few rooms still available here.” She nodded toward The Lands’ Best Inn.

Efran smiled at her dubiously. “How do you know?” His tone was teasingly curious.

Rondi turned to him authoritatively. “Racheal is keeping track of reservations in case she has to ask residents to open their homes to guests. But she’s already sent a man to Bortniansky in Westford to ask how many rooms he’ll have available in the new inn going up there.”

He crinkled his eyes at her. “That’s excellent, Rondi.” She had fully appropriated Minka’s confidence in asserting what she knew.

Colletta said, “All right. We’ll get rooms.” In aggravation, she looked around for the missing footman. “Where is Schwall?”

“Nursing his injuries,” Efran told her.

She peered at him, but a nearby worker stepped up. “I’ll take yer bags, Miss.”

“I’m *Lady* Colletta,” she corrected him stiffly.

“Not here,” Efran noted, being a stickler for titles on the Lands.

“Yes, Lady Colletta,” the worker said with a bow, because she was a very lovely 16-year-old.

So Colletta allowed him to load up with luggage from the carriage. There was so much of it that he had to drag over another two men, who, upon seeing her, were agreeable to carrying her boxes and valises. Marguerite had come up to the group by then. Efran acknowledged her with a smiling glance, but a new distraction was at hand.

While Colletta and her entourage headed for the covered entrance of The Lands’ Best Inn, Bullara came off the new switchback, passing two riders on their way up to the fortress with refugees behind their saddles. Bullara

walked up to Efran, asking, “You summoned me, Captain?” Both broader and taller than Efran, he did not salute (because he was not in the army) but his tone was respectful.

Efran peered at him, shaking his head. “No. But—” He looked at Barrueta. “This is Bullara. You see that he was not at the dinner.” He was half-Polonti, somewhat slow-witted, but willing to work at anything that did not involve chickens, which terrified him.

But the bosomy Barrueta eyed Bullara. She uttered, “What a specimen of manhood is standing before me.” Vaguely quizzical, Bullara glanced down at her. “Marry me,” she demanded in a throaty voice.

Her hearers looked horrified, especially when Bullara said indifferently, “All right.”

Minka began an immediate objection, but Efran, exasperated, said, “No. Bullara, you don’t have to follow her orders. She’s just visiting. Go do your work.”

Bullara barely shrugged. “I’m free right now, Captain.”

Minka pleaded, “Bullara, you don’t really want to marry her, do you?”

“I don’t mind, Lady Minka,” he said, scratching under his arm. He glanced distractedly at more workers heading to the lake to assist in booth preparations. Kraken cautiously snuffled him to see if he were another adjacent human, then snorted decisively, shaking his head.

“Come to the notary’s, then,” Barrueta ordered, taking his large hand. He complied to walk along with her.

Rondi, Minka and Efran watched, stupefied. Marguerite was concerned that this might be an unpleasant consequence of her dinner. Minka murmured, “Oh, dear.” Seeing Marguerite, she said, “Oh, Auntie! Thank goodness you’re here! What will she do to him?”

Efran preempted Marguerite’s reply with, “Kill him when he frustrates her enough, if he doesn’t accidentally break her neck before then.”

Laughing, Rondi said, “Maybe they’ll be very happy!”

Efran and Minka gaped at her, and Marguerite said, “I adore that view.”

Minka grabbed Rondi’s arm. “That’s why I love you! Now come; we still have work to do.”

Marguerite and Efran watched them walk away to resume their Faire duties. Kraken nudged Marguerite’s arm for a petting, which she provided. “Oh, Efran, won’t this be grand? And I love the singing tree there.” She nodded toward the structure, which was quietly sighing at the time.

He dismally shook his head. “I’m surrounded by optimists. It’s very uncomfortable.”

He and she both looked over at the large group of Abbey soldiers that rode up. Tourse, in front, dismounted to salute. “Captain. Lady Marguerite. We burned down the beginnings of another compound and chased the company over the east branch of the Passage. Their cook and washer woman should be up at the fortress by now.”

“Yes, I think I saw them,” Efran said, glancing over his shoulder.

“I’m scheduling regular patrols of the area, to make sure they don’t come back,” Tourse noted. “But . . . I did see a large gray wolf looking on, so if we miss their rebuilding the compound, the wolf clan won’t.”

“Oh, ho,” Efran said. “Yes, you’re probably right, because I gave them that area. Good, Tourse; thank you.”

“My pleasure,” he said sincerely, saluting again. “Lady Marguerite,” he nodded, and she returned a smile to him. Tourse remounted to take some of his men hilltop while the majority rode toward the lower barracks. These soldiers wore uniforms like the regular army, only in dusky blue instead of red.

Efran and Marguerite continued to idly watch the orderly bustle all up and down New North Road, the side roads off it, Chapel Road, the switchbacks, and the lakeside. He and she also saw Lady Barrueta and Bullara walk up the switchback with her clutching a folded document. Efran muttered, “As a group, we men are stupid.”

Marguerite insisted, “I cling to Rondi’s view.”

“You would,” Efran groused. He abruptly turned to watch three men ride up the old switchback. Marguerite looked toward them, then dropped her head. He asked, “Is that Verlice and his bodyguards?” Verlice was her son.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I’m afraid he’s looking for me.”

“‘Afraid’?” Efran asked in disapproval. He eyed her for a moment, then looked back up to see the gate guard pointing Verlice down to them.

“I may have some ’splaining to do,” she said wryly. Obviously, she was thinking of her marriage to Wendt and her “makeover” which allowed them to live together as man and wife.

“I don’t like that you feel you have to explain anything,” Efran said, watching the three ride down again at a tentative walk.

She laughed, “Now, don’t get your hackles up. He’s my son, so I do owe him some consideration.”

Efran lowered his head as the group trotted toward them. “He’d better be gentle and respectful about it, because if he draws the attention of your bodyguard over there [nodding to Minka at the near side of the lake] he’s going to be in for a beatdown.”

She agreed, “I’m afraid you’re right.”

Efran gave her a sidewise look. “I’ll allow you to be afraid of what Minka will do. That’s it.” As a last-minute advisory, he added, “I claim the right to eavesdrop.”

She flashed him an acknowledging smile as Verlice and his bodyguards Wiatt and Gastrell approached. Efran greeted them immediately: “Hello, Verlice. How is Arturo?” Verlice’s youngest son suffered a broken collarbone when he and his older brother Brayen were conscripted to fight against the Abbey Lands about four months ago.

“Thank you, Lord Efran, he’s doing well; only uses his injury to get out of work he doesn’t want to do, at this point,” Verlice said with only a glance at Marguerite. Efran was acknowledging that when Verlice added, “I’m looking for my mother.” He and his men remained on their horses.

Efran gestured to Marguerite, then deliberately looked away. She said, “Hello, Verlice. Wiatt, Gastrell.”

The three stared at her, and Efran glanced back at them. Minka and Rondi were looking over. “Mother?” Verlice asked dubiously.

“Yes, Verlice,” she said.

He hesitantly dismounted, and his men did likewise. While he stared hard at her, Wiatt and Gastrell took note of the bustle around the lake. After a moment, Verlice choked out, “Why—?”

“I’m married now, so my husband and I felt that I should ease toward a more truthful appearance,” she said.

The three men immediately stared at Efran, and Verlice began, “I thought you were a man of honor, but—”

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Chapter 3

Efran lowered his head to hiss at Verlice, “Not *me*, stu—”

Marguerite cut him off with, “Commander Wendt is my husband.”

Verlice was still rocking on his feet. “Wendt? The blind man? Why change your appearance for him?”

She replied, “He is no longer blind, Verlice, but his wishes were only a part of it.”

Swaying, Verlice looked around. “Can we go somewhere to talk?”

Marguerite was pointing toward her home when Efran whistled to a pair of men on Chapel Road. They came running over, and he said, “I’ll be in the chapel with Lady Marguerite; please inform the Commander that her son is here.”

“Yes, Captain.” Coxe saluted, then he and Elowen took off at a run for Barracks A.

As Verlice was opening his mouth, Minka, slightly winded, appeared between Marguerite and Efran. “Lord Verlice! Hello! How is Arturo?” she asked, all friendly and bright-eyed.

He nodded a little loosely. “Fine. Thank you. I—”

“Excellent,” Minka said, taking Marguerite’s arm. “Let’s go in and have one of Hartshough’s bracers. I’m just all worn out from Faire planning. But Rondi and I got the reserved spaces marked and have started on the available spaces. There aren’t many of those! Rondi has taken both lists to Racheal. Truro and Skalbeck are with her, Efran.”

“Good,” he said, falling in beside her as she diligently walked her Auntie up to the double doors of the chapel. Efran shot a look at Marguerite: whatever Minka had seen from a distance was enough to trigger her protective instincts.

Detler came up to take the three visitors' horses around to the stables in back. Kraken, declining to follow, stuck to Efran's shoulder, indelicately bumping Verlice off the sidewalk. Efran chastised his horse, "You may as well go around back; you can't come in."

"Oh, he can cut through to the backyard, Efran," Marguerite said as they entered. "HARTSHOUGH! Oh, there you are. Kraken's going out back, and we're just going to snag some chairs on the way to the patio. Will you—? Oh, yes, that would be lovely," she said upon Hartshough's suggestion of fruit bracers.

"Very good. If you would all please proceed to the patio, I had set out chairs earlier for visitors who seem to have gone elsewhere," Hartshough said, with a short bow.

"We'll do exactly as you say, Hartshough," Minka said as though they were part of a conspiracy. Efran turned smiling eyes to her, but she had a lock on Auntie's arm and didn't look over. Verlice looked vaguely disconcerted.

Minka guided Marguerite out to her own patio while Verlice and his men stared all around the luxurious chapel hall with the slender faerie trees dropping down randomly from the high ceiling to the marble floor.

On the patio, Minka sat Marguerite at the table and claimed the chair to her right. Verlice chose to sit across from her while Efran sat on her left. Verlice's men sat apart from the table, but Hartshough brought his blackberry bracers to them all.

They looked vacantly out to the landscaped yard, where Kraken dropped onto the thick green grass. He couldn't roll because of the saddle, but he could nibble the grass. He got up to slurp from the copper-and-rock fountain, then lowered his nose to the grass again.

Minka sat back to take a long sip of her bracer, then smacked her lips and declared, "So refreshing! Don't you think so, Lord Verlice?"

"Ah, yes, certainly," he said helplessly before ever tasting it.

"I agree. Good job, Hartshough!" she said, leaning over to shout at the kitchen.

He came to the doorway to bow. "Thank you, Lady Minka."

"You're so welcome!" She turned back to happily sip again, then said, "Now, don't mind me. Just talk away!"

Efran snorted behind his hand at his wife's successful attempts to derail any fault-finding of her darling Auntie. Verlice focused on him to ask pensively, "Why is this funny?"

Efran raised his eyes and slowly lifted up. "I'm laughing at my wife, which she invites. I would not laugh at any criticism of your mother," he said softly.

Verlice, highly conflicted, studied him a moment. "May I not ask her about this—extreme change?"

"Personally, I would say no," Efran said brashly. "But you may not have seen as much of her history as I have." He was referring to the family records crafted by the *lignéer*, which Verlice knew nothing about. Therefore, Efran's assertion came across as rather crass.

Verlice's face lost some color. "I've not forgotten how much I owe you for the rescue of my sons. But I'm

having trouble understanding why her appearance is so important to you.”

Efran corrected him, “Her happiness is what’s important to me, because she is the one who made all this possible from the very beginning. But I’ll let her explain to you whatever she likes.” Minka slurped her bracer in agreement.

Marguerite reached over to pat Efran’s hand. “I appreciate your frankness, Efran. And my darling Minka’s support.” She turned to her great-granddaughter, who held her arm with a sigh.

Turning to her son, Marguerite said, “Mostly, Verlice, I came to understand that I was hiding behind the old lady appearance out of fear. When I came down to the Lands, among people who only wanted to befriend me and not use me, I realized I was being dishonest. Wendt knew I was hiding, and when I showed him my true appearance, he said, ‘I understand now *why* you’re hiding.’ But when I showed Minka, she said, ‘Let’s just get a little bit closer to the truth.’”

Verlice’s brow furrowed. “Is this not your true appearance?”

“Not quite,” Marguerite answered. “But it’s—closer. And it enables me to be with a man I truly love without inflicting undue gossip or ill-will on him. He is crucial to the defense of the Lands.” Efran nodded slightly in affirmation.

Verlice still looked baffled. “Well, why not show the whole truth, then?”

Marguerite was forming a reply when Minka said, “To simply show her true appearance on the street without anyone knowing her story doesn’t show the whole truth. Strangers on the street aren’t entitled to know the whole truth about her, anyway. This is a compromise that protects her and the Commander, so that he can do his job and she can have the happiness she deserves.”

Verlice studied her, then glanced over the landscaped yard with its fountain and ornate iron fencing. Kraken raised his head to flutter his lips at him, which looked like he was blowing raspberries. Verlice muttered, “So, as part of your efforts to blend in, you build this fantastic lodging for yourself.”

Efran and Minka both spoke at once, but he overrode her: “The Fortress built this for another purpose, but when the trolls destroyed Featherstone, we realized this was needed to house her and Hartshough.”

Minka added, “She hosts concerts here, and has the children down and everything.”

Verlice was studying her when Efran asked, “Have the trolls invaded Wirrin Valley?”—where Verlice and his family lived, near his brewery and fields.

Verlice glanced at him to reply, “They make occasional sallies, but we learned long ago how to deal with them.”

“Good,” Efran said, remembering vividly the fight against trolls there in which Verlice’s father died, as well as Captain Gores and half the Red Regiment. “Don’t—underestimate them,” he added apprehensively.

“Thank you for the warning,” Verlice replied sarcastically.

“Don’t be stupid,” Minka said, stung. She had heard the details of this devastating battle, but Verlice was apparently unaware of the Red Regiment’s sacrifice on behalf of his home, his family, and his livelihood.

Verlice stood. “Perhaps we’d best continue this later.” His men stood as well.

He walked around the table to kiss his mother’s cheek, and she said, “Yes, please stay for a while, Verlice. I have plenty of room for you here.”

Eyeing Minka, he said tightly, “I don’t want to intrude.” Efran’s eyes went dangerously blank.

Minka glanced down. “I apologize for my rudeness, but Efran knows what he’s talking about.” Efran smiled at her having to apologize for defending him.

Marguerite interjected, “You won’t be intruding, Verlice.” She turned. “HARTSHOUGH! Oh, there you are. Yes, have Eryk bring their bags up to the two vacant rooms upstairs.”

“Yes, Lady Marguerite,” he said, bowing.

To her son, she said, “You must stay for the Faire, anyway. Oh, and Faciane, Brayan and Arturo must come see it, as well. It’s really going to be amazing.” She smiled at Minka, who smiled only briefly in return, still stinging over her own misstep.

“Thank you. Let me check the inns, first,” Verlice said. He and his men walked out, appropriating their saddle bags from Eryk on the way.

Those at the patio table were silent, watching one of the Abbey men bring the visitors’ horses out from the stables. Minka looked at Efran from under her brows to mutter, “Stop grinning at me.”

“I can’t help it. That was fun,” he said.

She exhaled, looking off. Marguerite placed a hand on hers. “Minka, I adore that you’re not afraid to speak up.”

Minka held her hand to glumly admit, “Efran doesn’t need me to speak for him, and you probably don’t, either.”

“Don’t speak for me,” he grinned at her.

With a guttural cry, she launched herself onto him, and he took her in his lap with the chair barely rocking under them. “I embarrassed myself again,” she cringed, her head on his neck.

“No, no—this is a big part of why I love you,” he said, arms tightening around her.

Marguerite said, “I agree, Minka. And, Efran, I’m going to ask Madgwick to pray about the trolls. I’m a little worried about Verlice’s family, and I know you’re weary of fighting them.”

Efran was opening his mouth to thank her when Eryk, perturbed, came out to their table. “Lady Marguerite, the Lord Verlice and his guards take their bags to the inn.”

“That’s all right, Eryk; they may be back,” she said.

“Yes, Lady Marguerite,” he said, returning to the house.

Mohr then appeared on the patio to salute Efran. “Captain, Administrator DeWitt requests your ear.”

Efran stood with Minka in his arms. “We’re—” He stopped as Kraken passed the patio table on his way through the hall to the front door. “We’re coming,” he said in exasperation. Newly embarrassed, Minka slid down out of his arms.

“Yes, sir.” Mohr turned out, then paused to salute again, this time to the Commander, who had materialized behind him.

Wendt nodded at Mohr, then noted Efran’s imminent leaving with Minka. “Did I miss anything?” Wendt asked.

“Not too much, Commander.” Efran was smiling again, holding her hand. “I’ve done something to displease my Administrator, so the lady will have to brief you.”

“Dismissed,” Wendt said before seating himself beside his wife. “What’ve you done now?” he asked her unironically. This finally made Minka laugh, as he sounded just like Efran. He just smiled.

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Chapter 4

As it turned out, DeWitt only wanted an update on preparations for the Faire, which Minka was able to give him comprehensively. Then she and Efran were free to collect Joshua from the back grounds for dinner. As usual, the toddler wanted to bring in Nakam too, but also as usual, Efran didn’t want the dog begging all around the hall. So Nakam was given a soup bone to chew on out back, which suited him fine until the children would appear again (because he most often slept in their quarters now).

Efran and Minka sat at their usual back table with Ella and Quennel to his left and Pleyel and Milo to her right (tonight. It varied.) Rondi sat across from Minka with Mathurin having snagged the seat across from Efran. As always, Efran had Joshua on his lap to feed him bites. By now, the toddler often fed himself from his own bowl on the table, which his father filled. Two weeks had passed since Efran had pounded a stone wall, so he had dispensed with the bandage on his hand.

Minka turned to Pleyel to ask, “What are you doing now? I hardly ever see you anymore. Didn’t we have fun finding my sister in the bell tower as Standing Goddess?”

Pleyel almost choked; Efran raised his face in a silent laugh—that episode had almost sent Minka into hysterics. Pleyel regained his breath to say, “Yes, Lady Minka, that was exciting. But now most of us are building booths for the Faire. The pieces are piled up in the barracks yard; they’ll be taken out to be put together around the lake when it gets closer to the time.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! How many are there so far?” Minka asked.

“Some thousands, I think,” Pleyel said, provoking laughter.

“Oh, you’re teasing,” Minka said, reproving. He was protesting that it was an accurate estimate when she asked Rondi, “How many booth reservations are there now?”

Glowing, Rondi said, “Fifty-three that are paid, and another forty that have put down deposits!”

Efran paused with a forkful of venison suspended in the air. “Almost a hundred?”

“Yes! Can you believe it?” Rondi asked. “Racheal says our upper limit is a hundred and ten, but that’s only if the remainder are single booths. Every double booth will knock two off that.”

Efran mused, “Oh. I had no idea there’d be that many. What about security?”

Rondi said, “Administrator Tourse is in charge of that, and Commander Wendt has promised he’ll have all the men he requests. I don’t know how many he wants.”

“Tourse. That’s good,” Efran said, eating again.

Minka looked around. “Where is Justinian? I haven’t seen him for days.”

Allyr, across from Pleyel, said, “Oh, he’s the official Greeter of single women to the Lands for the Faire, Lady Minka.”

“Of course,” she exhaled. So the talk moved on to other topics, but Minka was still concerned about Justinian. She didn’t miss him nearly as much as Wardly and his sister Ricci did, however, given that he tipped outrageously.

The following morning, September 22nd, began with what promised to be another headache for Efran. The door guard Ellor came up to the second-floor workroom to announce, “Captain, a woman named Windry is demanding to talk to you—seems pretty upset about something. We put her in the receiving room off the foyer.”

Estes and DeWitt watched Efran stand in resignation. “Ah. I think I know what that’s about. I’ll be right down.”

As Ellor saluted and left, DeWitt broached, “Windry? Wasn’t she one of your . . . ?”

“Yes, but I think this is about her children,” Efran said.

Estes said, “Oh, yes—Calix is still here, isn’t he?”

“Yes, and as far as I know, Lilou is at Firmin’s,” Efran said. “I hope we won’t need to get Ryal up here for a hearing.” His administrators winced in agreement, because a hearing to determine whether parents were fit to keep their children was painful. Calix, 10, had been staying at the fortress for three months now, and Lilou, 12, had been working and boarding at Firmin’s all that time, as well.

On his way down to the foyer, Efran was shaking his head: Windry might get Lilou back, but Calix had asked to stay at the fortress, and had not shown any desire to go back home.

Passing the library, Efran glanced in at Law class underway, but didn’t pull Minka out yet. As he came to the foyer, Windry rushed over to meet him. “Efran, where are my children?” she demanded.

A fortress worker glanced at her, so Efran said, “Ah, step in here, Windry.” He led her into the small receiving room off the foyer and shut the door.

“Well?” she demanded.

“Calix is here. Lilou is probably still at Firmin’s, but I don’t know,” he said.

“Then bring Calix to me,” she instructed.

“Yes,” he said. “Wait here, please. Have an ale if you like. Oh, there’s some flatbread, there, too.”

She squinted at him while he stepped out and shut the door. Gesturing Heus to him, Efran said, “I believe the children are still in class this morning. Bring Calix to me here, please.”

“Yes, Captain.” Heus saluted to walk rapidly down the corridor toward the children’s classroom. Efran stepped away from the receiving-room door to wait.

Shortly, he saw Heus walking Calix, white-faced, up the corridor. Efran nodded as Heus saluted and stepped aside for further orders. Efran knelt before Calix, who was shaking. “Don’t be afraid, Calix. Your mother is here—”

“To take me away?” he gasped.

Efran paused, then said quietly, “If you want to stay, we will have to call the Notary Ryal to have a hearing. He will listen to her, and then listen to you. But I am fairly sure we can keep you, Calix.”

“But Rondi had to leave,” he breathed.

“We brought her back, didn’t we?” Efran asked, chin down. Calix nodded. “I think you can stay, Calix. You tell your mother what you want to do, and then tell Ryal.”

“All right,” Calix said, bucking up.

Efran stood to place a hand on the door handle of the receiving room. He paused to tell Heus, “Stand by.”

“Captain.” Heus saluted.

Efran opened the door to bring Calix in and shut the door again behind them both. Windry gasped, “There you are!” She fell to the floor to hug his shoulders. He raised his wide eyes to Efran, who nodded. Windry stood, grasping her son’s hand. “Come on.”

“Wait,” Efran said. She looked irritated, but he asked, “Calix, do you want to stay or go?”

“I want to stay,” Calix spilled out.

Windry looked down at him. “Well, that’s ridiculous. You come with me.”

Calix braced his feet and said, “Call the notary for a hearing.”

“What?” she expelled, staring at him.

But Efran had stepped out to tell Heus, “Ask Ryal to step up here for a custody hearing.”

“Captain.” Heus strode to the courtyard doors as Efran sent another man to collect Minka and Soames from the

library. Efran then sent a third man up to the workroom to inform Estes and DeWitt.

That done, Efran told Windry and Calix, "We'll wait in here." He walked them to the small dining room off the foyer, gesturing. "Have a seat, both of you." Calix got himself a piece of flatbread from the sideboard and sat down.

Looking between Calix and Efran, she asked, "What is this about?" She was still standing.

"Ryal is coming up to determine where Calix goes, Windry," Efran said. He moved aside for Soames and Minka to enter around him.

Minka sat watchfully while Soames went to the sideboard to get paper and a quill set for taking notes. Glancing at Calix, Soames said, "There are hazelnuts over here, too, Calix. You want some of those?"

"Yes," Calix said, looking up.

"Me, too, please," Minka said, interested. So Soames brought over cups for them both.

"How dare you?" Windry uttered. "How dare you all?"

"M'ese are good," Calix said around a mouthful. Minka nodded in agreement.

"This is protocol, Windry," Efran said. "Calix has been here for three months without a peep from you. He doesn't want to leave."

While she stood staring at him, Estes came to the door to survey the room's occupants. Then he gestured Efran into the foyer to whisper, "She's here for Calix but he doesn't want to go with her?" Efran nodded, so Estes said, "Then she probably wants Lilou, too, doesn't she?"

"Probably, yes," Efran said.

Estes said, "I'll send down to Firmin's to get her, and explain matters to her before I bring her in."

"Good." Efran patted his shoulder, and Estes turned to wave at a soldier.

While Efran stood in the doorway, Minka and Soames sat at the table waiting for Ryal. Windry, growing frightened, sat beside Calix as he finished off the hazelnuts. "Calix, I met a man I'm going to marry. We're going to live in a nice little village north of here called Deneau. We want you and Lilou to come with us."

The other three in the room watched surreptitiously as Calix ate the flatbread. Then he looked up vaguely to ask, "Water?" Minka got up to pour him a cup from the pitcher on the sideboard. He drank, then put it down as though remembering something. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome," Minka murmured.

Windry was still waiting for a response from Calix when Efran stepped aside for Ryal to enter. Scanning the room, he said, "Hello, all. Are you Calix? I am the Notary Ryal."

Calix's head shot up. "I want to stay!"

Windry cried, “No, you don’t!”

“Yes I do!” he said, louder.

Ryal, who had paused in the act of sitting down, resumed sitting and said, “We’ll discuss that, but I think we need—”

At that moment, Lilou appeared at the door with Estes behind her. She said urgently, “I have to get back! Ionadi needs me to set up for the midday rush!”

“I see,” Ryal said. “You must be Lilou.”

“Yes, and I have to get back to help Ionadi!” she pleaded.

“Then we’ll do this quickly. Please have a seat,” Ryal said. Groaning, Lilou sat. He continued, “Lilou, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?”

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Chapter 5

Lilou looked baffled, but said, “I always tell the truth.”

“Good,” Ryal said. “Now, Windry is—”

She interrupted, “I want you and Calix to come with me, Lilou. I—”

“No!” Lilou cried. “Ionadi needs me! No.” She turned to Ryal to plead, “The last time I was home, my mother and Eryk were arguing again, so I went to my room to get more clothes and my doll, but there was a strange man in my bed who asked if he could help me get ready for bed but I told him no, I was leaving, so he helped me gather my things and then opened the window for me so I could get right back to Firmin’s.”

She suddenly looked over to say, “Hello, Calix.”

“Hi, Lilou. You can stay at Firmin’s,” he said confidently.

She looked back hopefully at Ryal, who asked, “Do you sleep at Firmin’s?”

“Yes, I have a pallet in Ionadi’s room that she shares with me, and I can eat there, and we can hear the lady sing when we get off work,” Lilou said, anxious to get gone.

“So, you would rather stay at Firmin’s than go with your mother?” Ryal asked.

“Yes! Please let me go help Ionadi; she can’t fold the napkins well with her fingers anymore,” Lilou said pathetically.

Ryal said, “I suppose we’ve heard enough—”

“Don’t I get to speak?” Windry asked.

Ryal said, “Quickly. Windry, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?”

She expelled an impatient breath at him, then turned to her daughter. “Lilou, I’m marrying a new man, who will—”

“I don’t care!” Lilou cried. “The only man you ever had who was nice to us was Efran, and he comes in to Firmin’s all the time, and leaves a lot of tips!”

There was some covert smiling around the table. Windry made one more effort: “We’re going to make a new start as a family. This man has two sons who love little girls.”

The room lapsed into stillness. The only sound was Soames’ quill scratching across the paper. Ryal said, “You may go, Lilou.”

She bounded up to grab Estes by the hand. “I need a horse!” With reassurances, he went out with her. Windry sat in shock.

Calix now seemed comfortably in control of the hearing. While Ryal stroked his brow, looking down at his blank page of notes, Calix said, “You don’t have to hurry with me. Class is still going on.”

Minka and Soames grinned at him, but Efran asked, “Do you need help with class, Calix?”

“No, Toby and Noah help me. I just like to do other things,” he said placidly. “I’m taking care of three beds now: the pole beans, which I started with, and the parsley, and the mint, which are growing everywhere. But I’m not so much wanting the mechanical toys at Froggatt’s as the pennons that you can fly on a string! Some have dragons on them, or eagles, or lions, and I like them all. But they cost even more than the mechanical toys, so that’s what I’m saving up for.”

“They must be beautiful,” Minka said.

Calix turned to her with wide eyes. “The big one with the dragon looks like it’s about to spring out on you! And they’re so big! Some of the pennons are as long as me!”

“I will have to go down to Froggatt’s to see these,” Minka stated.

“They’re *twenty pieces* each—and that’s for the small ones. They have big ones that cost a *royal!*” Calix said emphatically. “But I think it would be nice for the Abbey children to have our own pennon. I’ve seen the Fortress pennons, with the hill and the cross, which is nice, but not as exciting as a dragon or a hawk. So I’m thinking of buying one to be our own. Because, you know, we Abbey children were the only ones not hurt by the dancing, and so we took care of ourselves while Toby found Efran. So I thought we should have our own pennon.”

“I agree,” Minka said, looking up at Efran. He nodded imperceptibly. Calix folded his arms in vindication.

The room was again silent for Soames to catch up on Calix’s dissertation on pennons. When done, Soames stopped to look at Ryal.

Ryal looked around the table. “I have no more questions to ask, unless Windry would like to speak.”

Inhaling, she looked at Calix. “So you would rather stay with these people, some you don’t know, than go with your own mother?”

Calix looked at her for a moment, then said, “You could come see me any time. You could just walk up the hill and tell them you wanted to see me. But I’ve been here for weeks and weeks and, you never came up once just to see me.”

Again, the room went still. After a moment, Ryal said, “My judgment regarding Lilou, first, is that she be allowed to stay and work at Firmin’s. I will ask, Efran, that you or someone at the fortress continue to check in with her, to make sure that she’s all right, especially if anything happens to Ionadi.”

“Of course, Ryal,” Efran said.

“Very good,” Ryal said. “Now, as to Calix—” He paused to regard the child’s blue eyes that looked back at him confidently. “I’m glad to hear how well you’re doing, Calix. You may stay.” Ryal had not even addressed the serious issues, such as Windry’s failure to teach them reading, writing and numbers, and her turning them out to roam without supervision.

Calix nodded as if his staying were a foregone conclusion, then looked up at Efran smiling at him. Calix considered something, then said, “That makes me your son, in a way, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” Efran said, with his full-hearted smile.

Calix stood, even pushing his chair in. “I like that.” Then he looked over at his mother still seated, staring down at the table. Calix went over to pat her back. “I hope things work out with your new husband.”

She got up to quickly leave the room. Untroubled, Calix turned to the door, but Efran knelt before him. “You can’t go back to class right yet.” Again, Calix looked fine with that. Efran went on to explain, “Minka and I are taking you to Froggatt’s where you will pick out the biggest pennon they have in whatever design you like.”

Calix’s eyes got round. “But Efran, some of them are huge!”

“Can you take care of a huge pennon? Keep it clean and out of bad weather?” Efran asked.

“You mean, I’ll be Keeper of the Pennon?” Calix breathed.

“If you pick it, that makes you keeper of it,” Efran explained.

“Can we go right now?” Calix asked.

“Yes. But you have to make up the class work that you miss,” Efran said.

“I can do that,” Calix said. “Hurry, Minka!”

She came around the table as Efran stood with, “Thank you, Ryal.”

“I am thankful it was such an easy decision, in both cases,” Ryal exhaled.

Calix paused, then went over to Ryal to hold out his hand. “Thank you, Notary Ryal.”

Ryal gravely shook his hand. “My pleasure, Calix.”

Calix then ran over to join Efran and Minka in the doorway. “Let’s go!”

An hour later, they returned to the fortress to appear on the back grounds with a six-foot by two-foot satin pennon depicting a dragon rampant in red, green, brown and gold on a field of pale blue. It was so big that Efran had to hold the top while Calix held the bottom to keep it out of the dirt.

The children came rushing up to see it, and were greatly excited to hear that this was their very own pennon, bought by the Fortress in acknowledgment of their bravery during the dancing mania. After much discussion guided by Efran, they decided to hang it in their classroom, where it would encourage them to get the work done.

In bed that evening, Minka lay contentedly on Efran’s shoulder, though she had to position her head just right between the hills of muscle, which usually meant that her head rested on his chest instead of his shoulder. Efran did not care, as long as she was tight in his side. While he was drifting off to sleep, his right hand would always feel for her left, to hold it against his ribs or stomach. It was just another point of contact that enabled him to relax enough to sleep.

She suddenly raised up, and his eyes opened to slits. She asked, “When will Kraken come banging on the door?”

He exhaled, “Probably not tonight. Squirt’s been letting him out of his stall to sleep on the back grounds, and that satisfies him.”

“How, when he can’t smell you out there?” she asked.

“Lots of grass and apples,” he murmured, nudging her head back down with his chin.

“Oh,” she laughed, snuggling back into his side. After a minute, she whispered, “And to think I once worried about how we would keep a baby in this room with him.”

Efran didn’t answer, being asleep. Thinking about this, though, Minka realized that her barrenness no longer afflicted her so deeply. After bringing Rondi safely into the fortress, and keeping Calix and Lilou on the Lands with all the other children already here, Minka was—satisfied, in a way. Those children’s lives and futures were every much as valuable, or moreso, than that of a baby she was unlikely to ever see. Their needs were here and now, right before her. And because of the Abbey’s charter, Efran had the power to rescue every one that came to him.

I am content with the grass and apples, she thought drowsily, and went on to sleep.

When the lower-barracks officers arrived at their offices the following morning—September 23rd—they discovered the grounds almost completely filled with stacks of assembled booth panels. So Commander Wendt sent his Second Gabriel to Racheal at The Lands Clothing Shop to suggest that the men move the wood panels to the booth spaces that had been marked the previous day.

Racheal was agreeable to this, asking only that the booth numbers be transferred to the top panels so as to be visible. Gabriel assured her that this would be done.

So the call went out for heavy lifters to move the panels—8 by 8 feet for the sides, and 8 by 10 feet for the backs—to wagons that draft horses would bring to the spaces around the lake. More heavy lifters were required to unload these panels to their spaces. Bullara was summoned, but when he failed to appear, concerned inquiries were directed to his supervisor, Onfroi. She, in turn, sent a maid to knock on the door of his third-floor room.

The maid returned to report to Onfroi that a large, outraged woman had ordered the maid away, telling her that Bullara was resting and would not report to work today. This information Onfroi directed to Pieta, who told Administrator DeWitt, who redirected it down to the Second Gabriel with the suggestion of others who might fill the gap: Stephanos, Conte, Loriot, Aceto, Ure, Goss, Ley, Lambdin, Heus, Leneghan, Nee, Suco, Arne, Capur, and, er, Efran.

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Chapter 6

All of these men and more reported to the barracks yard to move the panels. (The canvas tops for the booths were being cut and stitched in Venegas. With this large order, Surchatain Sewell forgave Efran for burning down the brewery and a few fields five months ago. It helped when they discovered that clearing away a ramshackle, rat-infested building enabled them to put up another, far more suitable for their purposes. Also, the burned fields suddenly burst into a profusion of new crops, for which Sewell hired laborers. No more chains.)

So while Efran and his men were loading and unloading panels, they all discussed Bullara's sudden incapacitation, and how long he would be permitted to enjoy this state without the interference of work. Some men argued that he was entitled to a few days off, given the fact that he had never been married nor had a steady girlfriend. Efran listened to all this without comment, only smiling.

As they were working and talking, several men became quiet when they noticed one man in particular helping to unload the panels at the lake. When they began turning away from him, others looked, and grew still. As he was pulling one panel off the wagon, its corner became stuck. This left him awkwardly holding an edge that he couldn't move nor drop for the possibility of its breaking. But no one came over to help him.

Neale had been one of the Forty, and a captain of the Lands army when he joined with Wyse and DePew to overthrow Efran in the insurrection of six months ago. But when the Destroyer's visit aborted the insurrection, Neale had lost the use of his legs.

Bitterly repentant of his rôle in the uprising, Neale had accepted the rolling chair and menial service to the army. That lasted until three months ago, when the power of the Abbey hill, conveyed through Minka's pity, enabled him to get up out of the chair and walk. But the taint of his treachery remained.

Efran, glancing over at the panel that was stuck in the wagon, walked over to lift it out without seeing who was on the other end. When he turned to look where it should go, he caught sight of the man across from him. Neale held on to his end of the heavy back board without daring to look at his Captain. The rest of the men were silent, watching.

Jaw working, Efran said, "Can you back up? It goes on number twenty-one behind you." Neale nodded, and they

walked the panel over to the proper space to set it down. Then both men straightened, facing each other. Neale's head was lowered in renewed grief and shame; Efran stood looking at something beyond him for a moment. The sight filled him so that he reached out to take Neale in his arms and hold him.

Neale collapsed, sobbing, and all the men standing around were suddenly dropping tears. Efran patted him, then backed off, muttering, "We've all been stupid once or twice, but the ladies will tell us about it if these don't get unloaded."

"Yes, Captain," Neale said, lifting up.

"Help me with the next one," Efran directed, and Neale stepped over to the wagon to take the leading edge. Meanwhile, a couple of men had placed the side panel on top of 21's back board so that the man with the white paint could mark "21" on it. The rest of the men resumed their part of the unloading, wiping their faces. What Efran had seen behind Neale was something that had been shown him repeatedly in the Hall of Memories: a broken tree on which the only perfect Man had died in agony.

As they were finishing with this wagon, and the man with the paint can and brush had finished marking the last top board, Minka came up to look around. "Oh, good! This will help when everyone gets here all at once, trying to set up. But—will the wood warp, sitting out in the weather for a couple more weeks?" She looked between Neale and Efran, trying to keep a cool face while seeing theirs.

Efran had no answer, but Neale said, "No, I don't think so, Lady Minka—these are made from seasoned wood." He couldn't look at her either.

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that," she said. "Well, don't let me keep you. Don't hurt yourself. How is your hand?" she asked Efran, scowling at the entire lack of a bandage.

"All better, practically," he said with his most honest face.

She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. "Good, because if it's not, Leese will put you in another hard cast." He winced at the threat.

With the last wagon emptied, that ended their work here for the morning, so Efran dismissed the men. They left with salutes—including Neale, before he could stop himself. He saluted from impulse. Then his face drained and his eyes went hazy.

"At ease," Efran said, indicating his acceptance of Neale's show of respect.

"Thank you, Captain. Lady Minka," he said, then walked back to the barracks by himself.

Minka turned to Efran, her lips flushed. "I love you so much," she whispered.

He exhaled, reaching out for her. As she fell onto him, a slightly whiny voice said, "There you are. You were at Lady Marguerite's dinner. What is your name again?"

He and she both looked aside, where Colletta had come up to study Minka. She lifted off Efran to say, "I'm Minka."

"The Lady Sovereign," Efran elaborated. He glanced at the number of men trailing Colletta.

“Well—where is my mother? Lady Barrueta?” she asked, suspicious and mildly irritated on top of it all.

Efran looked down at Minka in expectation, so she said, “Colletta, I believe your mother married Bullara—what? Day before yesterday?” she asked Efran, who nodded. (When Finn heard this, who had been the one to mention Bullara to Barrueta, he almost fell down unconscious at the success of his joke.)

“Bullara? Who’s that?” Colletta asked, scrunching up her face.

“He’s a . . . fortress worker,” Minka said cautiously.

“Well—where is she, then?” Colletta demanded.

Efran said, “Go back to the inn, and I’ll get a man to look for her.”

She put a hand on her hip. “I’m going to sit by the little pond over there”—indicating that between Averno’s and Firmin’s. “Send her there.”

“All right,” Efran said with a dry smile at the command. She flounced away, followed by her crowd of admirers, and Efran whistled a man over to deliver the message to Bullara’s room.

That done, Efran draped an arm around Minka’s shoulders to walk her toward the old switchback. “I don’t particularly want either of those ladies roaming the fortress,” he muttered.

“Is Barrueta staying in Bullara’s room?” Minka asked, grimacing.

“Can you see that?” he snorted. “Maybe for a night or two, but, no; she’ll demand better accommodations.”

“I wonder if she and Colletta are here to stay, then,” she murmured.

“That may depend on what’s happening in Crescent Hollow. Barr is good about sending reports from Featheringham,” Efran replied.

“Are they out there for good?” she asked plaintively.

“Minka likes all her pets close by,” Efran observed, and she stopped to scowl at him. Laughing, he tightened his arm around her. “It’s an excellent outpost. They dragged the gates back from the meadow, but have to get new hardware made. Anyway, yes—we’re going to keep men on rotation there.”

She made him stop on the third western bend of the switchback to look over to the hydra’s nest, where the pair of eggs was barely visible. The hydra was apparently fishing in the cavern waters right now. “We need to check on Jonguitette,” she said.

“No, hush, she’s fine; her eggs are fine; come on up,” Efran said in pained laughter. “Thank heaven you didn’t have to unstick her,” he added, and she had to agree. So they went on to the fortress dining hall for the midday meal.

After midday dining that day (still Sept. 23rd) Efran and Minka went out to relax on the back grounds with Joshua and the children. Kraken had been drafted again for garden hauling, which he did willingly, for apples (abundantly scattered in the orchard, as the kitchen workers could not pick them all up).

Joshua, close to 21 months old, was toddling all over the grounds now, attended by Nakam, a few random children, and one constant soldier. Minka and Efran watched them from the bench under the walnut tree. Although Efran preferred to stretch out on the ground in front of the bench at her feet, he found that position to be a magnet for anyone wanting a word with him. So he sat with his arm around her instead.

Since the bench was so much in demand, two more had been placed under the tree—one facing east and the other facing west. The tree was so large, there was plenty of room for them.

Meanwhile, the singing tree had become an unexpected battleground between the hilltop fairies and the wind—Ino, apparently. Whenever the faeries would painstakingly alter the sounds emanating from it to please their ears, Ino would blow through it with wildly discordant notes that often sounded like raucous laughter. Other times it cackled, whined piercingly, or—farted, it seemed. All these disagreeable sounds drove the faeries to stop up all the pipes in anger. And when Ino blew them open again, everyone on the hilltop paused to look up for what might be crashing down upon them.

Eventually, they all figured out the game, but Aldwin was still concerned that the sounds were affecting the output of the dairy cows, way over on the other side of the hilltop near the stables.

Efran sighed to Minka, “What do you think? Should we ask Kele to ask the faeries to leave it be?”

She winced. “I’m afraid we should have asked permission of them before putting the tree up here to start with.”

Efran narrowed his eyes in objection. “No, now, they don’t rule.”

“Shh,” she said somewhat teasingly, and he groaned. (Later, after listening to many complaints about the noise, DeWitt remarked to Gerard about what excellent water or sewer lines those pipes would make, and the tree was quietly dismantled.)

Lund, on guard duty at the wall gates, came riding around the western side of the fortress. Efran looked to him at once as he dismounted in front of the bench to salute. “Captain, Lady Malaga from Crescent Hollow is at the gates demanding to talk to Rondinelli; says she’s been evicted from her home with no support.”

“Ohh. Windish’s wife,” Efran said while Minka watched.

“Yes, Captain,” Lund replied.

Efran stood. “All right; I’ll come. Have the stables—” Kraken, beyond them, ducked his head to get his nose under the hauling traces and shuck them off. Then he trotted up to Efran to nudge his shoulder. Efran told him, “You have to get geared up.”

Nodding, Kraken turned to lope toward the stables, and Efran told Lund, “Have Rose saddled for the lady, please.”

“Yes, Captain.” Lund saluted, remounted and loped after Kraken.

Efran told another (young) soldier, “Run up to DeWitt and Estes in the workroom; let them know that Lady Minka and I are going to talk to Malaga at the gates.”

“Captain.” Salk saluted to run for the back door.

Shortly, Efran and Minka were walking their horses down the switchback with an eye toward the wall gates. The bright green Crescent Hollow carriage sat conspicuously to the side of the road outside the gates. When the Lord and Lady Sovereigns turned their horses off the switchback to walk them up Main, they saw a woman emerge from the carriage and attempt to storm the gates, apparently.

The guards shouted at her, as she was blocking a whole line of pre-Faire traffic, but she sat in the middle of the road, crossing her arms. Her short black hair made her look almost childlike. So one gate guard picked her up to carry her inside the gates and set her down again on the side of the road. She remained there until Efran and Minka drew up and dismounted.

“Malaga?” Efran said, walking over to her.

Defiant and frightened, she eyed him to say, “I demand to talk to Rondinelli.”

“That isn’t possible, so you’ll have to talk to me,” Efran said. Minka waited behind him, stroking Kraken’s nose. Rose nudged her arm, so Minka had to pet both of them.

Still, Malaga sat hunched on the ground in a dress that had seen several days of continuous wear. “I won’t speak to anyone but Rondinelli or Lord Efran.”

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Chapter 7

Efran barely sighed; they had all seen each other at the hearing in which Ryal gave Malaga and Windish custody of Rondi. “I am Efran, Malaga; you stand up to talk to me.”

Peering at him suspiciously, she pushed herself up. “Rondinelli told lies that got my husband killed. She owes me now, and if you support her, then you do, too.”

Remembering the letter that Windish had written Rondi (which only Efran and Commander Wendt had seen), Efran asked curiously, “What was this testimony?” Whatever it was, it had been specific and compelling.

“It was lies! All lies!” Malaga shouted.

“What did she say he did?” Efran asked.

“I won’t repeat such lies!” she cried.

When she started weaving, Efran asked, “When was the last time you ate?” She replied by fainting on her feet—apparently, because she managed to fall directly onto him.

Efran folded her arms across her ribs to hoist her up by her elbows. “Come into the barracks; we’ll get you fed.”

As he began walking her over, her driver hopped down from his high seat. “Hiya, what about us?” He and the weary footman looked over the gates.

Efran nodded to Verrin, “See if the new inn’s got room in their stables—get enough from Gabriel to have them fed.”

“Yes, Captain.” Verrin gestured another man to hold up traffic until the Crescent Hollow carriage could come in from the side of the road.

A soldier in front of Barracks A took Kraken and Rose while Minka followed Efran as he walked Malaga into the conference room. He sat her at the long table and requested another soldier to bring her a plate and lager from the mess.

She slumped at the table with her head in her hands. Efran sat across from her, and Minka sat beside him. They were all quiet until a soldier brought a plate of chipped beef on toast with artichokes and a bottle. Malaga sat up to eat slowly. Wendt slipped into the room behind her, but did not sit at the table with them. He chose to lean against the wall with his arms crossed.

When she finished eating, Efran asked quietly, “What was the charge against Windish?”

“Murder,” she said dully. “Two counts.”

“For—his brother and his wife?” Efran asked.

“Yes,” she said through her teeth. “But he saved Rondinelli’s life! He ordered her brought out of the house when it was burning!”

“Why couldn’t he have her father and mother brought out?” Efran asked.

“I don’t know,” she said sleepily. “They might have been . . . already dead.” She put her head down on her arms.

Efran looked up at the Commander. “Can we just—put her in a cell for now?”

Wendt said, “Yes, I believe all the inns are full up already”—for a Faire that was still three weeks away. Nodding to two men outside, he said, “Take her to Barracks C; make sure it has a mattress bed and a privacy curtain.”

“Yes, Commander,” Tiras said, then he and Willis walked her out.

Efran remained seated, so Wendt sat at the head of the table with the conference room door open. “Hello, Minka.”

“Commander,” she said quietly.

“Did your mules get the booth panels correctly placed?” he asked her wryly.

She couldn’t help smiling. “As far as I know, but you’d have to ask Rondi to get a definitive answer.” She included Efran with a glance as she added, “She really is a wonderful organizer. Given half a chance, I believe she could have competently ruled Crescent Hollow.”

“All right, I believe you,” Efran said, laying his arms over his chest. “But now I am getting very curious about this trial. Rondi didn’t talk to anyone; didn’t make any accusations against her uncle. Did she?” he asked her.

“No,” Minka said. “Remember, I told you what she said when Barrueta accused her of giving testimony against him.”

“Ah. Yes, I remember,” Efran said. “So where did this testimony come from, that was so compelling that they promptly hanged Windish?”

He looked at Wendt, who said, “I’m not sure that it makes any difference now, but, you’ve piqued my curiosity. I believe I’ll send a request to Commander Barr to poke around Crescent Hollow for information about the trial.” (That message went out the following morning, September 24th.)

“Yes, thank you, Commander,” Efran said, then looked to Minka. She nodded tentatively. Inhaling, Efran then leaned back to press the heels of his palms to his forehead. “So what do we do with Malaga? We usually send abandoned women to Gayla, but I don’t want Rondi’s aunt anywhere in the fortress.”

As they were contemplating this, Minka drew a sudden, quiet breath. Both men looked at her. “Yes?” Efran asked. She looked at him almost fearfully, so that he sat up with a quizzical smile. “What? What are you thinking?”

“Don’t mind me,” she said apprehensively.

“What? Why?” Efran asked, baffled but entertained.

“Oh ho,” Wendt said in a low voice.

Efran turned to him. “Do you know what she’s thinking?”

“Possibly,” Wendt said, evaluating her.

She winced. “Oh, please don’t be mad at me!”

Efran looked between them in rising disgruntlement. “Would one of you like to tell me what you’re both thinking?”

Wendt waved in disavowal. “I could be wrong, in which case I don’t want to be right.”

Efran was weaving in his chair by this time, so Minka said, “Auntie has a way with lost little girls, Efran.”

“‘Little’?” he asked.

She said tentatively, “I get the sense that Malaga had been—smothered under Windish all their married life, and, now that he’s gone, and her home and support have been taken away, she’s got no experience or resources to draw on. She came here looking for safety, Efran, not necessarily for Rondi. But since Rondi found a home here. . . .” She shrugged.

Efran thought about that, then looked to Wendt. “How would you feel about having her in your home?”

Wendt shrugged, “Wouldn’t bother me, Efran. Minka is right.”

Efran looked slightly sick. “Then, should Minka talk to—to Marguerite before we spring this lovely ‘child’ on her?”

Minka said, “No, I think we just need to take her over there.”

Efran swiveled in his chair. “Commander?”

Again that wry look surfaced. “Minka is right, Efran,” Wendt said.

“All right, then.” Efran stood to go to the door, watching as Minka joined him. Then he looked back to Wendt, still seated, to ask, “Do you want to come, in case—”

“Not a chance,” Wendt said placidly. Efran nodded, leading Minka by the hand.

At the front of the barracks, she waited with Kraken and Rose while Efran went back to Barracks C to retrieve Marguerite’s surprise guest. As he brought her around, Minka debated a greeting, but the dispirited woman didn’t even look up.

Efran led Malaga by the upper arm down Main while Kraken followed at his shoulder and Minka led Rose on his other side. Kraken snuffled Malaga to see if she were another adjacent human—of which there was a growing number—then shook his head, sneezing.

As Efran’s handling was gentle, Malaga glanced at him from under her short black curls to ask, “Where are you taking me?”

“To lodging, I hope,” he said. She opened her mouth at the utter hopelessness of it, given the crowds filling the streets.

They walked up Main past the notary shop. Ryal, seeing her, came out to watch from the front step. Efran nodded to him in a promise to answer all questions. But for now, they turned up Chapel Road to advance to the scrolled double doors.

Malaga glanced about suspiciously as the pair of guards opened the doors for them while another man took the horses around back (with Kraken reluctantly cooperating. He had to keep an eye on his human, who was unaccountable). Stepping inside, Efran stopped to wait for Hartshough’s appearance while Malaga stared at the trees growing around the luxurious hall up to the ceiling.

Hartshough approached to bow. “Lord Efran, Lady Minka. How may I assist you with your guest?”

Efran breathed, “Well, we’d like to ask Marguerite about that, if she’s available.”

“Please have a seat, while I inquire,” Hartshough said, gesturing to the sitting area. “Would you care for refreshments while you wait?”

“No, thank you, Hartshough,” Efran said, directing Malaga to the divan. Minka sat in an upholstered chair, so Efran reluctantly sat on the divan.

When Marguerite appeared from the stairs, Minka grinned in approval of her pants. Marguerite glanced at her, smiling, before looking to Efran as he stood. “Hello, Efran, Minka. What can I do for you?”

Malaga was hunched on the divan, raising her eyes no farther than Marguerite’s knees. Efran came over to kiss Auntie’s head just to buy time for what to say. “Well, Marguerite, this is Rondi’s aunt Malaga. Ah, her uncle

Windish was hanged for the death of Rondi's parents, and, Malaga is now homeless, so she came to us. We've no place to put her, so, we were, ah. . . ."

Marguerite sat beside Malaga on the divan. "That must have been a terrible blow," she said softly.

Malaga pressed her lips together, not looking directly at her. "Lies," she said brokenly. "He had nothing to do with that fire; he was home with me when it broke out."

"I honestly can't imagine," Marguerite said. Efran remained standing to listen.

"He had no reason to kill them; Rondinelli meant nothing to us," Malaga whispered.

"Of course he would have no designs on her," Marguerite said, generously reinterpreting her statement.

"And we did take care of her for all those years, though the fire consumed so much, there was practically nothing left in the estate which Windish inherited," Malaga said defensively.

"A terrible ordeal," Marguerite acknowledged.

"His brother's business ventures folded a year later. Windish had to sell them at a loss," Malaga said.

"How unfortunate," Marguerite said.

"Windish evicted the bookseller; he was an old man, practically blind. I thought that we might—but, Windish proved he had been juggling the books, so had him turned out. But he was practically blind," Malaga said, struggling.

"Some men are very cunning," Marguerite said softly.

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Chapter 8

Trembling, Malaga continued, "The old man had no family; he had no one." Marguerite said nothing, and Malaga looked up at her. "Windish left a will leaving his entire estate to two men I barely knew. It was false; it had to have been a forgery, but they convinced the notary that it was payment for favors owed, and I could prove nothing different. It made no sense for Windish to leave me nothing, but I had no proof to satisfy the notary. He evicted me with nothing."

"I think you should stay here for a while," Marguerite suggested.

Malaga looked at her, then. "I have nothing to give you."

Marguerite smiled deviously. "Let's say it's for—satisfaction." Malaga looked uncomprehending, but Marguerite raised her with a supporting arm. "There are two empty rooms upstairs; you can choose which one you like. Then let's get you out of that dress into something more comfortable, so we can walk around to see the preparations for the Faire. It's going to be wonderful!" Marguerite said.

Assisting her up the stairway, Auntie glanced back down at the two left in the seating area, one grinning and the other bemused but grateful.

When the two women had gained the loft, Efran looked at Minka with thoughts. She waited, smiling, then he just took her hand to lead her to the front doors. The Abbey man standing watch there saluted; Efran absently patted his shoulder and they went on out.

By this time, Kraken was leading Rose around front, so their humans mounted to walk up the switchback. Efran was too distracted to remember that he needed to update Ryal (which he did later).

As soon as they arrived in the courtyard, Detler took their horses and said, “The administrators request your presence in the workroom, Captain—you and the lady.”

Efran and Minka looked at each other warily. “Uh oh,” he murmured, but placed a hand at her back as they progressed through the foyer, corridor, and up the stairs.

When they entered the workroom, they found Estes and DeWitt seated, working, with Tourse and several of his men standing nearby. Tourse saluted Efran, who said irritably, “Stop that. What is it?”

Tourse looked to DeWitt, who laid down his quill and leaned back. “Yes, Efran, if you haven’t noticed, we have a large and growing crowd waiting for the Faire. There are so many people here already that Tourse believes—and we agree—that we need to begin it as soon as possible.”

Efran absorbed this, then said, “But—the booths aren’t even up yet.”

Estes said, “We’ve got merchants asking to set up their own booths with the panels that are already sitting there. We’ve got entertainers waiting to perform and food merchants with goods that will spoil if they’re not put out soon. Tourse’s men are telling him that delaying much longer is going to result in violence.”

“Who will coordinate it all?” Efran asked.

Tourse replied, “I’ve got men on hand to take orders from Racheal; she’s prepared to give the go-ahead to the merchants who have been waiting the longest and those with perishables. She’ll have my men oversee setup and supervise the entertainers along Chapel Road.”

“Then, yes, have at it,” Efran said. Minka inhaled in excitement.

Tourse nodded to Cyneheard and Henris, who trotted out to relay the word to Racheal. Then Tourse said, “If you’ll excuse me, Captain, Steward, Administrator, I’m going to deploy the men necessary to make sure we have an orderly start.”

“Yes, thank you, Tourse,” Efran said, mildly confounded.

After Tourse had left, Efran asked vaguely, “How did things—jump ahead like that?”

DeWitt said, “Well, interest in the Lands has been rising for months now, what with your turning away attacks here and the upheaval in other cities. You know we’ve had an influx of settlers, so, a Faire is an attractive draw from all directions.” Estes nodded in concurrence.

Efran looked down at Minka, who couldn't stop grinning. He murmured, "You were right again."

"We all can't wait," she said. "When can we tell the children?"

"Oh, let's get over opening mayhem before we bring them down. But they'll see it all," he promised. She squealed and clapped.

By this time, Malaga was clean, wearing a casual dress (as she was not bold enough for pants). Marguerite was leading her down the stairway, describing the promised Faire attractions, when Verlice and his men Wiatt and Gastrell walked in. They tossed their saddlebags to the floor, looking disgusted.

Marguerite greeted them, "Verlice! Hello, Wiatt, Gastrell. Please meet my Faire guest Malaga. Verlice is my son, Malaga."

"Hello," Verlice said indifferently to her, then told his mother, "It looks as though we'll need your rooms after all. The blasted reservations clerk at the new inn bumped us for someone who offered to pay more."

"Oh, how annoying," Marguerite said. "Fortunately, the room on the far north end of the loft is still available. HARTSHOUGH!—oh, there you are. Verlice and his men will need the far north room after all."

Hartshough bowed to her. "Certainly, Lady Marguerite. Will you follow me, please, Lord Verlice?"

"But—you had two empty rooms," Verlice said, looking between her and Malaga.

"Yes, I did, but since you took rooms at the inn, I offered one to Malaga," Marguerite said sweetly.

"Well then, we'll take the one that's left," Verlice said with a tight smile. "Show us, please, Hartshough."

"Certainly, Lord Verlice," Hartshough said with a bow. "May I take your bags?"

"We have them, thank you," Verlice said, and the three followed the butler up the curving stairway.

Over the next several hours, the Faire exploded into existence. Booths sprang up as though self-assembled; some merchants whose booth panels weren't available yet simply set up their tables in their assigned spaces. Wagons were sent to Venegas for emergency delivery of the canvas tops, and many Abbey soldiers, all in uniform, were earning extra pay from the merchants for their assistance. They had been warned not to ask for money, but were allowed to accept tips.

Entertainers were directed all along Chapel Road. Musicians who asked to rove were allowed up and down Main Street, as well. Jugglers, acrobats, and dancers preferred allotted spaces, where passersby could see where to put tips. It was all so noisy and colorful that the children heard it on the hilltop. They ran to the courtyard gates, crying to be allowed down.

Efran yielded, of course, but decreed one soldier per child, and one hour to roam the Faire this afternoon. Each child was given twenty silver pieces to spend as they wished. So a wagonload of excited children rumbled down the switchback, driven by Arne with Minka on the seat beside him. Their bodyguards walked beside the wagon, and Efran rode Kraken down bareback, having left instructions for Joshua to be brought down to him when he awoke from his nap.

It was a golden late afternoon, with colored pennons cracking in a light breeze, music and singing and cheers at the skill of the acrobats. The children were dazed in delight, clutching the hands of their assigned men as they went from wonder to wonder. Because of all the food here already, the kitchen suspended dinner preparation, and several eateries simply closed, including Firmin's. So Ionadi and Lilou, with plenty of money to spend, were found walking hand in hand down the rows of booths and tables.

The Bidderscombe Bell Ringers found a prime spot to ring their happy tunes and collect a great pile of silver, which they promptly spent at the food booths. The Ruddock Chorale also found a good place to sing (away from the singing tree) but Racheal had required the Halfenaked Exotic Dancers to put on more clothes before they performed, which they were unable to find (for what they could spend) on short notice.

Marguerite walked her guest around the Faire, looking at folk art and inexpensive jewelry, eating figs stuffed with blue cheese and prosciutto. As Malaga watched the dancers perform difficult steps on their toes, she murmured, "It's hard to believe that there is a Faire happening around me . . . that the sun is shining on the water and clouds are moving across the sky. . . . When Windish died, I thought the world had ended."

Marguerite placed an arm around her shoulders. "You see that it hasn't. And you'll find good in it again. Life is worthwhile, Malaga, more than you can guess."

Malaga looked at her tentatively, then whispered, "He lied to me."

Marguerite sighed, "It doesn't matter anymore. Because now you are free." Malaga studied her, and Marguerite glanced at a bright flash to her right. "Oh, they're juggling hoops. Let's go see how many they drop." Malaga allowed herself to be taken over to watch the jesters in their bright, silly costumes.

After Efran turned Kraken loose to roll in the lakeside grass, away from the booths, he glanced up at Ryal and Giardi heading toward him. "Oh, yes," Efran remembered, then went over to intercept them so he could quietly explain Malaga's coming. "Commander Wendt is going to have scouts dig in Crescent Hollow for a little more information about Windish's trial."

"Yes, keep me apprised, please," Ryal said. Efran nodded, smiling at Giardi. To his satisfaction, she laughed at him. Then he looked over at the booths, where Minka was turning in circles, having lost him. He trotted over to regain her side.

From there, he gravitated toward the food stalls, from which aromas rose from sizzling pans over charcoal fires. Minka wandered over to a stall with beautifully painted ceramic faerie houses, glazed and waterproofed. She bought an armload of these, then placed them in hidden spots around the lake at the faeries' direction. So another half-hour passed before she and Efran found each other again.

Elsewhere on the grounds, Mathurin had found Rondi to present her with a bouquet of colored paper flowers; Martyn and Hadewidis walked close together from booth to booth, as she had less than a year to go till her majority (16). Bullara and Barrueta appeared together, he walking stiffly until she allowed him to sit under a faerie tree. There, he fell asleep and woke hours later with pink hair.

Colletta appeared with an entourage of men, who hastened to buy her anything that she looked at twice. But she was ever looking for Vonk—in reality, Suco, who, when he saw her, hid in a booth of finely forged knives until she passed on. Then, after examining a knife, he spent all he had to buy it.

Estes and DeWitt had locked the second-floor workroom to come down to the Faire with their families. Besides

15-month-old Malan, who was almost walking, Estes and his wife Kelsey had their baby girl Broгна with them, now about six weeks old. DeWitt and his wife Tera were here with their baby Tica, also six weeks old.

And Minka walked with Efran, holding his arm with both hands. Joshua was in a sling on his back, looking around in dazed wonder. He desperately wanted to run around with the other children; Efran had him on his back to forestall that. He gripped her hand in his left while eating pork on a stick with his right. It was good.

She sighed, “Oh, Efran, this is ten times better than the Faire in Crescent Hollow. It’s so much brighter and cleaner, and I get to watch so many of our friends having fun. Oh, there’s Auntie and Malaga. She’s looking around, almost smiling. Oh, dear—there goes Justinian with Vories.”

Efran ducked his head. “Did she see me?”

“I don’t think so. Justinian turned her in the other direction,” she noted.

“Good,” he said, resuming work on the pork on a stick. Still peering, she said, “She’s stopped at a jewelry booth. Oh, Justinian is nudging her on to—what is that? Oh, it’s a booth of linens. He’s presenting her with an embroidered kerchief. She’s pretending to like it,” Minka snorted.

“You see all that from here?” he asked, squinting toward the booths in question.

“It’s easy when you know the parties involved,” she said. Looking elsewhere, she noted, “Oh, Lilou and Calix have found each other; they’re showing each other what they’ve bought. All the children are so excited. Efran, they’ll remember this for years, I promise you.”

“I know,” he mumbled around a mouthful. Kraken was still at the lakeside, snuffling the newly hidden faerie houses and getting his nose stung for it.

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Chapter 9

Still gazing at the reality of the first Abbey Lands Faire, Minka exhaled, “Best of all is walking with you, seeing all this happen in what was only meadowland just two and a half years ago.”

Efran looked up. “That is what I least believe.”

Performers appeared in costume to amuse Fairegoers: there was a little girl with golden curls in a blue satin dress with a shepherd’s crook and lamb that followed her. She carried a white basket for admirers to place tips in, upon which she sang a sweet thank-you song. Joshua reached down to her from the sling on his father’s back, so Efran gave him a royal to drop into her basket. She then sang all four verses of a popular tavern song for him.

There were jesters in gaudy clothes and painted faces, and two men in a horse costume. On its side was written, “Put 5 pieces in my mouth and see what drops!” This was a common act: five silver pieces in the mouth caused the horse to bray and raise its tail to drop sausage links into waiting hands.

There also appeared two large brown slugs with eyes on stalks and humanlike hands on the ends of more stalks emerging from the upper area of their bodies. They seemed to speak through fringed extensions of skin on their

bellies. These costumes were a little much for some passersby, who skittered away from them. Efran, however, almost laughed when he saw them.

They were friendly creatures, jostling each other and talking to anyone nearby. When one tapped Reinagle's son Folliott on the shoulder, he turned to see it and fainted into a nearby booth. (In his defense, he'd been briefly changed into a slug himself about six months ago.)

Then one said, "A royal for the first person who can answer our riddles!" So people around them paused to listen. The slug recited:

"Comes through doors yet leaves no tracks
and passes the sun without shadow.
Sifts your grain, stokes your fire,
and chills you to the marrow.

"What is it?" he demanded.

Several in the crowd obviously knew the answer, but no one wanted to look foolish if no royal were forthcoming. Minka inhaled as if to answer, then hesitated. Efran nudged her. "Say it!" he whispered.

So she called, "The wind!"

"The lovely Lady Sovereign is correct!" the slug declared, tossing her a royal. She juggled it before handing it to the first child she saw. He gaped up at her, then quickly hid it before the bigger boys came over.

The second slug said, "That's too easy, Nonesuch. Let us make them earn their pay. Try this—" The crowd listened intently as he posed:

"The first letter a question eternally pending.
The second forms a line never ending.
The third: What I am called, but never 'me.'
The fourth: Upon which a ball does perch for thee.
The fifth: What heaven and hell in common hold.
But alas, the rub: This riddling grows old.

"What is the word that the clues have spelled out?" the second slug demanded.

Efran smiled, but all other faces were uniformly blank. Ryal, passing by with Giardi, glanced over to say, "That spells out Y-O-U-T-H—'youth.'" He and Efran exchanged looks, having read the same books. But Ryal never saw the coin tossed to him, so it was snatched up by a young man, who promptly gave it to a pretty girl standing by.

"Aha, an informed answer!" cried Asmuch. "Another, then?"

"Twin brothers we be,
and a burden carry we
by which we are bitterly pressed.
In truth we may say
we are full all the day
but empty we go to our rest.

“What are they?” called Asmuch.

Minka opened her mouth, but when she saw someone else about to answer, she shut it again. And the man called, “Yer boots!”

“Right-o!” Asmuch said, tossing him the royal with a many-fingered hand. Grinning as he caught it, he stuck it in his pocket.

“Now for a good brain-twister,” Nonesuch said, and the crowd went still, listening.

“The poor have it.
The rich need it.
It is greater than God.
It is more evil than the devil.
And if you eat it you will die.

“What is it?” Nonesuch asked. He and Asmuch turned in a circle to direct their many-stalked eyes at the silence around them. Their fringes fluttered and their fingers pointed at one hearer after another, who kept quiet or shook their heads. Efran looked on, smiling, until they both turned to him. “What is it, Lord Efran?” Nonesuch demanded.

“Nothing,” he said with his beautiful smile.

“Ares got it, too,” Nonesuch said, and Efran blinked, remembering. But Nonesuch apparently knew it firsthand.

When the crowd caught on, they groaned at the obviousness. “Efran, how did you figure that out?” Minka demanded, beating on him.

He said, “I did finally read the books you got me for Christmas.” He caught the tossed royal to give it to Wardly’s sister Ricci, who held it up victoriously to her crushed brother.

“I suppose I’d better read them,” she murmured, smoothing Joshua’s hair away from his eyes. As the audience moved on, the slugs seemed to melt away so quietly that no one noticed they were gone.

Verlice and his bodyguards watched all this from the edge of the crowd. His men looked interested while he appeared vaguely despondent. Gastrell whispered, “The development even since we were here is remarkable, Lord Verlice. And we’ve already heard how they repelled several troll attacks.”

Wiatt added, “The last attack on our brewery put us six months behind with production. We should cut our losses and make the move, sir. Brayan and Arturo are ready.”

“But Faciane is not,” Verlice muttered. This was his wife.

“She can be convinced. The house itself is vulnerable. They might even be attacking now!” Wiatt said urgently.

“Again? Already? Nah. Let me think on it,” Verlice grunted, turning away from the sight of the Polonti lord nuzzling his EurAsian wife. The fact was, Verlice was sore at being so indebted to him, and reluctant to go groveling to him for more help.

Efran and Minka continued to walk around, looking, while Joshua, on his father's back, quietly absorbed all the sights, sounds and smells. Eventually, he put his head down on Efran's shoulder, but continued to watch.

As they turned the corner toward an adjacent row of booths, Efran stopped abruptly, so that Minka looked up. He had his head tilted as though listening. Whatever he heard, he began looking for it.

They turned down that row and up another, and he picked up speed. She asked, "Do I hear drums?"

"Yes, but it's not the right rhythm," he answered. On the next row, he found what he was looking for.

A young man stood in front of a booth with percussion instruments—bells, cymbals, woodblocks, triangles, tambourines, and drums. The youngster was wearing a small drum—about 12 inches in diameter—strapped to his waist. Even when he tapped lightly, it produced a robust sound. He needed no mallet, using only his hand.

Although inclined to grab it off him, Efran asked, "Can I look at that?"

"Sure," he said, unstrapping it. "You just buckle it on your waist, there." His father watched from behind the booth table as Efran tried on the drum. Joshua craned his head over his father's shoulder to examine it.

Then Efran began beating the war drum rhythm: *bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM!* Using only one hand, he produced a beat that Minka could feel coursing through her as she stood next to him. He stopped briefly to examine the drum, noting, "It resonates."

"Yeah, that's the skin on both the batter head and the resonant head, what makes the sound fuller with less weight," the boy said knowledgeably. Efran started it again, harder: ***bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM!***

Men in Abbey uniforms began collecting around him to watch and listen. "Dense sound," Koschat said in approval.

"Bet you can beat it riding," Dango said. Efran stopped to look at him, then whistled loudly.

In short order, Kraken came loping up, scattering Fairegoers. Forgetting that Joshua was in his sling, Efran grabbed Kraken's mane with both hands to leap up on his bare back. The drum was still buckled on Efran's waist. "Hey, now!" the booth owner said in alarm.

Koschat assured him, "That's the Captain. You're about to get an order as to make your head spin." The owner went quiet to watch with everyone else.

While Joshua clapped on his father's back, Efran turned Kraken this way and that with his knees, beating out the war drums with one hand. The sound rattled the wood stalls around him. Men who began to clap or pound with him were quickly hushed, as the purpose was to judge the drum's power from a moving base.

Efran then stopped, unbuckling the drum to hand it back to the young man. After sliding off Kraken, Efran thought to ask his son over his shoulder, "You good?"

"Good," Joshua said.

Surrounded by interested men and Abbey children, Efran went up to the booth to ask, "How many of those do you have?"

The owner looked around his space. “About five. They’re a steal at fifteen pieces each.”

Efran pulled out three or four royals to lay on the table. “We’ll take whatever you have. How many can you make quickly?”

The owner raised his shoulders dubiously. “How many do you need?”

Efran looked at him. “Two hundred.” The man almost fainted.

While the booth owner made arrangements with associates to buy materials, Captain Chee sent one drum to the leather worker Eavenson to ask him to replicate it, delivering all he could quickly. Then Chee sent another to Conte, asking his Polonti craftsmen to do the same.

While Efran was following up on means of production, Commander Wendt, the Second Gabriel, and the Captains Stites and Rigdon came over to see Connor demonstrate how the drums could be used on horseback. Wendt nodded, “Yes, get all you can right away. I have a feeling they’ll be needed.” This was due to reports he continued to receive about trolls massing south of Eurus. The men watched Toby and Noah bang out the rhythm on two drums, which made the nearest booth shiver.

Shortly after the excitement of that discovery, it was time for the children to be taken back up to the fortress. Minka rode beside Arne in the driver’s seat of the wagon with Efran riding Kraken alongside, Joshua almost asleep in the sling. Soldiers went through the crowd warning patrons and merchants that when the lanterns on Main Street were lit for the evening, the Faire was over for the day. At that time, all visitors were to go to their lodging, although merchants were permitted to sleep in their booths to protect their wares overnight.

Just in time for nightfall, a great load of canvas booth covers arrived, to be distributed to the merchants. Racheal made sure that the first covers went to the first booths rented.

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Chapter 10

Before the soldiers commenced their night rounds, the sellers asked when they could open up for the second Faire day tomorrow, and were told, “At first light.” So the first unofficial day of the Faire, though only a half-day, was a good beginning.

At the chapel house, Marguerite saw her guest up to her bedroom, where she told her goodnight. Indicating a doorknob hanger on the bedside table, Marguerite told her, “When you’re ready for breakfast, if you’ll hang that on your door, Hartshough will know to bring it up to you.”

“Thank you,” Malaga whispered.

Marguerite patted her hand. On her way out, she murmured, “Lock your door.” And once the door was closed, Marguerite continued to stand in the corridor until she heard the lock turn.

Several hours later, Verlice and his men, slightly inebriated, appeared at the chapel doors, lit with lanterns. There

were two men in Abbey red standing at the doors, watching the three advance. Verlice straightened in front of them to say, "I am Lady Marguerite's son. We are lodging here."

"One moment," one of the men said, and slipped inside. Verlice started to follow, but the second man put a hand to his chest. Verlice started to argue, then decided to wait.

A few minutes later, the first man returned to open the door for them. Straightening his jacket in vindication, Verlice entered with his men.

They made it up the dim stairway to the loft, where sconced candles burned beside every door. Verlice found their room at the north end of the loft. The walkway was open on the west side, where the railing allowed safe viewing all over the lightly wooded hall. Opening the door to their room, the three entered to look at the one narrow bed. Verlice exhaled, going to built-in closets around the room to check for additional bedding. He found none, just a few women's dresses, actually.

"Eh, this won't do," Verlice said, slamming a closet door. He went out again to look at the doorways off the loft. Trying the handle of the door just south of the stairs, he found it to be the bath/laundry room. The next door opened to a large walk-in closet. He shut that door to try the handle of the next, which was locked. (This was Malaga's room, and she started in fear at the rattling handle.)

Verlice tried the next door, which was also locked. (This was Justinian's unoccupied room. He frequently stayed out very late.)

Coming to the next door, Verlice tried the handle, and was surprised that the door opened. He looked in at a badly scarred Polonti who was taking off his work clothes. "Who are you?" Verlice asked, forgetting.

"I am Eryk, Lady Marguerite's handyman," he said awkwardly.

"Oh. Well, we need your room. Step out," Verlice ordered. Eryk complied, taking his shirt and pants out onto the loft with him. Verlice then gestured Wiatt and Gastrell, "In here."

They carried their bags into the room around the bemused Polonti, then shut the door in his face and locked it. (They were not normally so rude, but, they needed the room and, he *was* Polonti.) Satisfied, Verlice returned to his room next door for the night. Eryk stood in confusion for a moment, then sank down to sit on the floor, leaning against the wall beside his door. And because he was exhausted from a long day of Faire setup, he fell asleep.

Hours later, he was shaken awake. He looked up groggily at Lord Justinian, smelling of tobacco and alcohol, leaning over him. "Eryk? What are you doing out here?"

"Um." Eryk stretched his aching back. "Lord Verlice says he needs the room, and brings his men into it."

"Oh, really," Justinian said. He straightened to look at the door. Suddenly he fell on it, pounding it with his fists, shouting, "Fire! Fire! Get out! Hurry!"

Then he stood back, pulling Eryk out of the way, while the door flew open for two men to run out in their breeches. "Hurry!" Justinian shouted after them as they almost fell down the curving stairway. Shortly, he and Eryk watched them fly out the front doors.

"Here you go," Justinian said, returning to hold open the door. As Eryk stumbled in, Justinian advised, "Lock it."

“Yes, Lord Justinian,” Eryk mumbled. Shutting the door, he found the key in the door lock. Then he looked at the men’s clothes and bags lying around. Justinian, with his part done, sighed wearily as he unlocked his own door to enter his suite.

Moments later, Verlice, having heard the banging, stuck his head out of his door to look around the loft. He saw nothing but closed doors; heard nothing but a door downstairs opening. So he shut his door and returned to bed.

An instant later, Eryk opened his door. After a moment of indecision, he walked the men’s clothes and bags to place them beside the bath/laundry room door. He returned to his room and relocked the door.

Malaga had not been disturbed by the tumult, as she was deeply dreaming about a scaffold that had been broken down to make a faire booth.

In the first-floor bedroom, Wendt muttered, “Your children are up and playing.”

“Did they wake you?” Marguerite asked, placing a hand on his chest.

“Yes,” he said, turning his head.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured, stretching her arm around his neck.

“We’ll just have to make the best of it,” he said, rolling over to her.

At the front doors, the two Abbey men on guard duty watched Wiatt and Gastrell run out in their breeches, then spin on the front walk to look back at the house. “Get everyone out!” Wiatt shouted at the guards.

“Eh, they’re probably asleep,” Loseby said lazily.

“Then they’ll burn to death!” Wiatt shouted.

“Maybe not,” Routh said. He glanced over at Loseby, who smiled. Having left the doors open to see that Lord Justinian made it safely up the stairway, they had heard everything from the doorway. Yes, the hall acoustics were *that* good.

Gastrell was scanning the windows. “I don’t see anything. Don’t smell any smoke, either.” They continued to stand uncertainly in front of the tranquil chapel, watching the green trailing leaves flit in the nighttime breeze.

After a few minutes, Gastrell went back up the steps to stand hesitantly in front of the doors, which Loseby opened for him. Gastrell stuck his head cautiously into the dim, quiet hall, then went in. Wiatt followed him as they took in the stillness, the cool, fresh air, and the blue moonlight splashed upon the far wall in muted colors from the stained-glass transom window.

“That dam’ Polonti laborer decided to get his room back,” Wiatt uttered.

Gastrell wrinkled his brow. “No, there was—another man. Someone else with him.”

Wiatt nodded to the curving stairway. “Let’s go have a look.”

Ascending to the loft, they saw at once their own belongings piled beside the bath/laundry room door. The four

bedroom doors were shut. Just to check, Wiatt tried the handle of the laborer's room, and found it locked. "It was him," he insisted.

"Well, he got his room back for tonight," Gastrell grunted. "We'll have to make do on Verlice's floor."

So they went down the loft to knock quietly on the door at the north end. When nothing happened, Wiatt knocked a little louder. After another few minutes of silence, Gastrell knocked a bit louder still. But he could not bring himself to pound on his lord's door.

In disgust, they picked up their bags to trudge to the remaining doors on the loft which were not bedrooms. The first door they opened was the large walk-in closet. But there was not room on its floor for either of them to stretch out.

The only remaining door was that of the bath/laundry room. Sighing, they got out large towels to fold for pillows and lay down on the wooden floor.

The following morning, September 24th, Eryk was up early for his duties, which mostly involved the Faire again. Before leaving his room, he peeked cautiously out to the loft, particularly toward the north end. Seeing no one else, he quickly exited and locked his door, carrying the key with him. Then he headed out to the Faire grounds, where breakfast would be provided for laborers.

When the soldiers had told the merchants that the Faire would resume "at first light" the next day, the sellers took them at their word to begin setting up in early dawn. More booths were constructed; more canvas tops installed, and the aroma of smoked and pan-fried meats rose up around the lake.

But that meant the soldiers were at work as well, and the first thing they did was investigate Minogue's complaint that he had a calf go missing overnight. When remains of the calf were found in one booth, its occupants were promptly turned out of the Lands (and the butchered calf returned to Minogue.)

Tourse's crew had been on duty the previous night, as well, catching visitors trying to break into Delano's brewery and Avene's Bakery & Eatery. Others who were out late getting drunk were sent to their lodging with warnings. And a few more were evicted for fighting with weapons. But these incidents were handled so quickly that none of them dampened expectations for another excellent Faire day. Also, more merchants were en route, being surprised by the early opening.

In fact, as of yesterday, Racheal had begun putting all new applicants on a waiting list. Many had petitioned for an expansion of Faire spaces, which she refused. She did not want to overwhelm the established Lands' businesses with a temporary attraction. Many of the eateries had simply closed yesterday afternoon; they could not be expected to continue to do so. But as they—and the Faire merchants—discovered, fresh ingredients for the next day's business had to come from somewhere. As a result, many food booths had to close up or significantly raise their prices. The merchants who came prepared to supply their own needs for the duration of the Faire did best.

Overall, the second day's opening went smoothly, largely due to the presence of the soldiers. Also, there were fewer visitors, at least for the morning, as most people in the Lands had to get back to work. Minka, Ella, and Rondi were also back in Law class this morning, and the children at their own studies.

At the chapel, Wendt rose shortly after Eryk. Hartshough prepared an excellent breakfast of ham, eggs, and apple cobbler to sustain the Commander through the morning's work. The first thing he did upon arriving at the

barracks was to get off riders with a request for Featheringham Commander Barr to send scouts to Crescent Hollow to get information on Windish's trial.

Marguerite rose in time to see her husband off, then she sat at the patio table to enjoy her own breakfast while morning spread across the sky. Hartshough came out to tell her, "Your guest Malaga is having breakfast, Lady Marguerite. Shall I invite her to sit with you here?"

"Yes, please do, Hartshough," she said. With a satisfied bow, he went off.

When he knocked for the second time at Malaga's door, she opened it to hand him the breakfast tray, as she was dressed. "That was wonderful," she said in mild awe.

He bowed, taking the tray. "I am delighted that it pleased you, Malaga. If you would, Lady Marguerite desires your company at the patio table."

"Yes, I'm coming." She closed the door behind her and headed for the stairs. Hartshough put the tray on the floor to retrieve the door key from the bedside table and lock her door. Placing the key in his pocket, he picked up the tray and followed her downstairs. (He himself had a master key to all rooms.)

Catching Malaga in the great hall, he put the tray on the dining table and extended the key to her, bowing. "Please keep your room key on your person."

"Oh. Yes, thank you." She took the key to drape its chain around her neck. He nodded, resuming his trip to the kitchen with the tray as she followed him to go out to the patio.

Shortly after Hartshough had descended the stairs, Verlice left his room, stretching after a good night's rest—the first that he had enjoyed for weeks now. Progressing through the loft, he stopped at Eryk's door, where he expected to find his men. When he tried the handle, he found it locked, so he rapped smartly on the door. "Wiatt! Gastrell!"

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Chapter 11

Verlice's men didn't come to the door right away, so he knocked harder and called louder: "WIATT. GASTRELL. Get dressed and come down!" Although aggravated at the lack of response, he went on down the stairs. His men did not hear him, having finally gotten to sleep on a hard wood floor behind the southern-most door on the loft. But Justinian, in the room next to Eryk's, opened his eyes.

On the patio, Marguerite turned as Malaga emerged from the kitchen. "Good morning, Malaga. Did you sleep well?"

Malaga sat, looking at morning light dancing on the water in the copper and rock fountain. "Yes, I did," she said in surprise. "The dreams, the nightmares of—of the hanging just, went away. Last night was the first night I didn't—"

She fell silent as Verlice stalked out to drop into the chair opposite his mother. He turned his head to say crisply,

“Breakfast, Hartshough.” Then he looked at Marguerite in mild displeasure. “If you don’t mind our continuing to use your handyman’s room, we’ll need another bed in there.”

This was news to her, of course. Marguerite tilted her head slightly as though considering that. Then Justinian, looking chipper in his elegant morning suit, emerged onto the patio to kiss Marguerite’s cheek with, “Good morning, dearest; you look quite perky and, if I may say so, satisfied this morning.”

She repressed a smile, and he went on to inquire, “And who is the enchantress sitting across from me at present?” He snapped out his napkin for his lap as he sat, nodding to the lady in question. Malaga blinked at him.

“Lord Justinian, this is Rondi’s aunt Malaga from Crescent Hollow,” Marguerite said. Hartshough placed a breakfast plate and bracer before Justinian as Marguerite continued, “Malaga, Justinian is our resident—”

“Is that not my breakfast?” Verlice asked, looking at Justinian’s plate in offense. “I thought it was bad enough when all our hired help ran off—” he caught himself, and Justinian’s eyes darted to him.

Hartshough bowed with, “Pardon, Lord Verlice; I adhere to morning routines. I shall bring your plate immediately.”

Verlice watched him walk off while Justinian said, “Ah, Rondi’s aunt. Then you must have had a hand in developing her incredible talent for overseeing brusque and ignorant men.” Sipping his bracer, he eyed Verlice, who belatedly looked back at him.

“Nonetheless,” Justinian continued, picking up his fork, “are we not all, in some way, overbearing brutes? I have even known some who roust others out of bed with false fire alarms.” At this, he arched an eyebrow of condemnation at Verlice, who stared back in bewilderment. Justinian ate quickly, as though keeping an eye on a wild ox in the seat next to him.

Malaga unwillingly laughed. Deducing something of her state from the pain in her face, Justinian raised his glass to her and said piously, “There you go, my dear; let it all out. Laughter is medicine for the soul.” With a bow, Hartshough placed Verlice’s breakfast before him.

Unaware of two sore and dispirited men approaching the patio from the kitchen, Justinian asked Marguerite, “Are you ladies going to the Faire today? If so, I urge you to accept my humble offer as chaperon. Beautiful women must not roam faires unattended.”

Marguerite began, “Thank you, Justinian, we’d be—”

“What took you so long?” Verlice asked his men in irritation.

Justinian swiveled minimally toward him. “Whatever it is, kind sir, I will interfere yet more pointedly if you interrupt the lady of the house again. I tolerate all manner of depravity before rudeness.”

Verlice squinted at him. “Who the hell—? Oh, wait; you’re that hanger-on that was always at Featherstone. And now you’ve fastened onto her down here.”

“Take care!” Justinian said urgently, half standing.

“What—?” Verlice looked down as his plate flipped off the table to land upside down in his lap. Justinian surreptitiously released the tablecloth. Wiatt and Gastrell looked on helplessly behind him.

Verlice sat gawking at his breakfast spread across his lap. Justinian, placing his knife and fork across his empty plate, gingerly stepped away from the table. “Forgive my hasty exit, sir, but I wish to preserve the current state of my suit. Are you ladies ready to step out for the Faire?” he asked them.

“I am; how about you, dear?” Marguerite asked, looking to Malaga. She nodded, rising. As they began out with Justinian, Marguerite looked back at her son. “Hartshough will take care of you, Verlice.” He grimaced at her, hardly daring to stand. The two women left the patio to enter the kitchen on either side of the dapper gent.

Hartshough came over with a cart which contained fresh plates of breakfast for all three men. While he removed the used dishes, Verlice rose to put his despoiled plate back on the table. When Hartshough had finished cleaning it, they three sat well away from the mess that covered Verlice’s chair.

After the butler had departed for the kitchen, they talked in whispers: “What kept you?” Verlice hissed.

Wiatt groaned, “We slept in the laundry room.”

“Why would you do that?” Verlice demanded, as if it were their own boneheaded idea.

“Someone roused us out of the handyman’s room last night crying ‘fire,’” Gastrell said, and the three of them looked toward the front door of the chapel, where Justinian was escorting the two women out.

Verlice said tightly, “The hanger-on needs something interesting to happen in his room, then, doesn’t he?” While the other two listened attentively, he sketched out his idea.

By the time Marguerite, Malaga, and Justinian reached the lakeside minutes later, morning was fully underway, with a smattering of patrons roaming the booths. But the first thing Malaga spotted was the whirligig powered by a donkey walking around a center post. The seats hung from dangling poles that allowed them to swing out upon the gentle spinning.

“Oh! May I ride it?” Malaga cried. She was transparently recalling something from her childhood.

The whirligig operator waved her over. “Only one silver a ride!” he called.

Justinian reached into his pocket for a silver, which he handed to Malaga. So she skipped over to give it to the operator, who then placed her in one seat. For balance, a laborer sat directly across from her, and the donkey was fitted with his nosebag, which he got whenever he was pulling.

As the whirligig began gently turning, Justinian and Marguerite watched Malaga lean back in the chair, looking up to the sky as she relived happier days of many years ago. He whispered to Marguerite, “Windish was executed?”

“Yes, for the murders of Rondi’s parents. The Commander is sending men to find out more about the trial. All I know is that Rondi never testified in any way, and—Malaga witnessed it all,” she whispered back.

“Then, is she as deeply scarred as she appears to be?” he asked, fingers at his lips.

“I believe so,” Marguerite said.

The ride came to an end; when the chair swung slowly to a stop, Malaga looked up with pleading eyes. “May I ride just a little bit longer?”

The operator looked to Justinian, who withdrew a royal (worth 30 silvers) from his suit pocket to walk over and hand him. “Let her ride as long as she likes, my good man.”

“Aye, m’lord,” the operator said, grinning. Malaga sighed as the whirligig started up again.

Returning to Marguerite’s side, Justinian asked, “Now. How much can you read Verlice?”—meaning not just his thoughts, but his state of mind. Marguerite was faerie, of course, as was her great-granddaughter Minka. Verlice was not, because faerie passed down only through the women when they partnered with human men.

Marguerite replied, “I can’t read him much, nor could I read his father, either. But I’ve never needed to; Verlice has always been honest with me. Now, I don’t know what is wrong, but this isn’t like him. Something has upset him, and it must have to do with why he’s here. He didn’t come for the Faire,” she said.

“Yes, he said something at breakfast . . .” he began quietly, then added, “I’ll talk to Efran.” She turned grateful eyes to him, placing a hand on his arm as the old lady used to do. He held her fingers fondly for a moment.

Before too much longer, the whirligig had to stop to take on other riders. Malaga took this to mean her time was up, and rose from the seat with a happy sigh. Justinian guided her away from the ride, then placed a hand at Marguerite’s back to walk them around the other attractions.

Back at the chapel, Verlice was cleaning up in the second-floor laundry/wash room while Gastrell was in the attached stables getting their horses ready to ride. Wiatt looked in the kitchen to see Hartshough washing the breakfast dishes. Wiatt withdrew from there to pass through the hall, looking around. He paused at the bottom of the stairs to watch an Abbey guard trot past him into the kitchen with an apparent message.

Wiatt ascended the stairs slowly in order to see the guard trot back through the hall to resume his position outside the front doors. With a last sweep of the first floor, Wiatt went up the stairs to stop on the loft, listening. Either Lady Marguerite didn’t employ maids, or they weren’t scheduled to work today.

Wiatt approached Justinian’s door—that is, the only door that could be his—to quietly try the handle. Unsurprisingly, it was locked. Wiatt glanced around again as he retrieved a lock pick from his pocket. Then he knelt at the door to insert the pick.

“May I help you, sir?”

Wiatt lurched up at the question, gaping to see Hartshough blandly standing at his shoulder. Hiding the pick in his hand, Wiatt stammered, “I—uh, thought that—I had left, er—”

Verlice emerged from the laundry/wash room to head for his room with his bags. “Are you ready to go, Wiatt?”

“Yes, sir,” Wiatt replied unsteadily.

“Good, then; come with me for a moment. Hartshough, I require these things washed.” Verlice dropped his soiled clothes at the butler’s feet.

“Yes, Lord Verlice,” Hartshough said, stooping to pick them up. He paused while Verlice and Wiatt entered the far north bedroom and closed the door. Then Hartshough placidly took the items into the laundry room.

After the midday meal at the fortress, the children were clamoring to go back down to the Faire. So Efran had them each given 15 silver pieces to spend, and had their wagon brought into the courtyard again. Today the children were required to go in pairs, with one guardian for each pair. So after much anguished choosing and rechoosing, the pairs consisted of Toby and Alcmund, Noah and Elwell, Jera and Ivy, Chorro and Calix, and Hassie and Acy.

This left Acy's 4-year-old brother Pim without a partner, so Rondi took charge of him, or vice versa, as Mathurin had requested to be her guardian again today, and they obviously needed their own chaperon. Minka rode in the driver's seat with Lambdin (who did the actual driving), and Efran rode alongside on Kraken, bareback (so that he could roll in the lakeside grass when otherwise not needed). Efran had Joshua in a heavy-duty sling on his back again today; he would not be allowed to toddle around in the chaotic Faire traffic.

The Faire was even better today, with more booths and activities. And no Lands businesses closed; rather, Avere sent waiters out with vending trays of mild ales and lagers, desserts, fried cheese balls, and other finger foods. When Croft and Firmin saw this, they immediately did likewise. The food booth proprietors complained, so Tourse nicely asked the Lands' vendors to walk their trays in areas out of sight of the food booths. They agreed, as there was plenty of room and still more customers.

After the children were unloaded from the wagon to run shrieking toward the Faire grounds with their partners and guardians, Efran released Kraken to trot over to the uncrowded grass. Then Efran lifted Minka down from the driver's seat to drape an arm over her shoulders. Joshua reached down to pat her head.

"What do you want to look at today?" Efran asked, scanning the Faire.

She glanced up halfheartedly. "Um, I don't care. Let's just walk around."

"What?" Disbelieving, he bent to look in her face. "After you were so excited? What's wrong?"

"I'm worried about Auntie," she exhaled.

"Oh. With Malaga?" he asked, taking her hand to head for the booths. She shook her head, not really knowing.

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Chapter 12

Meanwhile, Malaga was walking vacantly with Marguerite and Justinian, just—looking all around. To them, it appeared that she was a child again, taking in everything: the magician producing small treats out of thin air (for a small price), the dog walking on his hind legs balancing a ball on his nose, then taking around a hat in his teeth for tips; and—the booth of marionettes.

Malaga walked over to gaze at these, being finely crafted and painted—except for a sad clown puppet sitting off to the side.

Justinian and Marguerite drew up to hear her whisper, "There. That one."

She reached toward a female marionette with a gaudy painted face and elaborate dress. The puppet master took it off the shelf to put it in her hands, then looked at Justinian expectantly. He handed him a royal, which the vendor accepted.

Malaga walked away without looking where she was going, so Marguerite gently took her arm to lead her. Malaga patted the wooden figure, murmuring, "You see that she cannot do anything unless the master pulls her strings."

"Yes," Marguerite said quietly. Justinian just observed.

"She doesn't like the dress, but she's told what to wear," Malaga said critically.

"Not any more," Marguerite said.

Malaga then fingered the neatly wrapped strings above the marionette's head. "We must cut them," she said.

All at once she looked up, as did her companions. They had come almost face to face with Rondi, holding hands with Pim, and Mathurin at her side. Efran and Minka, approaching from another direction, paused to watch.

Rondi was shocked into speechlessness, and Malaga said nothing at first. Then she looked down at the marionette, extending it to Rondi, who took it. Patting the puppet, Malaga said, "You can cut her strings now. It will be all right."

"Thank you," Rondi whispered.

Malaga seemed to wake a little, looking around for Marguerite. She came up to take Malaga's hand, and Minka went to Marguerite's other side to walk with them. Justinian gestured to Efran, so they two dropped slightly behind the women, where Justinian could talk quietly in his ear. Joshua kept trying to play with his hat until Justinian took it off.

When Justinian had relayed everything of importance, Efran told him, "Go tell all this to the Commander; ask him to send scouts to Wirrin Valley." Justinian agreed, slipping away. Efran glanced around, agitated. It was too late in the day to send scouts now; they'd have to wait till tomorrow. But now he was beginning to worry that it was too late altogether.

Nodding at the bodyguards behind him, he caught up to Minka to whisper, "I'm going to see the children back up to the fortress, then meet you at Marguerite's. You've got your men." With a jerk of his head, he indicated Elowen and Ori.

She smiled at them, and they bowed to her. Then she patted Joshua's back. "Did you have a good time, Joshua?"

He barely opened his eyes, his head resting on his father's shoulder. "Good ti'e," he agreed. Efran kissed her forehead, then whistled for Kraken.

When the children were loaded into the wagon with their candies and souvenirs, Efran rode Kraken alongside to see them all—including Joshua—returned to the fortress. Then he rode back down to the chapel, where Minka and her bodyguards had already arrived with Marguerite and Malaga. Justinian had not yet returned from his errand to Barracks A. But Hartshough drew Marguerite aside for a private word, to which she made a suggestion.

Contrary to Marguerite's permissiveness, Efran had Kraken taken around the chapel to enter the back grounds by

way of the gate. Kraken accepted that, as he was still permitted to roll in the grass and play in the fountain.

When Efran arrived at the back patio, he saw Marguerite, Minka and Malaga—and that was all. At his questioning look, Minka said quietly, “Verlice and his men are not here right now.”

“Ah. Be right back.” He returned to the door where Elowen and Ori stood guard. From there, he sent Elowen to the lower barracks for two men out of uniform to find Verlice and his bodyguard, and shadow them.

On Efran’s way back through the kitchen, Hartshough turned to him dubiously. Efran came to a full stop. “Yes, Hartshough?”

Conflicted, Hartshough asked, “Would you care for a bracer, Lord Efran?”

“No. Thank you,” Efran said, studying him.

Hartshough hesitated again. “Perhaps hors d’oeuvres? I found a splendid new recipe for shrimp in phyllo cups.”

“Hartshough, what are you reluctant to tell me?” Efran asked.

The butler sighed. “Lady Marguerite does not wish to alarm you unnecessarily, nor create tension between you and Lord Verlice, but I felt you should know that, after Lord Justinian roused Verlice’s men from Eryk’s room last night, one of them attempted to break into the lord’s room today.”

“Oh, really,” Efran said flatly. “Does Justinian know?”

“I have not told him, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said, hanging his head in shame.

“No worries, I’ll be discreet. Thank you, Hartshough,” Efran said, clapping his shoulder.

Efran then went out to sit with the ladies at the patio. As he took his seat, looking around amiably, Marguerite said, “Oh, now, Efran, why couldn’t you bring Joshua here from the Faire?”

He said, “He’s walking now, Marguerite, which makes him a menace to himself and everyone around.”

“Oh,” she groaned in disappointment. “We can always put a gate at the stairs.”

“And trap Justinian?” he scowled.

“Oh, Efran, you’re just being difficult,” she chastised, laughing. Minka was listening with a half-smile; Malaga was vacantly watching Kraken eat grass while lying down.

“‘Fractious’ is the word you want,” Efran said, smiling. At that, Malaga turned to look at him.

“They were going to poison her,” she told him.

There was a brief silence, then Efran asked, “Windish told you this?”

“No, I heard him talking to one of Zolli’s men. He was angry that you got the soup instead of her,” Malaga said.

Efran nodded. “That’s about what we thought.”

She looked off for a moment, then turned back to say, "I am glad you did not die. I am glad that Rondinelli is happy." Her voice was a monotone.

"Thank you," he said, with just a hint of his scintillating smile.

She sighed, closing her eyes. "I'm tired."

"Here." Marguerite stood to lift her. "Come up to your room and lie down." Malaga made no argument as Marguerite took her into the kitchen and through the hall to the stairway.

When they reached her room, Marguerite said, "Oh, it's locked. Do you know where the key is?"

Malaga put a limp hand on the chain around her neck, so Marguerite lifted it off over her head to unlock the door. She led Malaga to the bed, turned down the covers, and sat her down to take off her shoes.

Malaga then began crying. "Everything your Efran said at the hearing was true. They were going to kill her." She hung her head from the weight of sorrow.

"Shh, now, it's all right. You see that it all worked out for good. She's well and happy, and you are here to heal," Marguerite said, laying her out on the bed. Malaga groaned, closing her eyes. Tiptoeing out, Marguerite locked the door behind her and took the key.

On her way down the stairs, she saw Verlice and his men enter the front doors. When they turned up the stairway in a group, she put a finger to her lips and said, "Shh! Sleeper upstairs." They paused.

As she went on down the stairs, Verlice, Wiatt and Gastrell looked at each other, knowing. Verlice said, "He was roused up out of bed early this morning for having come in so late, wasn't he?"

"I suppose so," Wiatt said.

Verlice added, "So we must be very quiet, unless there's an emergency."

Gastrell and Wiatt glanced at each other, then Gastrell said, "Eh, leave 'im, Lord Verlice. It's not worth aggravating the lady."

"Oh, come now. Just one quick payback for your uncomfortable night," Verlice countered. They deferred to their employer, and tiptoed the rest of the way to the loft. Then they gathered in front of Justinian's door for Verlice to count, "One . . . two . . . three!"

And they all pounded loudly on the door with their fists, shouting, "FIRE! FIRE! *GET OUT!*"

Marguerite spun in the kitchen to run back into the hall. Efran and Minka jumped up from the patio table to follow her. Hartshough came out of the kitchen more slowly.

These four stared up at the men as they laughingly descended from the loft. Seeing that they were observed, Verlice raised his hands in humorous culpability: "One good turn deserves another!"

But the next thing they heard was screaming. Malaga was at her door, unable to get it open right away. Marguerite (with the key) and Efran began running up the stairs; Verlice and his men backed up in confusion.

Finally getting herself out, Malaga fell onto the loft, screaming, “He was dead when they started the fire, but she was still alive! *She was alive when they set fire to her house around her!*” And she collapsed in agony at the head of the stairs.

Marguerite fell on her, covering her with arms of compassion. Minka dropped to her knees at the foot of the stairs, hands over her mouth in horror. Efran momentarily regarded the men standing uncertainly on the stairs, then he descended around Minka, pausing to put a hand under her head and whisper. She nodded, raising up.

But he went on to the doors, which were standing open, to speak briefly to Elowen and Ori. They saluted, then Ori took off at a run while Elowen came in to the hall to watch the stairs. Eryk ran in the still-open doors to join him.

From the bottom of the stairway, Efran told Verlice and his men, “Get your belongings and come down.” Minka promptly removed herself from the stairs to stand behind him.

All three men were pale and perspiring; Wiatt and Gastrell watched Verlice. He took himself in hand to say, “It was a misguided prank. I will apologize.” He turned to say, “I apologize for the insensitive joke, Mother. And Lady—whoever; I apologize for upsetting you.” Marguerite paid no attention to him; Malaga was unaware of his existence.

With blank eyes, Efran repeated, “Gather your belongings and come down, or I will come up and help you.”

Gastrell turned into the laundry room to reemerge at once, stuffing his clothes back into his bag. Wiatt, exhaling, did likewise, and followed him down the stairs. Then they looked back up at Verlice.

He was unmoved. Spreading his feet, he said, “You can’t throw me out of my mother’s house.” He looked over to her, expecting support. Several other people also looked at Marguerite, who was whispering to Malaga as she lay limp in her arms. Marguerite had nothing to say to anyone else at the moment.

Efran began ascending the stairs in dead center, one heavy step at a time. A half-dozen soldiers poured into the hall, stopping to watch the Captain ascend. Elowen gave them a quiet synopsis, pointing out Gastrell and Wiatt, who looked at each other in resignation. Then they all looked back up at Verlice.

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Chapter 13

Verlice suddenly darted down the loft to throw open the last door at the north end and slam it behind him. Looking down the stairs, Efran said, “Minka, will you ask Hartshough for the key?”

She turned, but Hartshough was right behind her. “Yes, Lord Efran,” he said, ascending.

While they were waiting for him to reach Efran with the key, the north door on the loft suddenly opened. Verlice strode out with his bags packed. Passing Efran without a glance, he trotted down the stairs to join his men. When one soldier put a hand on his arm, Verlice knocked it away and said, “We’re getting our horses and leaving the Lands at once.”

The men looked at Efran as he descended, and he told Ori, “Take them to Barracks C; then report to Commander Wendt.”

“Yes, Captain,” Ori said, saluting. He took Verlice’s wrist to hike it up behind his back and shove him forward. The other soldiers followed with Wiatt and Gastrell, who were resigned and cooperative.

As this parade advanced to the door, Justinian entered in bemusement. “Oh. Excuse me,” he said, stepping away from the flow of men. Verlice eyed him with jaw jutting, but Justinian merely looked back in concern. “Stop one moment, if you will!” he demanded, and the Abbey men stopped.

Justinian reached out to straighten Verlice’s crooked necktie, then said, “As you were.” The progression to the barracks cells recommenced.

Efran came to the front doors of the chapel to watch Verlice and his men led down Chapel Road toward New North Road like criminals, and he sighed in disgust. What was the reason for this absurdity?

Movement on the new switchback caught his eye, and he watched a rider descend with obvious sights on the chapel. So Efran waited, looking to see that Kraken had come out from the back grounds to nudge his shoulder. Stroking his nose, Efran asked, “Does it look as though I’m going somewhere?”

Kraken mouthed the bit complacently, and Efran sighed, “I may be, and soon.”

He watched as the rider, young Enon, dismounted before him to salute. “Captain, the Librarian has told me to tell you that Nibor asks you to go talk to the trolls in the play hut.”

Efran absorbed this for a moment. “Nibor asks that I talk to the trolls in the play hut.”

“Yes, Captain. Permission to accompany you, Captain,” Enon said.

“Yes, let’s do that before anyone comes out looking for me,” he said—meaning Minka, of course. So he swung up on Kraken, then he and Enon loped easily down Main to the gates.

They were standing open for Faire traffic, but Efran leaned down to tell Jehan, “Enon and I will be at the children’s play hut talking to the trolls.”

Jehan warily glanced across to his partner Coish, but said, “Yes, Captain. How long do we wait before we come after you?”

He laughed, “Give me a half hour just to figure out what they’re trying to tell me.”

“Yes, Captain,” Jehan said, not laughing.

Efran and Enon rode north out of the gates over the old stone bridge, then turned west on the coastal highway toward the Passage. They crossed the new bridge, whose gates were also standing open, then took the dirt path leading to the gates of the tall wooden fence around the play yard.

The gates were closed but unlocked, so Enon kicked them open from astride his horse. Then he and Efran walked their horses watchfully into the empty playground. “Krug? Irtz?” Efran called. He hoped he was remembering their names correctly, because those were the only two he could remember. Oh, and—“Urpèd?”

The whole group of five trolls came rushing out of the hut in great excitement. Enon's horse reared, almost throwing him, but Kraken stamped at the trolls to communicate, *Calm down and advance respectfully*.

Amazingly, they got the message, waiting anxiously for the Captain to dismount before they rushed him, all talking trollish all at once. Enon dismounted as well.

"No—wait, I can't—Krug!" Efran ordered. "Krug talk."

So, with many gestures, Krug very plainly told him that something bad had happened, was happening, or was about to happen.

As Efran looked blankly at him, Enon picked up a couple of sticks on the playground. He handed one to Krug, then bent to draw two parallel lines bracketed on one end by obvious gates. He drew wavy lines for the Passage, and curved lines over those to indicate the new bridge. Further lines depicted the east-west coastal highway running just north of the old stone bridge. Then another pair of lines at right angles to those indicated the northbound road to Westford.

Pointing to Krug's stick, Enon said, "Show us," tapping the map in the dirt.

The trolls jabbered excitedly. One (Urpèd?) drew the northbound road out much farther, then drew trees around it. Past the trees, he drew angry faces with sharp teeth. These he drew over and over, until he made them merely circles, while the others said in confirmation, "Da, da, dis!"

Efran nodded drearily. "Trolls along the northbound road—coming this way? How long?" He looked at Krug and Urpèd, who peered at him. Then he drew an arc on the ground with a sun at one end, and held up fingers. "One? Two? Three? Or more?"

Urpèd excitedly drew three arcs with suns, probably indicating three days. Efran studied this picture in dissatisfaction. If there were trolls three days away, then he saw no reliable indication they were heading to the Abbey Lands. They could be going to Eurús, or—

Then an alternative interpretation struck him, making him sick to his stomach. He leaned over to draw a deep circle around the center of the angry faces, then he drew lines with arrows from the three suns to this circle. "Three days? The trolls have been here [jabbing the circle] for *three days*?"

"Da! Da! Tree daze!" the articulate Urpèd said. He pointed up to the sky, making three large sweeps from horizon to horizon. The trolls had been attacking this one location—probably Wirrin Valley—for three days.

But that was only a guess. Looking back at the lines in the dirt, Efran drew an arrow to the heavy circle. At the blunt end of the arrow, he drew a stick house, a bottle, and—as best he could—hops growing on trellises. Tapping the circle, he asked, "Wirrin Valley?"

"Da. Wurn Ally," Urpèd said. "Da."

Efran looked off, thinking. Today was the 24th. Verlice and his men arrived on the 21st. So, apparently, the trolls waited to see him and his men off before attacking the house and brewery. "If they've been under attack for three days, there may not be anyone even left alive," he murmured.

"Let me ride with you, Captain," Enon said, making an accurate leap to the next step.

“All right. Let’s find out how many drums we’ve got,” Efran said, tossing the stick down. He turned to pat Krug’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

They nodded, satisfied at having gotten the message over.

First thing, Efran sent Enon up to Conte to tell him they needed as many drums as possible *right now*—anything that could be used to sound the war drums on horseback. Then Enon was to ask the hilltop Captains Rigdon and Chee for whatever men they could spare to ride immediately to Wirrin Valley. Further, Enon was to report to DeWitt and Estes that they’d be leaving at once. After seeing Enon lope up Main around Faire traffic, Efran went to Barracks A to report to Commander Wendt.

Before he talked to Wendt, however, he thought it best to check his hunch with a detour to Barracks C. When Kraken followed him, as usual, Efran pointed him to the stables. “Go get geared up; we’re leaving right away.” As Kraken trotted off, Efran entered the row of cells to walk down to the end, where the three were held. They were one to a cell, but in adjacent cells, because there was no reason to prohibit them from talking.

When Efran drew up before them, Wiatt and Gastrell looked at him; Verlice, tight-lipped, looked away. So Efran asked Wiatt, “Is there any chance trolls might attack Wirrin Valley?”

“Yes, Captain. We didn’t see any, but got indications of their movement, and came down to ask your help,” Wiatt said bluntly, without looking at his lord.

Efran exhaled, “Then *why*—?” He suddenly knew why they hadn’t asked, given the events of the last three days. “All right,” he said, walking back out.

When he had left, Verlice said, “You no longer work for me, Wiatt.”

Wiatt sighed, “If the trolls have hit Wirrin Valley, there’d be nothing left for me to do.”

“The trolls are not at Wirrin Valley!” Verlice said angrily.

“We’re about to find out,” Gastrell noted.

Efran went back to Barracks A, then, to find Commander Wendt waiting for him in the conference room. With him were the Second Gabriel, Captains Stites and Towner, and four more men. When Efran saluted, Wendt said, “Ho, is it that bad?”

Sighing, Efran said, “Ah, yes, Commander. The trolls in the play hut have just told me—if I understood them correctly—that a large troop of trolls came on Wirrin Valley three days ago, and are still there. Wiatt confirms that’s possible.”

“*Three days ago?*” Wendt fairly exploded, which was unusual for him.

“Yes, did you get scouts off?” Efran asked.

“Just hours ago,” Wendt exhaled.

“We’ll probably meet up with them,” Efran noted. “Anyway, we need however many drums there are right now. If we don’t have enough new ones, we’ll just have the men carry whatever they can. But, I want to put out a call

for whoever wants to ride out to the brewery in—in—” Efran almost broke down here, and the room was quiet.

Collecting himself, he said, “We’re going to avenge Captain Gores and his Red Regiment. We need light armor—breastplates and helmets—drums and provisions; clubs and serrated knives as backup.”

“You’ll have it all within a half hour, Captain,” Wendt said.

Efran acknowledged, “Thank you, Commander.” He paused as Viglian ran up to hand him a sheathed sawtooth knife. As other soldiers piled gear on the table, Efran strapped on a breastplate and then the knife. He carried a helmet turning out toward the chapel. Minka needed to hear this news from no one but him.

As he was walking up Main, he saw her round the corner from Chapel Road to begin running down Main on the sidewalk. She hadn’t seen him yet; she was focused on getting to the barracks as fast as she could. Enon had probably stopped by Marguerite’s house to give them the news, which was the right thing to do.

Efran kept walking toward her until she finally looked up to see him. Then she put on a burst of speed to leap on him from five feet away. He caught her to feel her trembling, but she said from his shoulder, “I’m not crying. I know you’ll come home safely. I just pray that Verlice’s family and workers are all right.”

“Yes, you pray. I don’t know if trolls are there or not, so, we’ll just get back when we can. But we know how to fight them now. So don’t worry,” he whispered.

“All right.” She let go of him, sliding down the breastplate to stand on her own feet, and he bent down to kiss her goodbye. (Passersby rolled their eyes at Lord Efran being demonstrative again.)

“Go on, now.” Efran turned her around to face Chapel Road, as he could not bear to walk off with her watching. To demonstrate compliance, she began walking toward the hill, but looked back over her shoulder as he was striding away. Duty came first, always.

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Chapter 14

Shortly, men on horseback were massing at the main wall gates, so that Faire traffic had to be routed to the northeastern gates that led down New North Road to Chapel Road. Not all of the men on this rescue mission were in uniform, but they all wore protection and carried drums—or something with which to sound the war drums—and either clubs or sawtooth knives.

Efran on Kraken received one of the new waist drums which he buckled on. Then he was handed up a water bag and pack of camp food (flatbread, jerky, dried fruit, and the like). He led the men at a walk out of the gates, looking back to gauge the number—about a hundred, it looked like. (In fact, there were 135.)

When most of them had cleared the wall gates, Efran, Quennel, and Truro led them single file over the old stone bridge (to allow for incoming traffic), then they spread out to lope. It was early afternoon. If they rode consistently, the trip would take only about five hours. It would be dark when they arrived, but not late, and then—no one knew what they would find.

As they settled into their travel pace, Efran looked over to ask Quennel, “What did Ella say about your coming?”

Quennel admitted, “I didn’t tell her; just left word with Sudie. We’ll see if I’m still married when we get back.”

“You’ll learn,” Efran said in pity. “Always tell them goodbye.”

Efran did not press them to travel fast; after Wirrin Valley’s having been on their own against the trolls for three days, an hour would make little difference one way or another. That’s what Efran told himself setting out, but he didn’t call the first rest stop until three hours into the ride. The line of men was stretched out pretty far by then, but the route was relatively easy—they just took the main road north until a conspicuous turnoff south of Eurus led east. The hard-packed dirt road then led directly to the township, the brewery being in the valley to its left.

Efran did call a stop at sundown to eat, rest and water the horses. Everyone caught up to him, Quennel, and Truro, then. Leaving Kraken to paw the shallow brook, Efran walked among the men to see who all was here. He acknowledged all of them with a pat or a word—Enon was here, as he said he would be, as were Jehan and Coish, who couldn’t bear to be left out of anything. Seagrave, Finn, Caswall, Mathurin, Cyneheard and Henris acknowledged his greeting with salutes.

But the old-timers—those of the Red Regiment who survived that first battle with the trolls at Wirrin Valley under Captain Gores: Teschner, Conte, Stephanos, Arne, Connor, Goss, Krall, Shane, Koschat, Ori—met the Captain’s eyes with shared pain. This was an overdue reckoning. Among them, Efran was surprised to see Tourse, who had left Faire security to his associate Nyarko. Tourse eyed him with a bare nod, and Efran’s eyes teared up again.

As darkness fell, they set off once more on the dirt road branching off the main road. Travel was slower just because of the night, but the road was clear and well-defined, and when the moon rose, it was almost bright.

Truro gave his nightingale whistle when the turnoff to the brewery appeared on the left. Ominously, the sign announcing “Wirrin Valley Brewery” was half-burnt. As the entry to the complex was protected by large yews, the men slowed to a walk.

Immediately two riders appeared from behind the yews—one hissed loudly, “Fellowes and Melott reporting, Captain!”

Efran drew up, as did those behind him. These would be the scouts Wendt had sent. “What have you found?”

“Trolls in possession, Captain,” Fellowes exhaled.

“Fall in,” Efran said, prompting Kraken on. The two scouts turned their horses to follow him. Before they even came within view of the house, they saw the flicker of flames. Approaching at a cautious walk, they saw shadowy forms dancing around bonfires and large figures stumbling around. They were definitely trolls, probably drunk; no people were visible.

Efran turned his head to whisper to either side, “We’re going to draw close so it will be loud. Stay on your horses; start when I do.” The message was passed on down as the men pulled up quietly on his right and left. Their horses were jittery with the smell of trolls and smoke; but Kraken arched his neck and raised his right front foot in a signal to them.

At a quiet walk, staying out of the firelight, Efran drew within fifty feet of the closest figures. Then he raised his hand, and when he dropped it, the drums began with a booming **bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM!**

Several factors made it immediately effective: it was close; it was loud; it was spread out; it was unified; it came from the darkness. And its targets were impaired and unwary.

Assaulted by the hateful sounds, the trolls fell into the fire or each other. They fought and grappled and roared, so that Efran was watching the dark house behind them in alarm. Enough trolls had fallen into the fire before staggering into the landscaping or porch posts so that the house itself caught on fire.

Something else disturbed Efran. Continuing to drum, he leaned over to ask Quennel, “How many do you count?”

“Twenty, twenty-five at most, Captain,” he said.

“Yes,” Efran said dismally. This was not their main band, then; these were just lingerers. But they had to be neutralized before Efran could check the house.

In another few minutes, the trolls were all dead or burning, and the front of the house was fully alight. Stopping the drums, Efran shouted, “Truro, take ten around the right side of the house; ten of you follow me around the left to see who’s there”—alive or dead. “The rest stand watch here; Arne, be ready to start the drums again. We’ll whistle for backup.”

As Efran directed Kraken to lope around the house, he saw shadows emerging from the rear with hooded lanterns. They drew back at the approach of the riders, so Efran called, “I am Captain Efran from the Abbey Lands! Who’s there?”

“Captain Efran! It’s Brayan, with Arturo, and mother and our housekeepers!” he shouted, as they poured out of the back door ahead of the smoke. He carried a canvas bag over his shoulder.

“Hurry! Have you got horses?” Efran asked, looking over to the dark stables.

“No, our field hands took them all when they heard that the trolls were coming,” Brayan gasped, now beside Kraken. “Is Father all right? He must have made it down to you.”

“Yes. Double up!” Efran called to his men. Shucking his left foot out of the stirrup, he held his hand down to Brayan. “Come up behind me.”

“No, wait; take my mother on your horse,” Brayan said, gesturing in the darkness.

A woman came beside them, also carrying a bag. Efran said, “Help her up, Brayan,” as he reached down to grasp her hand. Brayan put her foot in the stirrup and shoved her up while Efran pulled on her hand. When she was settled behind his saddle, he turned his head to say, “Hold on to me with both arms.”

She clutched him, gasping, “You’re Lord Efran?”

“Yes.” At this point, he pulled off his helmet to peer at the others climbing up on horses. “Put out the lights. Is that all of you?” he asked her. “You, your sons, and two others?”

“Yes,” she said.

“All right, we’re off,” he said, turning Kraken’s head.

Arriving at the front of the burning house, Efran rode to the waiting men. “Is that everyone?” he asked, looking around.

“Wait, here come two more,” Truro said, nodding to the last of the riders.

To be heard over the roaring fires, Efran shouted, “There are other trolls around, so we have to keep moving and stay together. Any of you who start falling behind, whistle. We have to get at least past the turnoff before we can rest. If you see anything moving—*anything*—start the drums!”

“Aye, Captain!” “Yes, sir!” “Right-o!” the men called. And Efran turned Kraken back the way they had come.

Clouds covered the moon, so the riders set off in almost total darkness. Efran leaned down to ask Kraken, “Can you see the road?” He nodded, so Efran turned to call, “Stay close to us! If you lose the road, whistle!”

Due to the darkness, Kraken was forced to walk head down to keep to the middle of the road. They walked for some minutes, until passing a stand of shagbark hickory trees. Kraken almost reared at the roaring shadows that emerged from them, so Efran began pounding his drum immediately. His men took it up all down the line, and they collected close together on the road to sound the war drums.

The trolls had gotten very close to them—within five feet—before the drums took effect, so the younger horses began panicking. But as they were pressed together, they had no opportunity to run. Efran had to kick two trolls away before they began flailing each other. Verlice’s wife Faciane gripped Efran tightly, emitting a soft whine, but then looked over to see the shadows fall away, pounding on each other.

The pungent smell of troll blood caused several in the group to retch. Still, they all held together, watching the trolls fall on each other until there were only piles of dismembered trolls remaining. But the men continued to pound until Efran raised his hand. They stopped, then, looking around as a sliver of moon appeared from behind the clouds.

The road ahead was completely blocked with troll bodies. Efran turned his head. “I need volunteers to clear the road.” A score of men fell down from their horses, running to pull, push and kick obstructing troll chunks.

As they were working on this, Efran looked to Truro beside him. He had an elderly man sitting behind his saddle. Efran asked, “How many do you think were in this group?”

“Sixty, Captain,” Truro said.

“So they’re on the move south,” Efran suggested.

“Could be, though you’d think we would’ve met them coming up,” Truro said.

“True,” Efran acknowledged.

Minutes later, the road was sufficiently cleared for the men to remount. But Henris stopped by Kraken to extend something to Efran. Being a university man, he had to give a speech: “I don’t imagine one often finds trolls carrying a scroll, but here you are, Captain. A hand was sticking straight up in the air with it.”

“Ah. Very good, Henris. That means we need it.” Efran stuffed it into his belt and Henris saluted, running back to remount.

So the party resumed their ride south. They were loping slowly, watchfully, while they had moonlight. Faciane looked back over the ranks. “Is Verlice with you here?”

“No,” he said.

They rode warily until reaching the turnoff to the main southbound road. As they approached a long stretch of overhanging trees, Efran held up his hand for a stop. Then he looked back over the men. “Trees ahead, where trolls like to hide. Should we ride through quickly? They’d catch our rear ranks before we could sound the drums. Should we ride slowly? They could overwhelm us in one surge.”

Tourse, right behind him, said, “Ride through at a walk, sounding the drums, Captain.”

“Agreed,” Efran said. He raised a hand, then lowered it to begin the drums. The whole road behind him took it up powerfully, and Efran nudged Kraken forward.

As they walked through the dark tunnel pounding the war drums, they heard shuffling, muted roars, and dull thuds emanating from the darkness on either hand. Nothing ventured out onto the road from the trees, but they got close enough to cause some horses to start. Their riders kept them firmly in hand, and the closeness of the other horses calmed them all.

Efran kept the drums going through a clear stretch before they entered the black canopy of trees again. As before, there were lunging shadows and growls, the crack of weapons hitting bones, and the stench of troll blood. The men’s arms were getting very tired, but they had no choice but to keep pounding.

Finally, Efran nudged Kraken to a lope, still sounding the drums, and they were able to clear the last of the trees before their arms fell exhausted. Efran turned to shout, “Rear guard keep watch!”

“Aye, sir!” someone called from the back, who sounded like Mumme. He was also a survivor of the first troll battle at Wirrin Valley, and an experienced scout. With that response, Efran almost began to relax. Faciane was asleep at his back. As she kept listing to the side, he had to hold her arms tightly to his stomach. But he could do nothing when her bag—whatever she had managed to save from the house—slipped off her shoulder.

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Chapter 15

When Efran spotted ripples of moonlight running through the meadow to their right, he whistled and pointed. The line of riders then left the road for the horses to drink in the brook and rest for a little while. “Don’t dismount unless you have to,” Efran told them.

Brayan and Arturo had to. They went down the whole line of riders looking, then returned to Efran for Brayan to ask, “Where is our father?”

“He’s back at the Lands,” Efran said.

“Is he hurt?” Arturo asked tightly.

“Not that I know of,” Efran said.

“Why didn’t he come with you?” Brayan asked.

Efran sighed, readjusting Faciane’s hold on him as she barely woke. “I’ll let you talk to him. Remount now.” They obeyed.

Two hours later, they were riding over the old stone bridge toward the lanterns at the wall gates ahead, and the alarm bell came to life. Soldiers collected at the open gates for the riders to enter. Efran, Truro and Quennel unloaded their guests in front of Barracks A, where Commander Wendt waited. Brayan and Arturo were on their feet; Quennel carried the old woman and Stephanos the old man. Efran relinquished Faciane to Brayan when she woke upon being lifted down.

Dismounting himself, Efran saluted. Before pulling off his breastplate, he muttered, “Captain Efran reporting from Wirrin Valley, Commander. These are all who remained there; the house is torched and a lot of trolls are dead.”

“Very good, Captain. I’ll hear a complete report tomorrow.” To someone else behind him, Wendt said, “Have all these taken to the chapel. I’m sleeping here in the barracks tonight; Hartshough and Marguerite will make room for them.”

Hollow-eyed, Brayan asked, “Where is my father, sir?”

“You’ll talk to him tomorrow, son,” Wendt replied. “Dismissed.”

“Commander.” Efran saluted again, then Brayan and Arturo did, as well.

Efran led Kraken on foot to the chapel, where his men assisted the five refugees inside. Marguerite and Hartshough were both up; the hall, kitchen and corridors fully lit. Hartshough led the boys to the room at the far north end of the loft, in which a second bed had been made ready beside the first. It was also equipped with fruit, bread, and water. Marguerite put Faciane in her own first-floor bed; Hartshough laid the old man and woman housekeepers in his large bed (also on the first floor), settling himself to sleep in a small room off the kitchen.

Efran took Kraken around the chapel to the back grounds. There he took off his bridle and saddle, then lay down in the grass beside him.

Late the following morning, September 25th, Efran opened his eyes to find someone scrunched into his side on the lawn. He looked over blearily, and she raised large blue eyes. “Good morning,” she whispered.

Joshua leaned over to pat Efran’s face. “Papapa.”

“Good morning to you two,” he murmured. He glanced back behind his head, where Kraken was drinking from the copper-and-rock fountain.

“Give me the condensed version,” Minka said.

He inhaled while Joshua climbed over his chest to pat his face. “Um, yes. We got Verlice’s wife and sons and their housekeepers. Saw a lot of trolls kill each other. The drums worked very well, by the way. Ah, house is torched; I imagine the brewery is wrecked, as well. We ran into more trolls on the way back. They could still be

heading here, depending on how many there were to start with,” he murmured. He removed the sawtooth knife out of Joshua’s reach, but let him pat the drum that lay on the grass beside them.

“You sure do sound worried,” she said sarcastically, playing with his soiled shirt.

“The drums were very effective. I was a little shocked,” he admitted.

“Oh. What’s this?” She withdrew the rumpled scroll from his belt.

“Oh, yes. Henris took it off one of the dead trolls.” He watched in vague interest while she unrolled it. Then they both looked at lines of a strange script.

“If the Librarian can’t translate it, I bet Nibor can,” Minka said, sitting up.

“Probably.” Efran sat up with Joshua, who pointed to the fountain with a demand. But Efran looked back at Kraken to say, “Do you want to come up hilltop or stay down here?” Kraken ambled over to snuffle Joshua’s hair, indicating his preference. So Efran put Minka and Joshua on his bare back to walk them all up the new switchback. Minka held on to the scroll.

At that time, Marguerite’s guests were waking in a dazed stupor. Since none of them had anything to wear but the heavily soiled, smoky clothes they came in, Hartshough provided wear for the men while Marguerite opened her closet to her daughter-in-law and the elderly woman housekeeper (whose name was Velie. Her husband was Picco.) They all sponge-bathed or used the hip bath, and felt much better for it.

Then Marguerite had the five of them served breakfast in the dining area of the hall. She did not sit with them, so was not available to answer questions, of which they had many. But when they had finished eating, she came in to tell them, “I hope you’re feeling better after such a terrible ordeal. We’re so grateful that Lord Efran and his men were able to reach you in time. I’ve just heard from Wendt that Verlice, Wiatt and Gastrell are waiting in the conference room of Barracks A. It’s just down Main—these men will escort you there.”

Marguerite pointed to Tiras and Eustace, who bowed to those at table. The visitors rose hesitantly, looking at each other. Tiras said, “Follow us, if you will.” He and Eustace went to the door. Faciane gathered her skirts to hurry after them with a set face; her sons followed pensively and the housekeepers slowly. The couple felt themselves too old for all this nonsense.

On the front walk, they all paused to look at the tumultuous Faire in progress: the brightly colored booths and performers, the roaming singers, acrobats, jugglers and jesters, the aroma of fresh-baked treats coming off the fire all melded into a wonderland of commerce.

Incidentally, Tourse had forbidden certain performers, such as the fire-swallower, the sword dancer, the knife thrower, and the wild animal handlers to perform among the booths; they had to perform in their isolated areas near the lake. But with so much room around them, they drew large audiences.

“This is huge,” Brayan muttered.

“Is that why Father couldn’t come get us?” Arturo laughed. Their mother’s face grew hard, and she turned to stalk down Main behind their escort. None of them saw Efran leading Kraken up the switchback with Minka and Joshua on his back. The Captain wouldn’t be available to answer questions, either.

Tiras led Verlice’s family and housekeepers into Barracks A. He stepped back to open the door to the conference

room. “Here you are.” He did not enter himself, nor did Wendt, Gabriel or Towner get up from their desks. But when the five refugees had entered the conference room, the door remained open.

Wiatt and Gastrell rose from their seats to bow to Faciane and nod to her sons. She glanced at them, but reserved her gaze for her husband, who sat regarding them thoughtfully. She dropped into the seat opposite him; her sons sat quietly on either side of her, and the housekeepers eased into chairs at the far end of the table to close their eyes.

No one spoke for a moment, then Verlice said, “Well, you look all right. Don’t tell me—this horde of trolls failed to show. Did you come down for the Faire?” He smiled sardonically.

His wife stood to slap him in the face as hard as she could. “Whoa, now!” He fell out of his chair and her sons reached over to restrain her, gently returning her to her seat.

Regarding them all—the deep scratches on Brayan’s hands, the bruises on Arturo, and the pallor of Faciane’s face—Wiatt whispered, “They did come,” white-faced himself.

Brayan glanced at him, but told his father, “They attacked hours after you left. All our field workers were gone by then, on all our horses. We hid down in the basement while the trolls ransacked the house. Last night they set fire to it, so we had to come out. We would have died one way or another if Captain Efran hadn’t brought a whole regiment to rescue us.”

Verlice, a red handprint covering one side of his face, sat back to gape at him in dismay. Brayan continued, “All the way back here, his men covered us while the trolls tried to attack again and again. We got here with nothing but our lives. The house is gone; I have no idea what the brewery looks like, but the trolls were everywhere.”

The room was silent while Verlice stared off into space. Arturo whispered, “Why didn’t you come?”

Verlice shifted in his chair. “They had me in a cell—all of us, in fact.”

Brayan squinted at him. “What’d you do?”

Verlice’s jaw jutted. “Their ‘Lord’ Justinian got my men out of their room with a false fire alarm, so we returned the favor.”

Brayan’s eyes began watering. “While you were so busy playing tit for tat, when did you tell them we might need help?”

“We . . . never saw the danger,” Verlice admitted. Wiatt raised his eyes to the ceiling in mute disagreement.

Arturo said, “I don’t understand this. Five months ago, you moved heaven and earth to find us after we got conscripted to fight against the Abbey Lands and then taken as slaves to the Polonti. After all that, I don’t understand why you would sit on your hands now.”

“I made him go,” Faciane said, still staring at her husband. “I had a dream where I saw you lying injured on a cot and Brayan in chains. I told him, ‘You go find them, or I will make your life hell.’” Gastrell looked away, having heard that ultimatum.

The room lapsed into another long silence while Verlice sat staring at a corner of the ceiling. “Well,” he finally sighed, “I’m glad you made it down all right.”

Faciane's eyes glazed over, then she stood and left the room. Her sons followed her. She stopped at Wendt's desk to say, "You are the Commander?"

He stood. "Yes, Lady Faciane; I'm Commander Wendt."

"We are deeply in your debt for sending your men to save us. I—don't know how we can possibly repay you, and, I don't know what to do now," she said evenly.

"Well," Wendt said, raising his brows. "First thing, I suggest you visit the Faire. Gabriel, get them some spending money, please."

"Yes, Commander." Gabriel opened a desk drawer to scrounge around in it a moment, then he brought out a pouch to hand to Arturo. He hefted it in surprise before opening it. Seeing what was inside, he darted a look of astonishment to the Second.

Gabriel told him, "Some men like the pork on a stick; I prefer the fried cheese balls, and the fish poppers are excellent as well. But the Faire merchants get those from Shurtleff and then mark them way up, so you might better just stop at his shop across the street here before you hit the Faire."

"Thank you; we'll do that," Brayan smiled, then took his mother's arm to drag her out while Arturo bounded after them. She wanted to rest; beyond that, she wanted to know how they were to make out a living, but her irrepressible sons wanted to see the Faire. The housekeepers woke up for that, as well.

Wendt nodded Lund and Graeme toward the men remaining in the conference room. "Take them back to their cells." Hearing, Verlice came right out, followed by Wiatt and Gastrell.

After Verlice had been taken out, Wiatt stopped by Wendt's desk. "Commander, I'd sure rather work off my cell time than sit there, if possible."

Wendt studied him. "We have openings for Faire cleanup."

"Give me a shovel and I'm good, sir," Wiatt avowed.

"Me as well, Commander," Gastrell said.

"All right. Stop by here at the end of the day for dinner in the mess," Wendt told them both. They gestured in assent and Wendt said, "Clough, take them to Nyarko for their assignments."

"Yes, Commander. This way, gentlemen," Clough said, and the three departed the barracks. Verlice, having been put back in his cell, looked down the corridor for his missing bodyguards.

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Chapter 16

While the children, including Joshua, were enjoying their third afternoon at the Faire and Efran was enjoying Minka's welcome home from his hasty trip to Wirrin Valley, Marguerite had just sat down with Malaga for a light midday meal. Marguerite told her, "I hope you weren't disturbed by the commotion last night. We had some unexpected guests arrive."

"No, they didn't bother me," Malaga said, still looking tired. "I'm just trying to understand how I could have been so—cowed and spineless for so long. I knew what they were going to do to her, but I just . . . put it out of my mind, as if, as if it were something happening on the other side of the world. I don't understand how I could have just floated along with all that."

Marguerite looked at her in complete understanding. She whispered, "We don't realize what we are doing when we bind ourselves to a man. We don't understand that we truly make him our head, that he influences what we do, what we say, how we think, and how we look at the world. So we have to be very, very careful to choose someone who is . . . righteous. For if he's not, he'll bring us down."

Malaga looked at her for a long time, then said, "I see that now, finally."

They regarded each other in companionship, then Marguerite patted her hand. "There are new booths at the Faire that we need to see today."

"I suppose so," Malaga said. And they got up to go.

At that time, Efran and Minka were belatedly on their way to the library with the troll scroll. Law classes had been usurped by the Faire, which disgruntled a number of men who would have preferred classes that allowed advancement in the army over stupid amusements. And, the Librarian was getting a little lonely in the withdrawal of his favorite pastime. So he looked up almost eagerly when the Lord and Lady Sovereigns appeared at the doorway of his domain.

Before the Librarian could bow, Efran handed him the scroll. "One of my men took this off a dead troll. We're hoping that you or Nibor can translate it for us."

"Ah. Very interesting, Lord Efran." The Librarian perused it while Minka looked on hopefully. Idly wondering how Sir Nomus was getting on with the portals, Efran glanced toward the hidden room.

The Librarian said, "I'm afraid I cannot translate this script, Lord Efran. Let us see if our Historian can help us." He took it to the partition in the corner. "Nibor, Lord Efran has brought something—" Her gnarly hand appeared over the partition, so the Librarian placed the scroll in it and stood back with folded hands.

While they waited, Minka asked, "How is she coming along with our history, dear Librarian?"

"She is working on Chapter Fifteen, Lady Minka," he replied.

"Chapter Fifteen? What does that cover?" she asked.

"Well, here is the last page she handed me, which I just now translated." The Librarian extended a sheet to Minka. She held it up so that Efran could read it silently with her:

The following morning, life at the fortress started out as usual: busy. Sunrise deliveries of rice, eggs, produce, and meat came to the kitchen from various plots below, and Madea's crew started preparing breakfast. Soldiers emerged from the hilltop barracks to begin their duties, and Soames walked up the switchback for Law lessons with Ella and Minka. Tourjee's crew got to work in the gardens; the sparring groups began their drills; Lwoff and his assistant Evrard took up the day's chores of cleaning, arranging and inventorying arms and equipment in the hilltop armory.

But people passing through the first-floor corridor paused at the faint rumble they heard. It was not alarming, but strange, and no one could quite pinpoint where it originated. So they passed on.

An hour or two later, however, the rumbling was making itself felt in the stone floor and walls. One or more people stopped to listen, particularly outside the closed door of a storage room. Then one soldier, Gaul, opened that door to look. With a cry of surprise, he slammed it again, shouting, "Captain! Help! We need—arrgghh!" he cried.

Efran and Minka turned to each other, exclaiming, "The snobbles!" at the same time.

At that point, the scroll was tossed back over the partition. The Librarian caught it, straightening it to look at the new writing underneath the original message. "Ah. This I can translate for you, Lord Efran."

He did that, then handed the scroll to Efran, who held it down so Minka could see the indented letters made by Shardlow's inkless writing system. After both had read it, Minka looked up at Efran with wide eyes, and he said, "Oh." Looking toward the corner, he said, "Thank you, Nibor." Her large-knuckled hand waved briefly over the top of the partition.

So they two went out to the front courtyard, where Kraken was waiting. Efran put her on his bare back with the annotated scroll, then walked beside them down the old switchback.

At this time, Marguerite and Malaga were strolling the aisles between booths, admiring all the novelties on display. Marguerite told her, "Wendt gave me our daily Faire allowance, so feel free to point out anything you like."

Malaga sighed, "Thank you, but I don't know that I need any knickknacks, as I have no place to put them. I . . . miss my house terribly. And I wasn't allowed to take anything from it—all my own things."

"We'll find you a place—a house, if you like. If you don't want that much to maintain, we'll get you a permanent room at one of the inns," Marguerite said.

"That's very kind of you. I just can't see beyond today," Malaga said listlessly. She really wanted *her* home with *her* things back.

"There's no need to worry about anything. Let's just walk around the lake," Marguerite said. They paused to listen to the clear, sweet strumming of a harp nearby. Malaga sighed, closing her eyes. It was such a pure, golden sound that Marguerite walked over to put a royal in the harpist's cap. His eyes lit up with a strummed *thank you*. The women went on.

"Oh, look here!" Marguerite exclaimed, so they stopped at the lakeside space to watch small monkeys in bright vests and caps. There were three of them: one, the male, was slightly larger than the other two, who were

females (wearing skirts along with their vests).

Their handler had them dancing, kissing with puckered lips, and tossing a bright yellow ball back and forth. When the handler's back was turned, the male hid the ball in his mouth, then raised his hands in pretended ignorance as to what happened to it. The handler chastised him, making a show of looking around for the ball while the male threw it to bounce off the man's head.

His audience was laughing at all this, and a fair number of coppers and silvers were put in the tin cup that one of the females was holding out to the spectators. The yellow ball was now floating on the lake, so when the male reached for it, he suddenly stuck his hand in the water to pull out a small perch. He waved it, screeching, but it wriggled out of his hand to splash back into the lake.

The audience laughed, clapping, and Malaga started to say something to Marguerite. But a woman's loud voice caught her attention, and she turned to see Barrueta tell her daughter, "Monkeys are such cheap entertainment. So low brow. We saw dancing horses at the Pavilion."

"Eh, were you part of the show?" a man nearby asked her mockingly.

Others jeered at her and turned back to the monkeys, but Malaga told Barrueta, "You knew about it." Barrueta didn't hear her at first, but Colletta looked at Malaga. She repeated a little louder, "You knew they were going to kill her."

A few in the crowd glanced over. Marguerite began to draw Malaga away with, "Let's not worry about—"

"Malaga! What are you doing here?" Barrueta demanded.

"You knew! You came here to take her back to die!" Malaga cried.

Barrueta shot back, "You demented woman! You're daft!" Colletta began pulling on her mother's arm.

"You're just as guilty as Windish! And Zolli! And—me!" Malaga said wretchedly.

"No, we're done with this, dear," Marguerite insisted, turning Malaga by her shoulder.

"How dare you accuse me of a plot I knew nothing about! You wear cheap knockoffs of Ennemond's clothes!" Barrueta shouted, rushing at her.

Suddenly the two women were fighting, with all the scratching, slapping, and hair-pulling that women use instead of fists. Colletta was pulling from one direction and Marguerite from the other, but the combatants had such a lock on each other that they were inseparable.

Having found new entertainment, the crowd gathered around them with cheers and catcalls. In the tumult, the monkeys scampered over to disappear into the nearest faerie tree, which closed its branches over them. While Marguerite was struggling to unclench Barrueta's fingers from Malaga's hair, there were whistles and commands to disengage.

All at once four dusky blue Abbey uniforms had separated the combatants and their seconds to hustle them down Main toward the barracks. "Uh oh," Marguerite murmured. From the steps of the chapel, Hartshough watched the four women being taken off to incarceration.

Efran, walking down the switchback beside Minka on Kraken, found the exit to Main completely blocked by the crowd of onlookers. Even the faerie trees' attempts to clear a path with their sweeping branches were futile. He could not see what the brouhaha was about, but Minka, seated higher, cried, "Auntie!"

By the time Efran and Minka got down to Barracks A, Commander Wendt had directed the four women to the conference room instead of cells in Barracks C, to which they had been destined when the apprehending soldiers failed to recognize the Commander's wife. As the opposing parties were placed across the table from each other with the Commander at the head, Minka burst in, crying, "Auntie! What has happened?"

Efran entered behind her, saluting helplessly to the Commander. Wendt nodded, "Have a seat, Minka, Efran, and we'll find out."

Chastised, Minka sat next to her Auntie, and Efran sat next to his wife, hoping that he would not need to remind her to be quiet.

"All right, Lady Marguerite, let's start with you," Wendt said dryly.

Smoothing back her disordered hair, Marguerite began, "Well, Malaga and I were watching the monkeys—"

The door opened for Mathurin to enter, saluting, and behind him, Rondi. She looked around the room, then asked, "May I sit in?"

Wendt exhaled, "If you're sure you want to, Rondi."

She said firmly, "Yes, I do." Mathurin escorted her to the chair beside Efran, then sat at the end of the table himself. Efran leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms to listen.

Everyone looked back at Marguerite as she simply related how they were all watching the monkeys, then Malaga spotted Barrueta and accused her of not only knowing, but allowing herself to be used in the plot to kill Rondi.

At this, Barrueta huffed, "That's ridiculous, and I resent it very much."

Colletta sighed, "Oh, Mother, of course you knew. Everyone knew. We knew why Zolli wanted us to bring her back, but everyone was too careful to say the words."

As Barrueta turned to contradict her daughter, Wendt said, "Barrueta, listen a moment, please. This is not new. If you'll remember at Marguerite's dinner, you admitted that Rondi's soup was poisoned, that she was to be killed to clear the way for the Council's choice for Surchatain."

"I was just repeating gossip," Barrueta insisted.

"Which was accurate," Wendt noted. "So, Malaga saw Barrueta—which obviously surprised her—and accused her of knowing that Rondi was to be killed."

Marguerite quickly added, "Malaga included herself in that accusation. I believe she's still working through the guilt of being complicit in this—this—conspiracy of silence."

"Understandable," Wendt said. "But, Barrueta, regardless of the provocation, you may not start fights with anyone else on the Lands."

Barrueta pursed her lips in dissatisfaction, protesting, “She fought as well!”

Marguerite made a face remarkably similar to Minka’s look of silent disagreement. Rondi said, “May I ask a question?”

“Yes, of course,” Wendt said.

“Lady Barrueta, did you hear the testimony that condemned Windish?” Rondi asked.

Barrueta’s shoulders slumped. “No. The Council went into private session to hear it, and when you did not dispute it, they issued the death sentence.”

Rondi looked thoughtful, then Wendt said, “We’ve asked for a man to nose around Crescent Hollow to see if he can dig that up.”

Rondi said, “I want to know what happened, but, in a way, it doesn’t matter. I feel I’m where I belong—where I was meant to be.” Minka smiled warmly at her.

Malaga said, “Purewal knew about it. He knew, and consented to it.”

“Purewal,” Efran repeated. “The one they just made Surchatain?”

“Yes,” Malaga said.

Wendt looked at Barrueta. “What do you know about this?”

She shook her head almost fearfully. “Because I was a well-connected socialite doesn’t mean the Council would consult me about their schemes!”

“That’s true,” Efran said, settling back again. “But how do you know that, Malaga?”

“They talked freely around me,” Malaga said almost dreamily. “Windish, and Zollicoffer, Purewal, and Woldemariam, who’s their new Grand Councilor. They all knew I was a good little puppet who sat in the corner and kept her mouth shut.”

Efran grunted in disgust, “Well, that means we can’t have diplomatic relations—” He broke off to stare at Wendt, who regarded him, questioning. Then Efran said, “Ah, thank you, Barrueta, and Colletta—I think we’re done. Aren’t we, Commander?”

“Yes, Efran,” Wendt said, watching him.

“Yes, thank you, ladies,” Efran said. He stood to help them up with the further encouragement, “Let’s just try not to get into any more fights unless it’s an authorized Faire exhibit, which might draw a lot of spectators, but, as far as individual fights, let’s—try to avoid those. All right. Thank you.” He ushered the two women out, then spoke to a soldier outside.

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Chapter 17

Reentering the conference room, Efran quietly closed the door. “Rondi,” he began, reseating himself, “did anyone on the Council ever give you an official notification of the end of your Regency?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“Then—” He leaned forward on the table, scratching the scars on the back of his head. “Then, if I’m not mistaken, by the Book of Notary Rules, they can’t appoint anyone else Surchatain until her Regency is formally ended. Isn’t that right?” he asked Wendt.

“As far as I know, but I’m not an expert in Continental Law,” Wendt said.

“Neither am I, but I’ve asked Ryal to bring his Notary Rules to give us his opinion,” Efran said.

Minka asked, “What does that mean if that is their law?”

Efran raised his shoulders. “It means that Purewal is illegitimate, and they can’t ignore that.”

Shortly, there was a knock on the door, and Gabriel ushered in Ryal with a large book. “Hello, all,” he said, glancing around.

“Here, Ryal.” Efran sat him in Barrueta’s previous seat around the corner from Wendt. “Here’s our question, Ryal: Crescent Hollow has appointed Purewal as their Surchatain—that seems to be clear. However, Rondi says she was never formally discharged as Regent. Now, can they appoint someone else Surchatain while she’s still technically Regent?”

“Normally, no,” Ryal said. “But I would have to see the Proclamation of her Regency, to know if special conditions were attached, such as a Sponsor.”

“Wait—we have that!” Efran said. “Wait.” He jumped up again to speak to another soldier, then sat again with the door open. “All right,” he said, deliberating. “What is a Sponsor?” he suddenly asked Ryal.

“An advisor who must be consulted on decisions that the Regent makes,” Ryal said.

“Did you have a Sponsor?” Efran asked Rondi.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“Well, I’m not remembering any other special conditions. Do you?” Efran asked her.

“I wouldn’t know. I never saw the Proclamation,” Rondi said.

“Not a problem; I’ve asked DeWitt to bring it down so we can see it,” Efran said. “Ryal, assuming there were no special conditions, and Rondi was never notified of the end of her Regency—except for occasional assassination attempts—where does that leave their new Surchatain Purewal?”

“In limbo,” Ryal said with a dismissive wave. “Any acts or decisions he makes are null and void until the situation is rectified.”

Wendt said, “Here we go, then. How is it rectified?”

“Rondi must state the terms under which she is willing to step aside as Regent. When those terms are satisfied, then a formal proclamation is issued to officially end her term. Then Purewal—or the Council’s choice of Surchatain—is formally selected.”

Wendt asked, “Can one of those conditions be her choice of successor?” Efran looked at Ryal with a tight smile of concurrence.

“Yes, it can be anything. Whether they choose to abide is another question,” Ryal replied.

“But if they don’t abide, and she won’t alter her conditions, they’re still stuck in limbo,” Efran posed.

“Apparently, yes,” Ryal said. “But, it seems incredible that they would appoint a thirteen-year-old as Regent without the protection of a Sponsor.”

Rondi shrugged, “They didn’t need to. They told me what to do. They gave me proclamations to announce that they had written up. I was a puppet.” She glanced at Malaga, who studied her.

“Which was very shortsighted,” Efran said to her. “So, who do you want to succeed you?”

She regarded him almost helplessly. “I—didn’t come in contact with anyone who wasn’t in on their scheme.”

Malaga said, “Windish was upset that the notary Dileonardo wouldn’t do everything that they wanted.”

“Dileonardo,” Rondi whispered, looking back into the past. “A tall, thin man with a sad face. He cried recording my parents’ deaths in his book.”

“What do you know about him?” Efran asked Ryal.

“Not very much—he’s one of those who works quietly. But, I did hear from one of your scouts that the Notary Culliton died right before Windish’s trial, so, that would probably make Dileonardo the most prominent Crescent Hollow Notary,” Ryal replied.

After a few more minutes of random speculation, DeWitt entered with the proclamation of Rondi’s Regency. “Who needs this? I’m guessing Ryal,” DeWitt said, handing the proclamation to him.

“Correct as usual,” Efran said, “Sit, please. We’re talking about who we want to be the new Surchatain of Crescent Hollow.”

“Ah,” DeWitt said, nodding to the others around the table as he sat. “What’s about to happen to Purewal, then?”

“He’s already Null and Void,” Efran said, looking to Ryal.

Extending the document back to DeWitt, Ryal said, “Yes, it’s standard verbiage, nothing that precludes the necessity of a severance document.”

“And Rondi sets the terms for severance?” Wendt asked, nodding to her.

“Unless she’s proved guilty of malfeasance,” Ryal said.

They all grinned back at the Regent. “Time to ’fess up, Rondi. What’ve you done?” Wendt asked crisply.

“I fell in love with the Lands,” Rondi admitted.

“Which is not a crime,” Efran said righteously.

“So,” Ryal said, stroking his forehead, “it appears that the Council of Crescent Hollow needs to be reminded of their need of a severance document.”

“Which they’ll ignore,” DeWitt pointed out.

Wendt offered, “Unless you send the reminder to someone empowered to make them regard it—say, the Notary Dileonardo.”

“Oh, that’s good, Commander,” Efran breathed.

“Thank you, Captain,” Wendt said wryly, at which Marguerite gave him a reproving wifely look.

“I will compose such a letter today,” Ryal said. “My question is, do you wish to include Rondi’s demand to appoint her successor?”

There followed a tentative silence. DeWitt said, “It would be more effective to name that successor with the demand.”

Mathurin said, “If this notary is a man of principle, perhaps ask him for a recommendation, sir?”

“Yes,” Wendt said.

“That seems the best course, without any other friend in Crescent Hollow,” DeWitt agreed.

Ryal asked, “Very well. Shall I route the letter to you, Administrator, or you, Commander, or our own Rondi before sealing it?”

Rondi and Wendt were making negative gestures; DeWitt said, “I don’t think any of us could improve on your verbiage, Lord Ryal.”

Ryal glanced at him in mild suspicion, but DeWitt kept a straight face. So the notary rose, taking up the unused Book of Notary Rules. “I will get on this, then, and forward it to you for delivery, Commander.”

“Yes, thank you, Ryal.” Wendt stood in respect, as did the others.

After Ryal had left, DeWitt stood also. “Well, then—”

“Ah!” Minka blurted, pulling out the wadded-up parchment. “We forgot about the scroll!” she told Efran, laughing in disbelief.

“Oh. Yes. Sit down, DeWitt,” Efran said. While DeWitt sat back down, Efran handed him the troll scroll. “One of my men got this off a troll as we were coming back from Wirrin Valley with Verlice’s family. The Librarian

had Nibor translate it to something that he could translate for us.”

Adjusting his spectacles, DeWitt opened the wrinkled parchment. He read out loud: ““To all Troops: The purge cometh, in the Rock and the Sky and the Wind, which thou shalt not see before it announces Death; there is no Shelter from the field of battle but in the Depth of the Mountain; therefore flee, flee to the Shelter, else meet the Purge sounding in the Wind. So sayeth Zenz, the only true Prophet of the Vengeful One.””

He looked up in bafflement while the rest of the table appeared to be expecting his commentary on the prophecy. Wendt finally said, “I’d hold on to that, were I you.”

“I suppose so,” DeWitt said, carefully folding the parchment.

Wendt said, “Unless anyone has anything else to add, I think we’re done for now.” No one else spoke, but a few shook their heads, so he added, “Dismissed.”

As they were all leaving, Marguerite asked DeWitt, “May I show the scroll to Madgwick? She may have some insights on it.”

“Yes. Absolutely,” he said, handing it to her.

Over the next several days, the booth lessees pleaded for an extension of the Faire, as new participants arrived with their goods, having only lately heard of the early opening. And more Fairegoers arrived daily, not just from Crescent Hollow and Eurus, but Venegas, Eviron, Prie Mer, and countless small villages in between, the largest of which were Deneau, Gerdts, Stuteville, Craghead, and Guerry. The Steward Estes and Administrator DeWitt granted the extension and enlarged Tourse’s security force.

All the Abbey Lands’ inns were full, so any business that had a spare room on their premises rented it out, among them Elvey’s, Delano’s, Imelda’s, and Besiana’s. By then, Firmin’s and Averno’s were already accepting suitable boarders, and Lemmerz temporarily turned his construction office into a lodging house.

Ryal had a spare room, but it was now occupied by Verlice’s old housekeepers Velie and Picco. After resting a few hours, they got up to start cleaning and running errands for the notary. Shocked by the couple’s energy (who were even older than Ryal and Giardi), Ryal asked that his allotment of Fortress meals be increased to feed four, which it was.

So other Lands residents opened their homes to Faire visitors for a nice price; Choules’ group in the east Lands not only rented tents, but permitted them to be erected on their portion of the Lands. Other visitors were allowed to erect tents in the eastern Lands, up to within five miles of the east Passage (the last five miles being wolf territory). The eastern Lands was also patrolled by Tourse’s men. The Fortress took no responsibility for lodging outside the Lands’ borders, and told visitors that.

When the number of Faire booths almost doubled overnight, Racheal surrendered her list to Tourse, who appointed a bookkeeper and two assistants to keep track of fees paid and owed.

Due to Tourse’s efforts, incidents were almost unknown, as violators of the peace were summarily ejected from the Lands without recourse. The owner of the monkeys came complaining that his animals had been stolen, but numerous witnesses attested to seeing them in the faerie tree on the east shore of Cavern Lake. Anyone who attempted to remove the monkeys, however, found themselves pelted with Snodsbury Spunkles, dragonflower seeds, or graeckle droppings (from the faeries) and sometimes poop (from the monkeys). If such transgressors

foolishly persevered, they discovered their hair and clothes brightly colored and their faces painted as Faire entertainers.

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Chapter 18

During these late September days, Commander Barr at Featheringham reported to Commander Wendt that their efforts to discover Windish's trial testimony were rebuffed with the official word that those records were sealed. Ryal's message to Notary Dileonardo was successfully delivered, but the notary was taking his time answering it. This is what Ryal had written to him:

"On the 25th of September in the Year 8155 from the Creation of the World

"To Notary Dileonardo of Crescent Hollow
"From Notary Ryal of the Abbey Lands

"Greetings to my fellow practitioner. Although we have never met, I have heard of your compassion and integrity from Rondinelli, Regent of Crescent Hollow. After at least one known attempt on her life, she has chosen to make her home here in the Lands with us. However, an untenable situation has arisen regarding her position which we apply to you for assistance to resolve.

"To wit: in the Proclamation of her Appointment as Regent of Crescent Hollow, I find no restrictions as far as Sponsorship or Limitation of Service. Therefore, she is evidently still Regent.

"However, I have been informed that the Council of Crescent Hollow has appointed a Councilor named Purewal as Surchatain. Because Rondinelli's Regency has never been formally terminated, this appointment is illegal under Prov. 416 ("The Appointment and Tenure of the Surchatain"), Sec. 12-A, para. 7 in the Book of Notary Rules. I need not remind you that until this situation is rectified, any decisions by the purported Surchatain may be disregarded with impunity by Hollowans; furthermore, he is subject to arrest and incarceration as a usurper.

"Rondinelli wishes to abdicate her position quietly and with the least disturbance to the citizens of Crescent Hollow. However, the continuation of the usurper Purewal is both repugnant to her and illegal under Prov. 416 previously cited. Therefore, her Terms of Severance of her position as Regent shall include the prerogative to name her successor. As she respects your integrity, she invites recommendations from you as to the best person to fill this capacity.

"Knowing the high regard in which you are held in Crescent Hollow, I am confident of a speedy and tranquil resolution of this situation. Therefore, I remain your admiring colleague,

"Ryal, Lord Commander of the Abbey Fortress and Lands"

As the resolution of other matters, Verlice was released from his cell to be reunited with his family, such as it was. For his sons Arturo and Bryan were finding joy, companionship, and profit as members of Tourse's

security force, as were Wiatt and Gastrell. In fact, those four frequently worked together in the live performance area, which tended to get rowdy. Their service in restraining the rowdiness gave opportunities for even more live performances.

Verlice's wife Faciane also found work as a tray vendor for Averno's finger foods. Her pleasing manner and nice wardrobe (provided by Marguerite) secured Averno's personal clearance for her to represent his establishment. That left Verlice to wander the Faire by himself, provided with a daily allowance from Marguerite, and to sleep on her divan at night.

By the end of the day on September 28th, Estes and DeWitt, having taken stock of everything, gave Tourse the word that on the following morning, all vendors were to be told that September 30th was to be the last active Faire day; by the end of October 1st, all Faire booth lessees, their employees, equipment, animals and trash were to be out of the Lands. Given that the Faire will have run eight days instead of the planned three, the administrators felt that all parties had been given plenty of time to make a profit or enjoy the spectacle. There would be no refunds for anything.

Given the number of people and the press of the crowds, Efran had halted the children's visits to the Faire some days ago (on September 26th). Surprisingly, they didn't care; they'd seen all of it they wanted to see. But they begged to check on Jonguitud—rather, Jonguitette—and her eggs. So on September 29th, all the children with their bodyguards Arne and Bennard, as well as Efran, Joshua, and Minka, walked down the old switchback to the west Chapel Road, away from the Faire, hoping to see the hydra.

When they arrived at the section of road directly below her nest, the children begged to be allowed to walk up the northwestern hillside to talk to her, because they could see her black body around her eggs. This Efran denied. They pleaded and cried, with Ivy throwing herself down to the road in a screaming fit (provoking Pim, years younger, to pat her in concern) but Efran stood firm.

Then Elwell shouted, "Look!" Wheeling to gaze up the hillside, they cried in joy to see the hydra scabbling down to meet them.

When she arrived at the edge of the road to sit up on her haunches, they promptly flung the accusation at her, voiced in various ways: "You're a girl! Only girls can lay eggs!"

Jonguitette said, "No no no. Am boy. Gevorgyan lays eggs. She flies; I curl eggs."

This rendered them all silent for at least two minutes, given its incongruence with much of what Jonguitud had told them earlier. Then Efran observed, "So this Gevorgyan laid eggs for you to take care of, and then flew off? Sounds more like a male to me."

Minka put a hand over her mouth, laughing. But the hydra flung her—his?—middle head back as if pointing. "Gevorgyan."

Everyone looked up at the hillside, where the rocks and brier began to rise in the sky. As before, while the children and bodyguards watched, the terrain that was shaped like a sinewy dragon body with wings, feet, and a great head on a winding neck melded into a misty blue sky with feathery clouds. The perfectly camouflaged body then vibrated above them, and Efran felt the weight of cogent thought descend from it. This was a thinking creature; it was discerning.

The children clustered together in momentary fear, but the dragon lifted off to higher reaches. So the children bombarded Jonguitud again: "So you really are a boy!" "But why do you have to take care of the eggs?" "Where

did she come from?” “Can we talk to her?” “Are there more like her?”—and twenty other questions in the next minute and a half.

As usual, Jonguitud’s answers were either irrelevant or nonsensical—“She is flighty.” “Too fat to curl eggs.” “Girls only talk; don’t listen.” So the children returned to the fortress grounds unenlightened as to whether Jonguitud was a boy or a girl, whether he or Gevorgyan had laid the eggs, where Gevorgyan had come from, or anything else. Which meant that it was entertaining, as always.

Late that night, a courtyard gate sentry woke Efran with the whispered message: “Captain. You’re requested at the wall gates.”

Efran turned his head, gently extracting himself from Minka. Still asleep, he pulled on his pants, his shirt, and his boots, then followed the guard—whoever it was—out of his quarters and down the fortress steps into the courtyard.

At the gate, he whistled lightly. Kraken, asleep in the grass on the western side of the fortress, hauled himself up and trotted over. Efran scrambled up on his bare back to accompany the man down Main, deserted but lit with lanterns in the deep of night.

Arriving at the wall gates in the middle of a cluster of men, Efran slid off Kraken. One of the men, a dark silhouette against the lanterns, said, “Stand still and feel, Captain.”

Efran held still, concentrating on his feet. Then he looked out to the dark trees a few miles north of the walls. “Vibrations. Something big,” he murmured.

“Yes. We’re feeling it all along the north wall,” the man said.

Efran peered at him in the flickering light, then. It was Kaas, one of the Forty. “What do you make of it?” Efran whispered as though afraid of being overheard.

“We don’t know. Only, it’s something—wide. Spread out beyond the trees,” Kaas said, nodding north.

Efran looked down at the barely perceptible trembling under his feet. *What do we do, Lord God?*

When no answer came, Efran said, “Alert me of any change.”

“Captain,” Kaas said, saluting, and Efran got back up on Kraken to ride up Main in the dancing shadows of the lantern lights.

When he climbed back into bed with Minka, she tucked herself into his side again, mostly asleep. He did not go to sleep, but lay awake thinking and praying. *What is this? It’s something outside the Lands. An earthquake? Something natural or supernatural? A force of nature or an enemy?*

He continued musing on the verge of consciousness until the moment he looked up to see faint daylight playing through the colored glass onto the wall opposite the bed. Then he heard the courtyard gate bell ringing in alarm. He quietly rose again to push his feet into his boots, having kept his clothes on.

He went out the fortress doors to the courtyard gates, looking to the wall gates at the end of Main. The men in the courtyard were all looking there as well, utterly silent. The man ringing the bell stopped as soon as Efran appeared. There was no use ringing any further.

For what they saw, lined up about sixty feet beyond the north walls, were hundreds, perhaps thousands of trolls standing at attention. This was something none of Efran's men had seen before—trolls with the self-discipline to stand and wait. They were all different kinds—the large maneaters with inch-long fangs and massive bodies; the smaller, simian trolls who relied on cunning rather than strength; the stupid foot soldiers who came at any battle call to kill and be killed. All shared the thick, wiry hair, the black eyes (bulging or tiny) and flabby red noses, and all were holding staffs (or spears?) at their right sides, waiting on something, possibly a signal.

Efran went out of the courtyard gates to look to the west, where the line of trolls, at least fifty deep, ran clear to the Passage. He then looked to the east, where the line ran all down the northern wall until it curved in the second extension, which ended in the barricade of tree trunks stretching to the road. There was no barbed wire over the road now; it was completely open to the trolls. But they did not rush it. Yet. With a unity and self-discipline unimagined in trolls, they stood motionless in orderly rows.

“How can they do this?” Efran whispered.

Then he focused on a point in the treeline beyond the old stone bridge. More trolls were dribbling out from the trees to take their stand on the line. “Where are they coming from?” he murmured.

The silent signal the trolls were waiting on came, and they raised their staffs to begin pounding out a rhythm:
bom bom BOM bom bom BOM bom bom BOM bom bom BOM

Some men almost fainted. They were hearing the Polonti war drums—the only weapon ever shown to be effective against trolls—now being sounded by the trolls to tell the Landers that death was upon them. Kraken trotted out of the gates to nose Efran back up to the courtyard, where he stayed beside him the whole time.

From the gates, Efran looked aside at the Faire, in full swing for its last day. Fairegoers were already crowding the aisles between the rows of booths, appreciating the rhythm of the drums as the day began. *Lord God, where is our defense? What do we do? Can they not approach? Or is this a siege? Will they stand outside the walls to catch anyone leaving the Lands? We have nothing; if the drums are ineffective, we have nothing to beat back a hundred trolls, much less a thousand.* Now at least he knew what the rumbling was last night: all the trolls gathering in the woods to appear here now.

And what of his authority as Lord Sovereign? Shaking his head at the hopelessness of it, he began to whisper, “As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lords, I . . .” Efran broke off, looking down the switchback at a rider coming up. After a moment, he recognized him as Wystan, Delano's son. He was riding their draft mare, who usually pulled their wagon of ales.

The gates were opened for Wystan, who didn't dismount. He just leaned over to say, “Captain, mum has a message for you. She said, ‘Stand and watch; the purge cometh.’”

Uncomprehending, Efran said, “All right.” Nodding, Wystan turned the mare back out the gates and down the switchback. Efran's paralyzed brain began piecing together what he heard with what he knew: Wystan's mum was Madgwick, a praying woman. . . .

“The purge cometh,” Efran whispered. Where was that from? It sounded familiar. “Are we being purged? Is it the Destroyer again?” He looked back down at the Faire grounds, the families and children walking the rows, some skipping to the beat of the war drums. “No, please no,” he groaned in dismay.

Small arms encircled his waist, and he looked down at Minka still in her night dress. She was eyeing the deep

and wide rows of trolls just outside the walls, pounding out the war drums. She didn't look frightened, only observant. "What did Wystan want?" she murmured.

"Ah, he gave a message from Madgwick," he said as though they needed to go shopping for her. "Stand and watch; the purge cometh."

"The purge cometh," Minka repeated. Then she raised up. "The purge cometh! Efran, that's from the troll scroll! The prophet telling the trolls to go hide in the mountains because the purge cometh!"

"Oh," he said at what sounded like a total irrelevance. Everyone looked quickly down at the wall again because the thousands of trolls let out a great roar that rattled the gates. Then they began rushing the gates, the walls, and the wide-open eastern end of Chapel Road.

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Chapter 19

Efran's heart seized to see the bravest of his men run up to meet the trolls with clubs or spears, while scores more trolls were pouring over the eight-foot high walls. The Fairegoers still saw nothing wrong; the din of the troll invasion wasn't up to the level of Faire noise yet.

But then there was a piercing, skirling cry from overhead—Efran ducked, pushing Minka down; several men dropped to their knees, covering their heads. The cry seemed to arrest the trolls as it spread from the hilltop to the northern walls. Nothing could be seen of what caused it, but after the first few moments of the weird calling, the mass of oncoming trolls paused. There was a confusion, a milling of the bodies, as though they had lost their sense of direction. When the shrieking continued, the trolls went into convulsions. They fell down writhing, howling and grabbing their heads.

And Efran suddenly remembered one thing Estes had said when they brought Nibor hilltop for the first time—that troll ears had a weakness to sounds in a certain range, and some birds like hawks or screamers could cause them to bleed from the ears, faint or even die from their calls. What Efran was hearing now was more powerful than any bird call he had ever heard.

This noise finally caused some of the Fairegoers to pause and look up, or around, especially as it was echoed by the singing tree. But what was more disturbing than the shrieking overhead was the howling of the trolls in response to it. Still, the musicians gathered around the booths to play forcefully enough to drown it out, so the patrons were appeased, and went back to buying.

Being the last day of the Faire, many booth merchants slashed their prices, so many Fairegoers bought in response. While the trolls were driven mad by the unknown, unseen scourge in the sky, the merchants were raking in their greatest profits of the whole eight days. It was the strangest cosmic opera ever seen.

Only a few Abbey men at the wall gates were injured before the skirling brought the trolls to their knees, bleeding from their noses and ears. Searching the sky, Efran finally caught the slight vacillation in the air that signaled the movement of the invisible. "That's—Gevorgyan!" he murmured, after the necessary moment to remember the name. "Jonguitud's mate."

Minka searched the sky for what he was seeing. “So is Gevorgyan a male or female?” she asked, testing.

“Oh, female, definitely. Making that noise? No question,” he said, and the men around him laughed weakly.

Efran looked down Main to see the trolls beating on the gates to get back out. The soldiers opened them as quickly as they could, but it made no difference, for the trolls as far away as the trees past the ravine were dropping from the dragon’s shrill cries.

Efran exhaled, his heart rising in gratitude. Then he noticed, again, the point in the trees from which more trolls were emerging. And these seemed more resistant to Gevorgyan’s piercing cries. “Where are they coming from?” he asked. “Show yourself,” he abruptly ordered.

Then something huge lumbered out from the trees, crushing those on either side. It looked very much like a toad, except instead of toes on its front legs, it had an array of sharp spines like those of a porcupine. And out of its wide mouth it disgorged fully formed trolls, one at a time. They slipped out of its mouth naked, covered in slime, to land on their feet and look toward the battle lines.

Meanwhile, the toad was pressing rows of spines into the ground. As each troll dropped from its mouth, they took up a spine as a staff and ran toward the depleting line of trolls at the gates. The newest trolls appeared to be impervious to Gevorgyan’s skirling, as the previous trolls had been impervious to the war drums.

“A Trollbrunnen! It’s real,” Efran gasped. “Where—? Get back in the fortress!” he ordered Minka, and she obediently turned to run back inside. The guards closed the doors, then all the men in the courtyard watched in horror as the Trollbrunnen stopped spewing to raise its great ugly head toward the sky, where Gevorgyan, still camouflaged, continued to screech her death song. The Trollbrunnen was apparently tracking the source of the sound above it. Raising a bristling foreleg, it shot an array of spines upward.

Three hit their mark. Gripping the gates, Efran watched them hang in midair, with spots of blood dropping around them. Gevorgyan shook them off, but the death cries ceased, and the surviving trolls began picking themselves up to resume their attack.

The Abbey defenders, however, had regrouped to fight back. Armed with clubs and spears, they aimed for the trolls’ faces with both, especially the eyes and the mouths. This was effective, and the trolls began falling again. But with the Trollbrunnen spewing more, the men were merely holding the line. The only encouraging signs were that the trolls along the open eastern face were all apparently dead, and the Fairegoers still apparently unaware of the battle.

And Gevorgyan was still aloft. But she was no longer skirling, and the Trollbrunnen was tracking her by the blood on her belly. By the time the great toad had released another round of spines, however, the blood had vanished. The spines sailed harmlessly through the air.

Efran relaxed his hold on the gate balusters only a little. With the cessation of Gevorgyan’s screeching, the Trollbrunnen had resumed vomiting out trolls. Was the dragon too badly wounded to fly or cry? Efran closed his eyes, leaning his forehead on the gates.

The men’s shouting caused him to jerk up, and there was Gevorgyan, visible slightly above and behind the Trollbrunnen. It had no means of turning its head, and its forearms were too short to aim the spines behind it. The dragon extended her formidable claws to latch onto the toad’s neck—or try to. The warty skin was so thick and hard, not even Gevorgyan’s claws could pierce it.

So the Trollbrunnen began turning ponderously to get in position to skewer its enemy. But Gevorgyan, great wings flapping, opened her mouth a few feet above the toad's head and shrieked directly down at it. This caused it to freeze, so Gevorgyan could then land on the toad's back to place her open jaws right at its left tympanum—its ear—and drive her high-powered scream right into Trollbrunnen's brain.

The toad stopped emitting trolls, and those it had produced went still, so that Abbey men were having a field day knocking their heads off. Fairegoers, too far removed from this entertainment to see it, continued their buying unabated. And the toad began deflating like a balloon with a slow leak.

When its eyes had gone glassy and it collapsed into itself flat on the ground, Gevorgyan lifted into the air, covering herself with the sky again. And all the remaining trolls that Trollbrunnen had disgorged fell down dead. The few survivors were those that had traveled from the Fastnesses for the battle. But the Abbey men converged on them with a vengeance, wielding their clubs. Within minutes, the trolls that had traveled hundreds of miles for this encounter lay dead as well.

The men in the courtyard stood breathless, gazing all around the walls at the masses of dead trolls. Not a one was upright; not a one was moving. The soldiers on the ground looked all around likewise, then someone ran out from the barracks to begin handing out gloves.

The men in the courtyard were immobile with the shock of it, but Efran shifted to regard Delano's below. *The purge cometh*. Then he gasped, "Nibor!" He grabbed the man beside him, Krall, and shook him. "Go to the library and check on Nibor!"

"Yes, Captain," Krall said calmly, but had to wait for Efran to release his jacket. Then he ran up the fortress steps while Efran turned disbelieving eyes back to the Lands littered with a thousand dead trolls.

Shortly, Krall ran back out to salute. "Captain, the Librarian said the calls were not heard inside the fortress; the Historian is fine and working as usual."

Exhaling, "Thank you," Efran looked down again at the number of troll bodies that his men had begun to drag out of the Lands and pile up in heaps.

Here was a corollary danger: Dead trolls decomposed rapidly, and their bodies and blood were poisonous. Even burning the worst kinds of trolls, or great numbers of them, could give off noxious fumes. Cleaning out that many corpses so that people could safely leave the Lands was as dangerous as fighting living trolls. The remains of the Trollbrunnen at the edge of the trees was itself a great smoking pile of toxic waste.

While Efran was surveying the carnage, Minka, dressed now, came out to look at all this. Then everyone heard Gevorgyan crying again, only, it was a different sound. It was more of a chirp—*kak kak kak kak kak*. But it went on and on.

A dense shadow filled the sky from the east, so that everyone looked up at thousands of black birds—carrion crows. Efran pushed Minka down to crouch over her, but the crows were not interested in anything on the hilltop; they were responding to an invitation to feast. For carrion crows—black vultures—could eat anything comfortably, even trolls.

Fairegoers gazed up at the cloud of birds that passed over them, darkening the sky. When they dived beyond the Lands to reveal the sunlight again, the Faire visitors went back to buying. The musicians resumed playing, and the acrobats emerged from their booth dressed in dazzling finery for their final performance.

But the soldiers were watching the carrion crows land en masse on the piles of troll bodies. They jostled and fought over the bounty before spreading out, as there was plenty to be had. Stronger birds cooperated to drag the larger bodies—or pieces of them—to the shelter of the trees so they could eat undisturbed.

Within an hour, the rancid odor of decaying troll flesh that had begun spreading over the Lands began dissipating. More carrion crows, vultures, condors, hawks, buzzards and eagles arrived by the minute to jostle each other, as well as foxes and jackals, over the piles. In another half hour, the stench had blown away, but the scavengers required hours more to finish the feast.

After watching this dénouement unfold, Efran lifted Minka to Kraken's bare back and walked him down the switchback. Efran held onto his halter just to give himself a sense of being in control on their way down to Delano's.

Inadvertently leaving Kraken to block the sidewalk, Efran and Minka entered the brewery to see Wystan at the front counter, doing a brisk business with booth lessees who were stocking up for the last day's sales. Noting the newcomers, he nodded over his shoulder. "Mum's in the back; go ahead."

"Thank you, Wystan," Efran said, leading Minka to the back room.

Opening the door with a light knock, Efran looked in to see Madgwick standing with a baby he didn't recognize right away. But Minka slipped in under his arm, gasping, "Oh, Madgwick! Is that Ruth?"

"Yes, almost seven months old! She looks good, doesn't she?" Madgwick said proudly.

"She looks so happy," Minka marveled.

"Oh, yes; she's the most contented little thing you ever saw," Madgwick said.

"I'm so glad." Minka closed her eyes against the tears.

"Ah, hello," Efran said tentatively, edging past the baby as Madgwick put her down in a crib. "I, um, wanted to thank you for sending Wystan up with the message about the purge. If you haven't looked out your door in the last few minutes, carrion crows are cleaning up a lot of dead trolls. But, Madgwick—how could you know?"

"Oh, well, Efran, Marguerite showed me the scroll you'd found, and so I did some praying, and, I felt that I was being directed to Revelation, chapters sixteen and nineteen, which describe how God allows the armies of evil to mass on the plain of Megiddo to fight against His people. But this is a fight that evil is ordained to lose so that God may wipe it off the earth.

"So, the wording of the scroll led me to consider that God might be preparing to mass the trolls here in order to clear them out, because we have been praying about these continual attacks. But not all trolls are evil, so their prophet was warning the good trolls not to mass with the evil ones, so they would not be wiped out with them. Anyway, when they all showed up, I felt sure that was what was happening. But since I knew you would be alarmed to see all these trolls, I wanted to tell you that the outcome of this battle was ordained, and you need do nothing but watch." While she was explaining all this, she turned the baby on her front and covered her.

"And then, all the carrion crows coming," Efran said.

"Yes, there's a rather graphic passage about an angel calling them to come feast on the bodies of the slain," she said, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

Minka blurted, “Was Zenz a prophet of God to the trolls, then?”

“Well,” Madgwick said slowly, “the test of a true prophet was if their predictions came true. So, it seems that he was.”

Efran stared at her a moment, then leaned down to gently hug her. “Thank you, Madgwick.”

“You’re welcome, Efran.” She patted his back with one hand. Minka reached up to kiss her cheek. Madgwick added, “Oh, and Efran—I’m so grateful for Jehan and Coish’s help with counter work during the Faire—I don’t know how I would have managed without them.”

“I’m glad, Madgwick; that’s what we’re here for,” he laughed.

Efran and Minka left quietly around the line at the counter to find that Kraken had graciously vacated the sidewalk for pedestrians, and now only blocked part of Main. Efran lifted Minka to Kraken’s back, and they proceeded up the switchback. Efran said, “We need to brief Estes and DeWitt, then we’ll go back down to tell the Commander what happened.”

“All right,” she said. Then: “I think I’m going to start going to Earnshaw’s Scripture readings.”

“Me, too,” he exhaled.

They went up to the workroom to tell the administrators about Marguerite, Madgwick, and the scroll. Estes and DeWitt listened dumbfounded, but Koschat nodded in comprehension. Then DeWitt said, “Somehow, that makes sense.”

Estes added, “I like how Madgwick said it was ‘ordained,’ because so much that has happened here has been.”

“Yes,” Efran said, almost swaying again. But he had a report to make to Wendt as well, so he and Minka returned to the courtyard. There, he put her back on Kraken for the ride down Main, even though she wanted her own horse saddled. He jumped up behind her without crowding her. For now.

Arriving at the barracks, they paused to look over the gates as the carrion crows finished up their feast and began flying away. Gabriel came out to glance at the crows’ cleanup, then told Efran, “Commander Wendt was wondering if you had anything you’d like to share with him.”

“Yes,” Efran half-laughed, slipping down from Kraken. “But Marguerite may be able to tell him, as well.” He took Minka into the barracks to sit in the conference room with the Commander, his Second Gabriel, and a half dozen soldiers, including Captains Towner and Stites. There, Efran related everything that Madgwick had told him. He paused frequently in the telling, looking to Minka for her comments.

When he was done, Wendt asked, “So, Madgwick related this to . . . something in the book of Revelation?”

Efran chewed a knuckle, muttering, “As if what happened today was a—textbook example of how God clears out evil.”

“Then perhaps I should examine my soul,” Wendt said gravely, glancing at Gabriel.

The Second raised his hands to clear himself with, “You keep me in line, Commander.”

“Yes, he does that well,” Efran murmured, sitting back to exhale.

Reaching for an open letter, Wendt said, “Since we apparently have no need of a confessional at the moment, I’ll share with you this response Ryal received last night from the notary Dileonardo in Crescent Hollow.”

“Ah.” Efran spread the cover letter between himself and Minka, and they both read:

“To: Lord Ryal, Notary of the Abbey Lands

“From: Notary Dileonardo of Crescent Hollow

“Dear Sir: While I am humbled and grateful for your regard, I find the situation you describe with the former Regent Rondinelli beyond my purview. My first action, therefore, was to share your letter with the Council and Surchatain Purewal, as I can do nothing without their leave. Enclosed please find their reply.

“Wishing the best for Rondinelli, I remain your admiring colleague.”

“Spineless twit,” Efran remarked before opening the enclosure. This read:

“To: Ryal, Notary of the Abbey Lands

“From: The Council of Crescent Hollow and its Esteemed Surchatain Purewal

“Sir: Let it be known to you that your allegations of irregularity in this Body and its Surchatain are meritless, ridiculous, and fraudulent. The former Regent Rondinelli was deposed after having been found to have abandoned her duties by fleeing to your Lands after allowing your representative to burn down Plumtree in its entirety and causing the death of High Councilor Zollicoffer as well as numerous Hollowan soldiers. Therefore, any claims she presumes to have upon us are legally and morally insupportable, and any attempt by you to enforce those claims shall be regarded by this Council as a declaration of war.

“Most sincerely, [signed by the entire Council and the Surchatain]”

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Chapter 20

Grinning, Efran laid the letter aside while his boot heel rapped lightly in amusement. “What d’you think?” he asked the Commander.

“Let me wait for divine inspiration on that,” Wendt replied dryly.

Efran sat back, crossing his arms over his chest to examine the ceiling. “I don’t want to attack; that’s too blunt and—uninspired. I don’t want to take on any responsibility for Crescent Hollow; I just want to clean out their Council. D’you think we can get Gevorgyan to go screeching over them?”

The Commander agreed, “That’s about what they need, but I also don’t want to expose Rondi to any repercussions.”

“True, nor cause any inconvenience to the township, either,” Efran admitted, still thinking. Then he mused, “I wonder what Malaga knows.”

Wendt eyed him. “About the Council?”

“About the Councilors, specifically,” Efran said. “Remember, she said they talked freely in front of her. Should we ask what she knows about them?”

“Are you proposing blackmail?” Wendt asked.

“Only if it works,” Efran said, chewing his lip. Minka covered a chortle, and he muttered, “Shut up,” kissing her head.

“Well, I suppose we could ask her and Marguerite to step over,” Wendt conceded. “But if Marguerite has reservations about a plan, I’ll listen to her.”

Efran nodded. “Of course. I can convince her.” Some of the men laughed outright, and the Commander sent a man to the chapel. At the same time, he sent Nee up to the hilltop to ask Captains Rigdon and Chee to come down.

When Malaga and Marguerite arrived, Efran and Minka moved down so that they could sit directly at Wendt’s right hand. He started with small talk, inquiring how Malaga was feeling, and if they were enjoying the last day of the Faire.

Malaga replied, “I’m better every day, thank you. But, I think I’m done with the Faire; it’s getting so—rowdy. I most enjoyed the wandering harpist, though he was all but drowned out for the noise. I’m worried about the monkeys, however, that escaped their handler. They’re living in the tree at the lake, but there doesn’t seem to be any food for them there, so the handler is putting traps out with their favorite foods in them. I don’t want to see them caught,” she said in despondence.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that,” Marguerite said tentatively. “The faeries in that tree are taking good care of them. And when all the Faire merchants leave tomorrow, the faeries will lead the monkeys up to the hilltop trees, which will be safe for them.”

“Oh! Really?” Malaga asked her.

“Yes. I should have told you earlier, but it slipped my mind,” Marguerite said.

“Oh,” Malaga sighed in relief. Minka put a discreet hand on Efran’s leg to still its impatient bouncing.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Wendt said, glancing at Efran. Captains Rigdon and Chee entered at that time to salute, and Wendt pointed to their chairs. “Well, Malaga, we thought we might ask you for some insight. Here is the letter Ryal received from the Council of Crescent Hollow.” He laid the letter in front of her, and Marguerite looked over to read it, as well.

After reading it, Malaga snorted, “Huh! Oh, they are so righteous. How could I ever have sat silent with such evil men?” She started crying again.

“So, do you know anything about these Councilors? If you tell us, that may help us defang them,” Wendt said lightly, shooting a glance at Gabriel. He immediately drew the note-taking quill set and parchments toward him.

Malaga screeched, “Know anything! Oh, the sins of these men would make a troll blush. Cretins and liars, all of them. Robello here has sent a string of young servants off to Dansington to have their babies, then docks their pay for the time off when they get back.”

“Do you know any of their names?” Gabriel asked quietly.

“Facey, Adorjan, and Perley are the most recent ones,” she replied. “Oh, those poor girls. How could I have done nothing for them?” She put her head down.

“You’re helping them now. Tell us more,” Wendt said, so Malaga sat up with a sigh.

She went on as Gabriel scratched rapidly with his quill: “Verbeke is just a thief; he picks up whatever he likes from merchants in his district. Tudor’s Imported Cigars has to close up when they see him coming or he’ll clean them out. The same thing for Neylon’s Fine Wines. ‘Councilor’ Squitieri? Ha! He can’t even read! He just puts everything aside, says he’ll think on it. Then he takes it home to show his butler, who tells him what it says and what he should do. And, oh! Don’t get me started on Grand Councilor Woldemariam. He’s the one who bought the arsenic for Rondi’s soup.”

“Where from?” Gabriel asked, pausing to dip his quill and accidentally streak his face.

“The rat catcher Stief,” she said. “He has loads of it.”

She followed that up with commentary on all the other Councilors (including one who wore women’s undergarments), and Surchatain Purewal. Then she sat back, exhaling, “Oh, I feel better, to finally get it all out. Do you know,” she turned to Marguerite, “when you took me to visit the brewery woman with the baby—Madgwick? Madgwick—I looked at an open book on her table, and the first line I saw in it said, ‘Have nothing to do with evil deeds; instead, expose them.’ What was that book?”

Marguerite replied, “Her Scriptures, certainly.”

“So, I’m doing what it says, aren’t I? Is that why I feel clean again?” Malaga asked, looking hopefully around at the smiling faces.

Wendt cleared his throat. “That seems likely, Malaga. So we’ll try to use your recollections to the best effect.”

“Good,” she said, standing. Marguerite hastily stood with her, then Malaga told her, “You know, I might like going by the chocolates booth again, if you don’t mind.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Marguerite said, taking her arm to leave with her. She glanced back wide-eyed at her husband, who lifted a finger to his smiling lips.

Those remaining in the conference room quietly watched Gabriel finish scratching out his notes. Efran leaned back to study the ceiling minutely. Then he began thinking out loud: “We can tell them we have this information and threaten to release it, but that’s not forward enough. We can share each one’s information with him in detail, and instruct him on what he has to do, but that leaves too many threads to hold. Or we can just . . . release the information publicly in Crescent Hollow.”

He sat up, looking at his Commander. “Remember what happened when Surchataine Gaea’s letter to Marguerite got passed around Crescent Hollow?”

“Not very much,” Wendt said, frowning. His whole period of blindness was fading into unreality.

“Gaea had to go into hiding; the dressmaker had to temporarily close his shop. Connor described the city as in an ‘uproar,’” Efran said, smiling vaguely. “So what if we just . . . exposed the evil?”

They spent the next hour debating how to do that. Then they decided that teasers would go up on public information boards. Scouts would surreptitiously post, in variant wording, different handwriting and on disparate papers, questions or statements such as, “Why did Woldemariam buy arsenic back in August?” “Ask Squitieri to read this to you.” “Why does Robello keep sending young girls to Dansington?” “You should watch Verbeke in a wine shop sometime.”

The officers had their scribes copy out a hundred of these missives, then they were packed up to be sent to Featheringham tomorrow, October 1st. From there, Commander Barr was instructed to divide them up among four discreet scouts, who would post them all over Crescent Hollow.

That issue resolved (for now), Efran led Minka out of the barracks, where they stopped to look around for Kraken. When he came trotting up, Efran turned with the intention of hoisting her onto his back to return to the fortress. But she had walked out of the open gates to look toward the Passage in dismay. “What? What is it?” he asked, coming out to her. Kraken followed him.

“I’m worried about Krug and his friends at the play hut. Wouldn’t Gevorgyan’s screams hurt them, too?” she asked. “And they did warn you about the trolls in Wirrin Valley.”

“We’ll go check on them,” he offered, lifting her to Kraken’s back. He turned to tell the gate guard Telo, “We’re going to look in on our troll friends in the play hut.”

“Yes, Captain,” Telo saluted. Efran turned to walk Kraken up the north road over the old stone bridge, then west on the coastal highway toward the new bridge over the Passage and the hut down the dirt road beyond. For the first time in weeks, he had no thought of trolls hiding in the trees. But he was keeping an eye on Kraken for his reactions to smells and sounds around them.

Arriving at the fenced play yard, Efran pushed the gate open. No one was in the yard, but a slender spiral of smoke rose from the center chimney opening of the hut. “Krug? Irtz?” Efran called. Those were the only troll names he could remember at the moment. Minka slipped down from Kraken’s back.

Wiry black heads stuck out of the open hut door. “Ah! Da Effen,” one said, and all five trolls presently surrounded him and Minka, all talking. Kraken snuffled one, then sneezed violently.

The visitors tried to listen, nodding in total incomprehension as two or three of the trolls talked excitedly. Finally, Efran said, “We just wanted to—dragon? Screeching?” And he simulated Gevorgyan’s skirling.

“Da! Da!” The trolls clapped their gnarly hands in appreciation of his performance. “No dis,” Urpèd waved in unconcern. Efran doubted he’d ever understand why the screeching did not implode their skulls, but he accepted it. (Much later, he realized: with permission to live on the playgrounds, they were legitimate residents of the Abbey Lands. This was their safe place as much as anyone else’s.)

One of them brought over a steaming bowl as if offering it to the visitors. Krug said, “Fud! Eet? Gud fud!”

“Oh, how sweet. They’re offering us dinner,” Minka said, leaning forward to look in the wooden bowl. When she saw the eyeballs floating in the broth, she tottered back.

Efran caught her. “Thank you! Another time,” he said, sweeping her up. Since she was not quite unconscious, she resisted being carried, so he just slung her over his shoulder to head out of the gates with Kraken trotting alongside.

“Da! Nudder tie!” Krug called after them. Efran waved over his shoulder, and they all waved as Minka weakly fluttered her fingers at them.

When they were a safe distance away, he put her again on Kraken’s back. She grumbled, “I feel like a saddle, being thrown up and down here. Next time I want my own horse that I can get on myself.”

“Donkey coming up,” he said, and she kicked at him so abruptly that she almost fell off.

With her clinging to Kraken’s mane, she and Efran returned to the fortress for him to update his administrators on the army’s sneaky ploys against the corrupt Crescent Hollow Council. Meanwhile, Minka went out to the back grounds to tell the children that their troll friends in the play hut were doing fine, cooking meals for themselves.

Faire merchants began packing up that afternoon. Fairegoers who lived in nearby villages began leaving then, as well—first, because no nasty trolls were waiting along the roads (and some people believed there never were, that it was just a rumor started by the lodging houses that wanted to charge outrageous prices). And second, everyone had spent all their money and had nothing left for another night of outrageous lodging prices.

As evening fell, the Fortress set off an array of fireworks to commemorate the end of the first Abbey Lands Faire. Many of the surrounding villages saw it, and began asking when the next Faire would be.

The following morning, October 1st, Efran watched from the courtyard gates as a stream of carts and wagons flowed up Main to exit the wall gates, which stood wide open. Traffic departed from not just the main gates, but the smaller northeastern gates and Chapel Road, which led directly east to merge with the coastal highway. Tourse’s crew was busy cleaning up the Faire rows: dismantling booths, setting aside those panels or canvas tops that needed repairs, sweeping up debris, and collecting food trash for the pigs.

Watching them work, Efran knew that this crew was the one factor most responsible for the Faire’s success. They insured that it did not devolve into violence or mayhem, as any large human gathering tended to do.

Thinking, he went back to his quarters to look in on Minka, who was just waking. “Come get breakfast with me,” he whispered, brushing back her hair.

“I’m not awake yet,” she mumbled, eyes closed.

“No, come on. If you can’t get to Law class this morning, Soames and the Librarian will cry. They haven’t had them all week because of the Faire,” he said. She opened her eyes, then got up.

After breakfast (for him, ham and eggs; for her, eggs and apple cobbler with cheese) she went on to the library and Efran went upstairs. Both Estes and DeWitt were there. Looking at the parchments and receipts piled up on

the worktable, Efran said, “I suppose it’s too early to know how much the Faire brought in, isn’t it? I’m looking for a reason to do all this again next year.” He hadn’t admitted how much he disliked the disruption.

Estes nodded to DeWitt, who glanced over his papers. “No, we don’t have final receipts yet, but it will be somewhere in the neighborhood of two thousand royals.”

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Chapter 21

Efran’s hands dropped from his pockets and his jaw hung loose. “Are you serious? Two thousand royals for eight days of Faire nonsense?”

DeWitt laughed. “Incredible, isn’t it? No, according to Ploense, that’s our haul, even after paying all expenses, the largest of which was Tourse’s security team.”

Efran looked cautious. “What do you plan to do with the money?”

“First thing, absolutely, is dig sewers. With the influx of residents, it’s become a critical need, so we’ll pay top dollar for laborers,” DeWitt said. (Residents and visitors in the east Lands had already been warned to put evacuation spots well away from traffic, and bury their waste. Anyone found not abiding by sanitation guidelines could be evicted from the Lands.)

Estes added, “Except, we’re not uttering the word *sewer*. These are *aqueducts* that the men will be digging.”

Efran laughed lightly, “That’s good, but—”

DeWitt interrupted, “And if you think to go dig sewers, Efran, I will come out there and drag you off myself.” Estes laughed in agreement.

“Yikes,” Efran winced. “No, no worries there. Only, will you have anything left over after that?”

Both administrators looked at him. Estes said, “Yes, a lot, Efran. What do you need?”

“I want Tourse and his men paid a bonus. They worked around the clock, and, the Faire would not have been successful without them,” Efran said.

“We’ll take care of that now,” DeWitt said. “Who’s at the door? Milo? Ask him to bring Tourse up here, please.”

Efran went to the door to do that, then went on down to the nursery to pick up Joshua.

By noon, only a handful of Faire merchants were left in the Lands, and of those, three wanted to stay permanently. One was a food merchant, one a seller of novelties, and one a roving harpist. These three were sent up to the administrators on the second floor to make their case.

The food merchant and seller of novelties were denied, as DeWitt explained that the Fortress did not want ongoing competition to their established businesses that paid wages and taxes. Also, the Fortress wanted to leave

the lakeshore clean and uncluttered for the residents. Now, should the Faire merchants want to buy or rent space and register with the notary, they were certainly welcome to do that. Those two merchants decided they didn't want a permanent relationship and left until the next Faire.

The harpist Arenivas, however, was permitted to stay, with the condition that he would find lodging for the nighttime. Estes gave him a stipend to get him started, and told him that if he had difficulty affording meals or lodging, to come back to them. (As subsequent weeks proved, however, he kept stumbling across royals, particularly under the trees at either end of the lake, because the faeries adored his playing. And yes, they had safely escorted the monkeys to the hilltop trees during the last night of the Faire.)

That afternoon—still October 1st—four happy and only slightly inebriated men burst into the chapel, calling, “Auntie! Dear Auntie!”

“What?” She came out from the kitchen in laughing bewilderment, Hartshough following. Seeing the men, Marguerite said, “I’m not your Auntie! And what have you been celebrating?”

Arturo said, “You’re too young to be our grandmother, so we’re calling you Auntie. And we’ve been paid FIVE ROYALS EACH for our Faire service.”

“What?” she cried.

“It’s true!” Brayan inadvertently burped. “And we’ve been accepted as permanent members of Administrator Tourse’s Enforcement Unit. We’ve been measured for uniforms that are BLUE and not red, and we’ll be lodged and fed in the barracks.”

“AND,” Wiatt said, “if we demonstrate good sense and self-discipline, we’ll be equipped with ‘soft’ clubs to encourage compliance among the drunken.” He chortled at the irony of it.

“The best part is, they’re a good group of men,” Gastrell said soberly.

“I’m so glad,” Marguerite smiled. Then she said, a little downcast, “I haven’t seen Faciane since the Faire ended.”

“Oh!” Arturo said. “She’s on with Avere’s permanently. They like her style.”

“Really? That’s wonderful,” Marguerite sighed. “It will be so nice to have you all close again.”

“I don’t know about Father,” Brayan said dubiously.

“You mustn’t worry about me,” Verlice said, having entered behind them. “I’ve just been hired on for aqueduct construction. It’s a sophisticated project for the Lands, so they need someone with my building experience.” To his mother, he said, “I hope that the north room is still available? I will certainly be earning enough to pay you.”

“Yes, it is, Verlice, and you’re welcome to it, but I won’t accept any pay from you. I’m sorry,” she said, smiling. “However, Hartshough is working on a new dinner recipe, so if you’ll all go wash up, we’ll see what he has for us to try.”

“Thank you, Lady Marguerite,” Gastrell said, bowing. Wiatt bowed, too, but Brayan and Arturo hugged her before heading for the closest washroom. Verlice sat at the head of the dining table. (Malaga, overwhelmed with recent events, had gone to bed early.)

When they had all gathered to sample Hartshough's cévapi (small minced meat sausages seasoned with whatever he was experimenting with at the moment), one of the door guards opened the door to a messenger. Then the guard, Cyneheard, brought over the message addressed to Verlice, from the Notary Ryal.

"Ah," Verlice said. "A request for consultation on the aqueducts, no doubt." Opening it, he glanced over it before crumpling it up and dropping it to the floor.

All those at table with him paused, then Brayan, seated around the corner from him, leaned over to pick up the crumpled parchment. Spreading it out, he noted, "Mum's divorcing him."

"Oh." Everyone began eating again. They roundly congratulated Hartshough on his most recent culinary success while Verlice chewed with jutting jaw.

At that time, Justinian entered the front doors. Sweeping past the table, he barely glanced at the men seated around it before bestowing his usual kiss of greeting on Marguerite's cheek. She said, "Justinian, I don't believe you've met my grandsons, have you?—Brayan and Arturo. They'll be working for Administrator Tourse, as will Wiatt and Gastrell, so they won't be lodging here. Verlice will have the north room as usual. What are you up to?"

Justinian nodded to her grandsons, being well acquainted with their history. But he said offhandedly, "I'm just here to change into dinner wear, dear heart; am entertaining a lovely newcomer to the Lands with the Faire. But she's staying on at Averno's, and only requires company."

Several cautious glances went around the table. The irrepressible Arturo asked, "That wouldn't be a lady named Faciane, would it?"

"Ah, you've met her?" Justinian asked. He knew the relationships involved, as he had delivered several messages back and forth from Featherstone to Wirrin Valley. It was questionable as to whether the boys remembered him.

Brayan replied, "She just divorced Father. But Hartshough's cévapi is excellent; you should stay for a bite."

"As always, but I'm afraid I committed to the inferior fare at Averno's. Good evening, all." Justinian bowed to the table, then trotted up the stairs toward his room. While discreet smiles passed from face to face, Verlice continued eating with jutting jaw.

The following morning, October 2nd, Efran was up early to look down from the courtyard on the peaceful Lands. All the booths around the lake had been taken down, so the area was clear again, save the harpist. He was sitting on the lakeshore, strumming his lyre harp, awaking the dawn. Because of the incredible acoustics of the hill, Efran could hear it clearly. (The singing tree was apparently silent right now, there being little wind.)

Listening, Efran looked over the homes, shops, fields, and flocks spreading from the Passage on the west to the horizon on the east and he wondered, *How did all this come about?*

"For the glory of the Lord, Efran," Nakham whispered beside him.

"I'm not worthy, Nakham. I'm not able to sustain all this," he said in despair.

“It all never rested on you, Efran. Your only job is to do what’s required at the moment,” Nakham said, puckering.

Efran looked at him with tears in his eyes. “I am helped.”

“Every moment,” Nakham confirmed.

For the next several days, Efran spent a great deal of time lying on the back grounds. Whenever Minka brought out a picnic blanket for him, he lay on that, but generally wasn’t particular as to whether he had turf or cloth to lie on—he just wanted to stretch out to look at the trees, or the clouds, or most often, Minka on the bench and the children playing around him. Joshua, 21 months old now, was close to being able to keep up with them.

They were still catching green frogs in the cistern surrounded by reeds, but the best new attraction by far was the monkeys in the orchard. They teased the children, chattering at them from high up in the trees, throwing sticks and sometimes fruit at them if they got too close.

However, the monkeys ate not only apples and peaches, but foraged in the gardens to sample everything, ruining most of it, and harassed the chickens. Everywhere they went, they left piles of poop. Therefore, the entire back grounds crew rose up in rebellion, demanding their extermination. This filled the children with anguished dismay. But everyone agreed that something had to be done.

Since the faeries had facilitated the monkeys’ move to the hilltop, Efran asked Queene Kele to forge a solution. So the faeries came together in a hill-wide conference, and spent the entire first day arguing about who was to blame. So at the beginning of the next day, Efran told her that if they didn’t come up with something by the end of the day, the monkeys would be—disposed of.

Immediately, the faeries ushered the monkeys down from the hilltop to the woods west of the Passage, where they sustained themselves stealing nuts, acorns, and edible weeds from the trolls who lived in the children’s play hut. However, the trolls were up for their games, and captured one female with the intention of having it for dinner the following day. Fortunately, the male was able to open the simple cage and free her during the night, but this alarmed the monkeys, so they began looking around for safer spaces with more abundant food.

At this time, Bullara, still with pink hair, was hiding from Barrueta, so she and her daughter Colletta decided to make a trip back to Crescent Hollow to visit old friends and pack up more money, clothes and décor for the house they were jointly leasing in the Lands. So they departed the morning of October 6th in their bright green, Hollowan-approved carriage.

However, immediately after crossing the new bridge over the Passage, the driver had to pull to the side of the road, surrounded by trees, to make minor adjustments to one wheel. The footman climbed down to help him. While they were thus engaged, the monkeys, attracted by the bright green, decided to hitch a ride. They scampered up the side of the carriage and nestled down behind the driver’s seat to comfortably hide. Minutes later, the carriage with passengers and stowaways was on its way.

Halfway to Crescent Hollow, the carriage passed two riders in nondescript work clothes on their way to the Lands. Neither party acknowledged the other, but Shane and Connor noted the carriage without seeing who was inside.

A little over three hours later, Barrueta’s carriage drew into Crescent Hollow. Before going to their home here, Barrueta had the driver stop in the Market District so they could pick up victuals for tonight and tomorrow

morning. While the driver and footman were assisting the ladies, the monkeys peeked out of their hiding spot to gaze across a half-acre of fruits, vegetables, grains, fish and meat—in other words, the perfect place to debark. This they did. Incidentally, both females were pregnant.

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Chapter 22

About this time, Shane and Connor were flopping down at the conference table in Barracks A to receive a good mess dinner while they waited for the hilltop Captains Efran, Chee, and Rigdon, along with his scribe Oulton, to join them, Commander Wendt, the Second Gabriel, and Captains Towner and Stites.

When the hilltop men appeared in the conference room, the scouts shoved away their empty plates to stand and salute. Then everyone sat to hear the highly anticipated report of what impact, if any, their posted revelations on the Councilors of Crescent Hollow had.

Connor opened, addressing Efran: “Captain, do you remember the—the utter insanity unleashed by the copied letter of Surchataine Gaea to Lady Marguerite—?”

Efran gripped the table edge in wild hope. “Are you going to tell me—” Shane had put his head down to laugh.

Connor said, “Same song, second verse. Had only one or two accusations been posted, the Council might have been able to dismiss them, but—a hundred?” He had to stop to laugh. “And since they were all widely known or suspected, the Council has been blown apart.”

“Who? How?” Efran demanded.

Connor looked to Shane. “Help me remember all the details.” They were both very tired, of course.

Shane said, “First off, *five* families have sued Robello for child support for the girls he made pregnant. He’ll have trouble paying, as he was the first one kicked off the Council. They were willing to sacrifice him to end it. But it wasn’t over. Squitieri, poor man, was exposed right off when the sheriff—who the Council abuses regularly—cornered him in the market, shoving a paper in his face and demanding that he read it. Of course, it was the one that said, ‘Ask Squitieri to read this to you.’ He was trapped. It was brutal, his being made fun of by street cleaners who could barely recite the alphabet.”

Shane looked back to Connor, who said, “Oh, and the ironmonger walked up to Councilor Schlitt on the street and lifted his robe from behind—hiked it clear up to his shoulders—and there they were, ladies’ pink bloomers. I did pity him, poor man, but I didn’t see where he ran to from there.”

Shane said, “Grand Councilor Woldemariam was the only one to successfully—so far—deny the accusation against him, that of buying arsenic, because the rat catcher has disappeared, probably to avoid being forced to testify. Surchatain Purewal’s position also appears secure for the moment, but, wolves are circling, you know.”

His listeners absorbed all that in silent satisfaction, then Rigdon said, “What a zoo. That’s as bad as the monkeys on the hilltop.”

“Whatever happened to them?” Stites asked.

Chee raised his shoulders and Efran shook his head blankly, with, “Ah, they were supposedly taken down to the woods on the west shore of the Passage, but—who knows? But, if the play hut trolls invite you to dinner, just—politely decline.”

The men around the table groaned and laughed.

Ever since Malaga had exposed the Council’s dirty little secrets to the Landers, she became aware of a restlessness, a sense of urgency to do more. Underlying that was the intense desire to return to her own home.

The restlessness built for several days, until October 9th, when she asked Marguerite to go with her to talk to that woman Madgwick again. Marguerite told her, “I’d love to, but I’m waiting for Wendt right now. Why don’t you go on over? I’m sure she’ll be happy to talk to you.”

Malaga hesitated, then said, “Yes, I think I will.”

From the chapel, Delano’s was just down Main Street past the community well. When Malaga hesitantly entered the front office, she found two young Polonti at the counter. The Faire over, business was slow right now. So the older boy brightened at her appearance. “Having a party for the ladies after the excitement of the Faire? Then it’s the lager you want. How many cases?”

She half-laughed, “No, I just want to talk to Madgwick, if she’s here.”

“Oh.” He looked so disappointed that she was almost sorry she didn’t have any money to buy a few bottles. But he jerked his head toward the back room. “Show her, Jehan.”

“Yes, come on back,” the younger one said. “You won’t believe how fast baby Ruth is growing. She’ll be all grown up in no time.”

“I suppose,” she said.

He knocked on a door and opened it to stick his head in. “Madgwick? You have a caller.” He pulled out of the doorway to tell Malaga, “She says to come on in.”

She nodded, going into the back room where Madgwick had just put a baby down to sleep. “Oh, hello, Malaga. How are you doing? Have a seat.” She gestured to a chair by her rocker.

“Thank you,” Malaga said, adding dubiously, “I don’t want to disturb the baby.”

“Oh, don’t worry; she’s a sound sleeper. What can I do for you?” Madgwick asked. She sat in the rocker, and Malaga took the chair beside her.

She frowned in the effort of finding the right words. She wanted to be careful not to say too much. “I . . . feel that there’s so much left undone in Crescent Hollow. I want those Councilors to be held accountable, and—I want my house back,” she blurted.

“I understand that you’re feeling unsettled, so that you want to do something, anything. But please know that after what you’ve been through, this is a time of great opportunity and . . . great danger,” Madgwick said, also choosing her words carefully.

“What do you mean? How is it dangerous?” Malaga asked.

“The danger is in jumping ahead to satisfy your own desires, when God is the only one who can do that. The opportunity is in learning to wait on Him, to take in His Word, and to rest in Him,” Madgwick said.

“I’ve been resting for days now, and I’m getting tired of it,” Malaga said, a little peevish.

Madgwick said, “Well, I mean ‘resting’ as an active period of preparation: ‘In repentance and rest is your salvation; in quietness and trust is your strength. . . . The Lord longs to be gracious to you, rising up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for Him.’ [Isa 30:15, 18]

“That doesn’t mean anything to me,” Malaga said pensively.

“That’s why you have to wait consciously before Him, to receive understanding,” Madgwick said. “Do it to save your own life. Don’t rush off after what you want, just—*wait*,” she begged.

“All right,” Malaga said, standing. “I’ll think about it. Thank you.” She paused at the look of deep distress on Madgwick’s face, but turned out.

By that time, the sewer digging was well underway. Stephanos and Arne supervised forty-five men who were earning between one and three royals a day, depending on their output. Verlice was at a disadvantage right away, being considerably older than most of these men, and having never done hard physical labor in his life. He was crushed, of course, to see how far removed the actual job was from what he had imagined it to be.

Still, he persevered through the first few days, as the work was reasonable. The supervisors kept water and beef jerky on hand for the men as needed. And they used nothing like whips to spur them on, only—something worse. Time and again Arne or Stephanos would tap him on the shoulder with, “Pick it up a bit, friend. We have a waiting list of men wanting to work.” Which was true, blast them.

So Verlice would redouble his efforts, sullenly watching the brute beside him with pink hair—PINK HAIR—fill his wheelbarrow with four or five shovelfuls. Verlice required twenty to fill the same capacity.

But the worst—the WORST—humiliation was when Justinian stepped down to speak with Arne about something that Minka wanted to do. After Arne had told him what he needed to know, Justinian then turned slowly in Verlice’s direction. Verlice kept his head down, raising the largest load of dirt he possibly could, while Justinian’s eyes pensively swept the area. Then he turned and walked away, leaving Verlice in agonizing doubt as to whether he’d been seen or not.

Verlice quit that day.

Over the next few days, Verlice got up as usual, dressed and left the house as though he were going to work. He quickly learned to time his breakfast to follow Eryk (who rose very early) and precede Justinian (who rose late) so as not to run into either of them. He did not tell anyone, especially his mother, that he was no longer working on “aqueduct construction,” but he was truly looking for work. He had so little experience in fields outside his father’s brewery that he just didn’t see what he could do. Certainly not physical labor—he was so sore from his few days of digging that he could hardly lift his arms.

Passing in front of Delano's for the fortieth time, Verlice finally worked up the courage to consider talking to the proprietor when he pulled up in front of his building driving a wagon full of crates. Verlice watched from across the street as Delano shouted something to his son, who gestured in acknowledgment before entering a side door. Then Delano hefted a crate to carry it to the same door.

When Delano came back out to his wagon, Verlice crossed the street to meet him—after being rudely surprised by an angry call of, “Use the crossings, willya?”

As Delano grabbed hold of another crate, Verlice said, “Hello! I'm Marguerite's son Verlice. This your brewery?”

“Yes, it is. Good to meet you. Excuse me,” Delano said, carrying the crate to the door again.

When he returned to the wagon, Verlice said, “I was just wondering how long you've been here in the Abbey Lands.”

Hoisting another crate, Delano paused to think. “Goodness, it's been almost a year now. Amazing. Excuse me.” And he walked that crate back to the door.

Growing exasperated, Verlice caught him again as he approached his wagon. “Well, I'm terribly interested to hear how you happened to establish your business here.”

Sweating as he took up another crate, Delano said, “Oh, it was all due to Lord Efran's support.” He nodded across the street before lugging that crate to the side door.

Verlice looked across Main to Firmin's eatery, where Efran and his wife Minka were sitting close together at a streetside table. He had his arm over the back of her chair and his face practically in her hair to listen while she told him something with many emphatic gestures. He murmured something in return, so that she gave him a look of such adoration, it almost made Verlice throw up. “Why can't they take that show inside?” he muttered.

Verlice watched a girl run up to their table with a tray of dishes which she began unloading in front of them. Efran removed his arm from his wife's chair to help unload the tray, turning—surprisingly—to put a platter and two bottles on the table behind him, where two Abbey soldiers sat. They received the food and drink, then looked back up at him—Verlice—with sardonic smiles. They'd been observing his observation and he hadn't even noticed.

Undeterred, Verlice looked back to the Captain, who put something in the serving girl's hand that caused her to bob excitedly. Then she pointed to an old lady under the awning of the restaurant, and the Captain turned to wave to her.

The girl withdrew; Minka offered a bite of her pie to her husband, who accepted. She caught an errant crumb on his lip to transfer to her own mouth and Efran smiled. Verlice almost smiled watching. Then his face froze as he saw his wife—ex-wife—lean over the low fence between Averne's and Firmin's outdoor dining areas. Faciane had an armload of orange lilies that she had just cut from the landscaping around Averne's pond. Tied with a yellow-orange ribbon, these she presented to Minka, who accepted them with a cry of delight.

Efran reached into his pocket for a royal to extend to Faciane, who lifted a hand in refusal with a gracious comment. Minka thanked her profusely; Efran kept smiling. Why did he smile so much?

Without knowing what he was doing, Verlice crossed the street toward them. A cart driver shouted profanities

along with the word “crosswalk” again, and Efran’s head jerked toward him.

But a woman in a strange dress chose that moment to step on the sidewalk between the two men and turn toward Efran. So Verlice was treated to a view of her back that extended from her neck to the top of her buttocks.

He was shocked. Was this the style of Abbey Lands women? Walking around with naked backs? “What are you thinking?” Verlice exploded at her. “Why in the world would you parade your whole backside like this? Can’t you leave any surprises for the bedroom?”

As there was a burst of laughter around them, she wheeled to stare at him. “Oh, and you’re so lovely,” Verlice groaned. “Did your mother never tell you about buttons?”

The object of his scrutiny, Leila, was speechless. Because she was one of Elvey’s models, Lady Elvey herself, who had just come out of Croft’s, heard his harangue and began to stalk over to them.

Heedless, Verlice was saying, “Oh, no, no. See here, what you want to do is tease, not give away the whole show on the street.” So saying, he took hold of the back of her dress to begin rearranging its layers, folding them over the wide gaps. A number of people, men and women, stopped to watch.

Leila hissed at Efran, “Will you tell him to shut up and stop it?”

He winced, “I can’t. I agree with him.” Minka hid her face on his neck under the lilies so that no one could see her chortling. “Shut up,” he whispered, laughing.

“No, here, look,” Verlice was telling Leila as Elvey drew up behind them. Due to the crowd gathering on the sidewalk, Firmin came out to look. Verlice went on, “Here, drape that part around your neck and your chest. Keep some of these assets behind the door lock instead of on parade.” Efran’s men behind his table were grinning broadly at the show.

Leila couldn’t see what Verlice was doing with the back part of her dress, but Elvey stood at his elbow to watch as he rearranged the layers this way and that. Then he tied the sash authoritatively. “There. Isn’t that better?” he asked Elvey with no comprehension of who she was. “Then they’re looking at the dress instead of her body parts. And unless the shop’s a meat market, they want customers to look at the clothes, right?” The crowd around them laughed, some applauding.

The owner of that shop studied him, then said, “I am Elvey. Who are you?”

“Hello, Elvey. I am Lord Verlice of Wirrin Valley,” he said, glancing up as he made minor alterations to the back of the dress.

Firmin, trying to get his attention, called, “Lord Verlice? Are you an actor? We have openings for performers here at Firmin’s.”

Verlice opened his mouth but Elvey said, “Firmin! You have an opera star and a sommelier! Can’t you see that we need him to do something with all these clothes that no one can wear? Come with me, Lord Verlice. We need to talk about a position for you.”

She took his arm firmly to lead him back to her sprawling complex. Firmin went back into his restaurant; Leila tried to see what the back of her dress looked like; Wystan came out to help Delano finish unloading the wagon, and Minka nestled happily on Efran with her lilies.

By the time Verlice came out of Elvey's a few hours later, Efran's party had left. As Elvey's new stylist, Verlice wore a sleek blue-gray suit with feathered hat and dashing cape. And he walked around Main so that everyone could see him in it, especially Justinian.

On the next day, October 10th, Marguerite sent Eryk to Commander Wendt with an urgent message: Malaga wanted to return to Crescent Hollow.

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Chapter 23

Wendt did not see any problem with Malaga returning to Crescent Hollow, except that she had no money or men. Also, to his understanding, she had nowhere to go. But since it evidently upset his wife, he took time to go home for the midday meal and talk to both of them. Meanwhile, he sent a man up to Efran to apprise him of Malaga's wishes, and ask for his thoughts on the matter.

When Wendt arrived on the back patio of the chapel, Marguerite rose from the table to meet him. He kissed her lightly, then both looked down at their guest, who was staring blankly at the copper and rock fountain in the yard.

Sitting at the table, Wendt glanced up as Hartshough put a very nice plate of veal and summer vegetables in front of him. "Thank you, Hartshough."

"You're most welcome, sir," Hartshough murmured before vanishing, as all good butlers did.

Wendt then tentatively regarded their guest. "So, you want to go back to Crescent Hollow, Malaga? May I ask why?"

She turned toward him without meeting his eyes. "There's so much more that needs to be done. The men who tried to kill Rondinelli. The thieves and murderers. I want to bring them all to justice."

Marguerite sagged. "Malaga, that's a noble task, but—not for you. You're not healed yourself, and we'd not be able to help you that far away."

Malaga said stubbornly, "I want to see what I can do."

"You're liable to get yourself killed," Wendt said. "Marguerite is right; some things you have to wait on. Our scouts tell us the whole city is still jumpy from the little firebombs we dropped on their message boards. We need to let that play out. Give it a few weeks; let us see how—"

"I want my house back," she said, more firmly.

Wendt paused. "This is about a house? I understand that DeWitt's willing to help you—"

"I don't need help. I know what to do," she said. He and Marguerite looked at each other.

A soldier, Seagrave, came up to salute. “Commander, Captain Efran says he’s willing to send money and men with Malaga back to Crescent Hollow. But he says that we’ll have to loan her a carriage, because the driver and footman are claiming ownership of the one she came in. Also, when she gets there, she has to decide quickly—two days at the outside—whether she wants to stay or not, because he wants our men to leave again by then.”

“But I came with horses, too!” Malaga said, taking umbrage at the omission.

Seagrave paused, then said, “Yes, ma’am, but, ah, those belong to the carriage service that brought you. They’re now working at Wade’s Carriages for Hire, and neither man wants to go back to Crescent Hollow. So, if you do go, it’s got to be with our men who return according to the Captain’s orders.”

Marguerite said, “Malaga, that means we may not be able to get you back out after they leave. And some of the Councilors may already know you’re the one who gave us that information. You’d be jumping blind into a pit of vipers. Wendt’s right, dear; please just wait, then if you still want to go in a few weeks, we’ll know better what to do.”

Malaga turned her head away. “I want to go now. I know what needs to be done.”

Wendt shrugged, then told Seagrave, “Call for volunteers; have a carriage made ready for tomorrow morning, and a packet of, oh, forty royals for her. Inform Captain Efran; ask him to give the volunteers his specific instructions.”

“Yes, Commander.” Seagrave saluted and trotted off. Marguerite exhaled in distress; Malaga looked off in satisfaction.

The following day, October 11th, Malaga left for Crescent Hollow in a plain Abbey carriage. Two Abbey men were dressed as driver and footman, while another pair rode alongside as bodyguards in mercenary clothing.

Late that afternoon, after an uneventful drive (and no trolls) the party arrived in Crescent Hollow without stopping at Featheringham. Malaga directed them to a very nice neighborhood on the fringe of the nobles’ district. “Here. That house. Stop here,” she called up to Detler and Coxe in the driver’s seat. Mumme and Leneghan drew up on their horses alongside the carriage.

Detler, watching someone in the house close window drapes, called down to Malaga, “Someone’s here. Let us go in with you.”

“No, that’s only Roberg,” she said, emerging from the carriage with the pouch of royals. “He’ll let me in.”

Detler watched uneasily as she ran up the front walk to knock on the door. It was opened for her to speak to the man they’d seen closing the drapes. She might have indicated the pouch hanging from her shoulder. The door opened wider; she entered, and it closed behind her.

After watching a few minutes and seeing nothing else happen, Detler gestured, “On to the inn, then.”

Inside the house, Roberg was telling Malaga, “You really shouldn’t be here, you know. Beaufoy will be simply furious when he gets home.”

She opened the pouch to put two royals on the table in front of him. “I won’t stay around for him. I only need to get my medicine and a few clothes. You turned me out without a thing, you know,” she added a little resentfully.

Peevishly, he said, “You were being such a pill about the whole thing.” But he took the royals. “Get what you need, then.”

“I will.” She hurried to a back room to take a swift glance around. Apparently, nothing had been done to this room yet. Tossing down the pouch, she went to the wardrobe to dig around in the bottom, and pull out a small bag. “Oh, good,” she murmured, checking it.

Leaving the bag, she picked up a bottle of Seger’s Best Brew to check the label. Yes, this was the one she needed. With a sigh, she removed the beribboned card tied around the neck on which she had written, “For My Windish.” Then she took the bottle into the kitchen to open it, pulling out two cups from a cabinet. Roberg came in while she was pouring. He asked, “What are you doing? You’re just to gather your things and get out.”

“I will, but this is one of the last bottles of Seger’s new formula—you know, the one that everyone was raving about, that cost five royals a bottle at its most expensive.” She handed him a cup, taking hers to the kitchen table.

Sitting, she added, “It’s got such a kick to it.” She lifted the cup to her lips, wincing slightly.

As she knew he would, Roberg sat with his cup as well. He took a good drink, then grimaced. “It’s bitter!”

“I know! That’s what makes it work!” She brought her cup to her mouth again, and he drained his.

“Ohh,” he groaned, holding his stomach.

“Hang on; it gets better,” she laughed.

A few minutes later, she went back to her bedroom to change into work pants. Taking up the small bag, she quickly left.

Also late that afternoon, Barrueta and Colletta returned to the Lands from Crescent Hollow with not only a packed carriage, but another pair of men driving a laden wagon behind it. When word was sent up to Efran of their return, he asked Rondi if she and Mathurin felt up to making small talk with mother and daughter, just to find out whatever they could. Rondi was willing to try.

So she and Mathurin went out riding, and happened to pass by Barrueta’s rented house in the eastern section. The driver and footman had unloaded everything from the hired carriage onto the front yard of the house. As that was a great lot of stuff, they felt they were not further obliged to carry it all inside. In contrast, the two cartmen were fully aware that their pay included bringing everything in.

So Rondi and Mathurin picked up bundles to carry in through the open door. Rondi called, “Lady Barrueta? Colletta?”

The woman bustled into the front room, and Rondi said, “Hello, Lady Barrueta! It’s good to see you back. Where would you like—”

“Just put that down here, and bring that box to the kitchen,” Barrueta instructed Rondi and Mathurin, respectively. Rondi did as she was told, then waited while Mathurin took his armload to the kitchen and went out for a second load from the yard.

As Barrueta unpacked boxes around Rondi, she began, “I hope you—had a good. . .” But Barrueta kept unpacking without stopping to talk. Colletta, almost asleep, lay on a loveseat that the cartmen had just brought in. So Rondi went over to sit on the upholstered arm at her feet. After a moment, Rondi said quietly, “I hope you didn’t have any trouble. Were you able to bring back everything you needed?”

Colletta barely opened her eyes, muttering, “I miss Auber and Gaea. Everything was nice and quiet under them. But these idiots. . . . Anyway, there were squatters at our house, and we had to hire men just to get out our own things. So inconvenient. Mother’s mad because of all the things she’s missing. But, no matter; I’ll just marry the richest man here. There are wealthy men here, aren’t there?” She shifted, looking at Rondi dubiously.

“I’m sure there are,” Rondi said, glancing up as Mathurin shot her a wry look over a large box.

The cartmen dropped their last load on the floor, so that the tinkling of breakage was audible. As Barrueta rushed into the room, one cartman said, “We’re owed four royals, ma’am.”

“Four! I promised you one each!” she sputtered.

“For the aggravation, it’s four royals. If we tell all to the notary, he’ll make you pay us eight,” he said dully.

“Oh!” Barrueta left the room, then shortly returned with the required pay. “There! Now get out!”

“Have a good day, ma’am.” The cartman touched his hat and the two walked out.

“Oh! Look at all this!” Barrueta fumed. She flung a fat hand at Rondi, ordering, “Go find Bullara!”

Mathurin jerked his head at Rondi. As they exited the house, he sped up to catch one of the cartmen and talk to him for a moment. Then he returned to the horses, where she was waiting. They remounted to begin riding back leisurely through the Lands, and she asked, “What did he tell you?”

“Not much,” Mathurin said in dissatisfaction. “Only that everyone’s jittery with all the uncertainty about who’s ruling Crescent Hollow.”

“Colletta said she missed Auber and Gaea, and that there were squatters in their house, using all their things. No wonder Barrueta’s upset,” she observed.

“Yes. Well, we’ll tell what little we know to the Captain, then—Firmin’s for a bite?” he suggested.

“Firmin’s sounds good,” she said, grinning.

After they had made their report to Efran and his administrators, Mathurin and Rondi went back down to Main Street. There, they found Firmin’s packed with customers wishing to hear the diva sing. Since Croft’s was perennially overcrowded, they went next door to Avere’s.

There, they found a subtle drama of snubs and counter-snubs playing out between a flamboyantly dressed man at a table by himself and the pretty new hostess at Avere’s. This Mathurin and Rondi watched briefly, not knowing the participants. But it was tame compared to what they had heard from Crescent Hollow.

Looking east, Mathurin said, “Tomorrow we try The Lands’ Best Inn. Their outdoor dining area has a nice lake view.”

She grinned, which was a view he also liked. They leaned back to receive their plates from a server, then Mathurin murmured, “I’m glad the Captain got you out of Crescent Hollow when he did.” That was about a month and a half ago.

“*You’re glad!*” she cried quietly. “I still wake up every now and then shaking over how narrowly they saved my life.”

“Wish I’d’ve been there,” he grunted, poking at his perch.

“I don’t know.” She studied her plate of pasta. “It’s nice having you here.”

He flashed a smile at her, and they both looked over at Firmin’s as the diva started singing inside somewhere. Her gorgeous voice was perfectly audible from the outside dining area at Averne’s. He began, “Yes. It’s nice being here—” And then the Averne’s hostess accidentally spilled an ale on the dapper man’s suit.

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Chapter 24

That evening, Efran stood at the top of the old switchback. Again, he was looking out over the Lands, dotted by little lights in windows almost as far as he could see. There were people, mostly families, in each of those houses represented by one or two lights. It staggered him to think of it—so much so, that DeWitt had stopped telling him what their official population count was now. Whenever he did tell him, the thought of trying to protect all those people incapacitated Efran for a few days. So Nakham had to come remind him that it wasn’t his job.

Efran looked down the old switchback, trying to picture Main Street as it had been almost two and a half years ago, when Adele led Loizeaux’s thousands through the meadowgrass against him alone, here with Minka and four children: Toby, Noah, Ivy, and Pia. Then, and ever after, there had been one miraculous deliverance after another.

The last one came just 12 days ago, at the height of the Faire, when a thousand trolls had been summoned to the Lands to be annihilated. It was incomprehensible. Contemplatively, Efran looked over to the dark northwestern hillside, where the hydra’s nest was. He still didn’t know whether the hydra was Jonguitud or Jonguitette.

“Efran?” He turned at her voice. From the courtyard, Minka said, “The dinner bell rang a half hour ago, and the children are asking for you.”

“I’m coming,” he said, walking back up to the open gates. “Just . . . remembering.”

“I know,” she said, cuddling his arm. “It was the best Faire ever.” He laughed in agreement.

Four days later, on October 15th, the four Abbey men who had escorted Malaga to Crescent Hollow—Detler and Coxe driving the carriage with Mumme and Leneghan as bodyguard—returned. They were one day late; Captain Efran had wanted them to stay no longer than two days, but they had stayed a third night at Featheringham. Malaga had not returned with them.

Wendt had them brought to the conference room to eat while he summoned Efran and the hilltop Captains Rigdon and Chee. He also sent a query to DeWitt and Estes as to whether either would like to come hear the report. Today, Estes came down with Efran, leaving DeWitt to wrangle numbers with Koschat and Pieta.

As they all sat at the conference table, the officers and hilltop men watched the return party finish eating quickly and push away their plates. Three of them looked to the fourth, Detler, as the spokesman. He cleared his throat to begin, “Well, Commander, Second, Captains, we got to Crescent Hollow in mid-afternoon; dropped off Malaga at her house—what used to be her house, anyway—as she asked us to. We wanted to go in with her and she said no. We didn’t like this, because it was clearly occupied; we even saw one man pull the shades closed. But she insisted we leave her there, so we did, and went on to the Elegance Inn to eat and then, look around.”

He glanced at his companions before resuming, “That night, the eleventh, the Councilors were having dinner at Grand Councilor Woldemariam’s estate Murat, during which four of them—ah, Schlitt, Robello, Verbeke, and Wombwell—died of arsenic poisoning, apparently from the soup. Surchatain Purewal was sickened, but survived. Woldemariam’s staff, all long-timers, were never suspected, but they all remembered the delivery woman with short black hair who seemed to hang about in the kitchen longer than necessary while they were preparing dinner.

“The next day at breakfast—on the twelfth—Woldemariam also got enough arsenic to kill him, this time from his beer—he liked his beer bitter. Woldemariam’s cook also saw the black-haired woman outside the house at breakfast, but insisted she was never in the kitchen that morning. And she was not, but the butler brought in a delivery of bitter beer at the back door that they hadn’t been expecting.”

Detler paused in the silence, then went on: “On the, um, thirteenth, Surchatain Purewal also died of arsenic poisoning. His kitchen staff and officers almost went insane trying to find the source, until someone checked the butter—Purewal was fond of garlic butter. That same day, Notary Dileonardo was found by his housekeeper, dead. They’d received an unexpected delivery of garlic butter.”

“Why the notary?” Efran breathed.

“We talked about that a great deal coming back, Captain,” Detler said. “All we can think is because he turned over Lord Ryal’s letter to the Council without lifting a hand to help Rondi. At any rate, two more men were found dead in a ditch the next morning, the fourteenth. We didn’t learn anything about them right away, except, the night before, that of the thirteenth, we rode by Malaga’s house—the one she had complained had been stolen by a fake will. We decided to stop and knock on the door; lo and behold, she was occupying it comfortably, alone. But she wouldn’t let us in; said the former occupants had left it dirty.

“So we left Crescent Hollow on the fourteenth; stayed the night at Featheringham and reported to Commander Barr. He’s got a constant stream of scouts going in and out of Crescent Hollow to keep us updated,” Detler finished. Then he remembered: “Oh! Don’t know what this has to do with anything, but, there are vandals in the Market District that are driving the merchants crazy—eating a bit of produce and then ruining the rest. It’s not rats, but—they don’t know what it is.”

“Where are the monkeys?” Chee asked. The others laughed weakly.

There was a long silence, then Efran told Wendt, “I can’t believe we let you bring her into your house. Even Minka—” he broke off before blaming his wife.

Wendt said, “No, it was the right thing to do, Efran. Everyone deserves a shot at redemption. And it was Marguerite’s idea, not Minka’s. She just knows her Auntie too well.” A few of the men smiled.

“Malaga even quoted Scripture at us,” Efran grumbled. “Have nothing to do with evil deeds—” He broke off in shock.

Wendt half-smiled. “Yes, she should have listened to herself.”

“Do you think she’ll get caught?” Gabriel asked, looking from Wendt to Efran.

“Eventually, yes,” Wendt said. “Especially as she seems to have found a method she likes.”

“How did she get it, and so much of it?” Towner asked. “Arsenic’s not easy to come by; you have to sign for it.”

“They had it at the house already. She and Windish,” Wendt suggested.

“Or maybe just she had it for Windish, Commander,” Detler counter-suggested. “That was another thing: she had, what?—maybe an hour or two from when we arrived to get to Woldemariam’s in time to poison the soup.”

“And she had to take out the current residents of her house first,” Stites noted.

Coxe added, “Which she did right away. Probably with bitter beer. What would you do if a woman showed up at your house with beer?”

“Some of us won’t do that any more,” Detler said.

“She was really sore about that will, losing her house,” Efran murmured.

“What do we do if she comes back here, Commander?” Leneghan asked.

Wendt was shaking his head. “Turn her away, obviously. But I don’t think she will. She’s got everything she wants now.”

So, with more muttering and head-shaking, the meeting broke up. Outside the barracks, Efran paused with a hand on Kraken’s halter. *Uh oh. What happened?* Kraken asked.

“Why did you decide to start talking again?” Efran asked absently, holding his mane to swing up on his back.

For laughs, Kraken said.

“Ha ha. We have to go get Minka,” Efran said pensively, nudging him up Main.

Right-o.

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything, yet,” Estes said, coming alongside on his own horse.

“Yes, I know,” Efran said. “Arguing with a horse is as pointless as arguing with your wife.”

Kraken brayed at him, but Estes nodded.

As it turned out—as it often turned out—Minka was waiting in the courtyard for them. While Estes dismounted, greeting her, Efran held his hand down to her. “Come ride with me for a minute.”

“Only if I sit behind you. I don’t want people staring at us again,” she said distrustfully.

“All right,” he sighed. “Ley, help her up, please.”

“Yes, Captain.” Ley, at the courtyard gate, took her by the waist to lift her as easily as a doll to sit behind Efran on Kraken’s bare back. Kraken looked over to make sure she was settled before turning to walk out the gates.

Efran directed him with his knees to the new switchback, less crowded right now. “Let’s just walk around the lake,” he told them both.

“What happened?” she asked with a quick breath.

Reluctantly, he told her the whole thing. As she listened, her arms tightened around his waist. He emphasized, “Wendt said that Marguerite was right to invite her to stay—he said that everyone deserves a shot at redemption. And I don’t think Marguerite was ever in danger, first, because it was personal for Malaga. Also, she poisoned only men.”

“But—most of the Council! And the *notary*? Why?” she asked in distress. Notaries were a sacred class. Kraken was placidly walking along the lake shore, staying clear of the faerie trees—the singing tree, as well, because he didn’t like the noise it made.

“All we can figure is, she targeted him because he didn’t take up Rondi’s case. And—I don’t know; Malaga may not be done. Our men got out of Crescent Hollow when they realized what she was doing,” Efran said.

“Oh, that’s horrible,” she groaned, resting her head on his back.

“Not ideal,” he agreed.

Few people on the Lands took note of the fact that today was October 15th. October FIFTEENTH: the day when the first Abbey Lands Faire had originally been scheduled to start. As there were some merchants who never got word about the early start, about a half-dozen showed up today.

Of course, they were outraged to find that the whole Faire had taken place without them, but all DeWitt and Estes could do was refund their booth deposits. Also, when some of the Lands’ businesses discovered what they were selling, they agreeably bought their stock. There was a toymaker who sold his entire inventory to Froggatt’s, a crêpe maker who sold his ingredients to Averne, and a tentmaker whose canvases, thick thread and stakes were divided up between the Fortress and Choules’ group, as tents were needed everywhere at one time or another. So no one left the Lands feeling cheated.

Anyway, Efran and Minka got back to the courtyard in time to hear the dinner bell ring, so took their places on the back bench. Ella, to Efran’s left, was venting about something as he sat and took Joshua on his knee. She turned to Efran to demand, “I’m sure you didn’t ride off to Wirrin Valley without telling Minka, did you?” That was about three weeks ago.

“Ah, no, but, it took me a long time to learn that—that was something I needed to do.” Efran did his best to cover for his son-in-law, who was rolling his eyes on Ella’s other side.

She had further thoughts on that, but a sentry, Clough, stopped behind him to salute. Efran turned his head as Clough said, “Captain, a messenger just arrived from Eurus, but the Commander says you can talk with him tomorrow. He’s from the new Surchatain, Escarra, who expresses his gratitude for your men cleaning out the trolls from the area. He says they appear to be all gone.”

“Good. He’s not a troll himself, is he?” Efran asked warily.

Clough laughed, “No, sir, he’s Eurusian, and has a new Council to work with.”

“That’s good, then. Thank the Commander for me; I will talk with him tomorrow,” Efran said. Clough saluted and left with that message.

Disturbed, Efran looked down at his chicken. “This is new. I don’t like it.”

“What?” Minka asked, studying his plate, which looked fine to her. The men around them looked over, especially Quennel, who was wanting a diversion right now.

“Eurus expressing gratitude for anything, to put us off guard before they attack,” he muttered.

“Efran! Maybe he means it,” Minka protested.

“You don’t know anything about Eurus,” he told his Eurusian wife.

She scowled at him, but only observed, “Joshua’s playing in your gravy.”

“Oh.” He picked up his fork to give Joshua a bite of chicken, hoping to divert him. It worked, temporarily.

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Chapter 25

That evening, Efran was wakened by Jehan’s whisper: “Captain. Captain, you’re wanted in the courtyard.”

When Efran rose, Minka sprang up. “What is it?” she asked clearly.

“Just a sight on the northwestern hillside, Lady Minka,” Jehan said. She was already out of bed, grabbing her robe. She jammed her feet into her slippers by the bed to run out with Jehan ahead of Efran.

“Wait! You wait for me!” Efran hissed, trying to find his breeches in the dark.

Shortly, he was able to stagger out with his loins covered. In the courtyard, he found Minka trying to get past Coish at the gates. They were looking westward, and after a burst of light, Efran did, too.

Gevorgyan was hovering above the nest, emitting small bursts of colored flames into the air. As they fell back to the rocky hillside, they illumined two broken eggs rocking in the nest. Black Jonguitud, barely visible in the night, appeared to be lazily curled up south of the nest.

“Efran! The eggs hatched! She’s celebrating her babies being born! How long has it been?” Minka cried softly.

Without knowing exactly when the eggs had been laid, Efran guessed, “Six weeks?” Which was about right.

With men gathering in the courtyard and walking down to the far western bend of the old switchback to get a better view, Minka ran out, as well. So Efran followed to make sure she stopped on the switchback.

She did, and they all watched as two small, awkward bodies fell out of the broken shells to tumble over the sticks of the nest. One appeared to be all black, with one head, but bursts of light above it also illumined two small, wrinkled wings that it was shaking out. The other definitely had two heads on loosely waving necks, but its coloration was vacillating between the sandy beige of the rocks, the brown of the nest sticks, and even the random bursts of flames.

Minka cried, “Oh, I want to pet them!”

Efran was laughing, shaking his head, but Jonguitud lifted up. His black body slinked down to the nest, where he did something. Then he was scrabbling across the hillside toward the bend of the switchback with both babies in his mouths.

Before anyone could react, he had dropped both onto Minka. She caught the two-headed one, but Efran intercepted the black one that was energetically working its wings. They were about the size of a pink salmon, weighing maybe ten pounds each.

Minka gasped in delight, “Oh, Efran! Aren’t they adorable? And their sweet little scales are still soft!” She stroked one of the heads of the new baby while its body replicated the white of her night dress.

“Yes, adorable,” Efran said, watching in alarm as Gevorgyan, unquestionably the mother, rose up to fly pointedly and visibly toward them, her claws extended. Before those spread claws could descend on Minka, Efran tossed the black, winged baby up to Gevorgyan, which she caught in one foot. He grabbed the two-headed one off Minka to launch it in the air likewise, which Mother caught as well. Satisfied, she returned them to the nest, and presumably lectured Jonguitud for taking liberties with her babies.

With the fireworks ended, Efran firmly took Minka’s hand to lead her back to the bedroom. She was all happy and sighing, “Oh, wasn’t that fun? That was so nice of Jonguitud, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, except he didn’t ask her permission,” he groused, gathering her up in bed. She curled up to go right back to sleep, but he lay awake for a few minutes, reliving the sight of those wicked claws bearing down on his Minka. He muttered, “Stupid men,” then laid his chin on her head to drop off, exhausted.

At that time, Malaga was puttering in the kitchen of her own house, warmed by a nice peat fire. Deciding that this was a night to celebrate, she took out a bottle of Seger’s Best Brew, having been careful to separate out the safe bottles from the doctored ones. “These to the left are the safe ones. These to the right have been doctored,” she reminded herself. As a further safeguard, she had marked each doctored bottle with a tiny x on its label. The bottle that Roberg and Beaufoy had finished off was rinsed out and waiting in the box to go to the gaffer.

She had plans for the rest of the doctored bottles, but she must think of new ways to get the medicine into a few more men like the notary, who had taken her house away from her. Not all of them liked garlic butter, so, she would have to get creative. But—it was fun. She was surprised at how satisfying this new game was. “And I don’t need anybody’s help,” she said smugly.

Taking the safe bottle and her cup to the cozy gathering room, she put them on the little chairside table to walk around the room, caressing her treasured knickknacks that she had to hide from Windish because he didn't like them—he called them “clutter.” Not all of them were here; Roberg and Beaufoy had sold a few of the more valuable ones. They wouldn't do that again.

Snuggling into her favorite upholstered chair before the fire, she poured herself a cup of hard ale, because that's what most of the remaining safe bottles were. It didn't matter if she got drunk; she was all alone. But that's how she liked it: no one to order her around, to express concern about her, or to tell her what she should do. As she sipped, she continued her ruminations. Men needed doctoring. They required it. But they were on watch now, so she had to be careful and clever about getting their medicine to them. Oh, this was going to be fun.

And the ale was very good, with enough buzz to make her woozy. All too quickly, she finished off the bottle—which was small, to be sure. So she got up to fetch another from the kitchen, steadying herself with a hand on the wall as she went.

“Now. The bottles to the left have been doctored. Those to the right are the safe ones,” she reminded herself. She was surprised to find a mild ale among the safe bottles. To not get so drunk that she couldn't plan, she picked up that one.

Taking it back to her chair, she opened it to fill her cup. For a moment, she just held it to her lips while she watched the flames eagerly dance, as though in expectation. But a qualm arose about the doctoring. She had sudden unasked-for doubts. Was this really something she should do?

She lowered the cup, thinking about that. Then it occurred to her: she had already done it; she was already committed. So she raised her drink in a toast to the fire. Draining the cup, she found it unaccountably bitter for a mild ale. “Seger is getting so careless,” she muttered, putting a hand to her uneasy stomach. “Stupid men,” she said, refilling the cup. This she drank, and another, to dull the pain.

But instead, it worsened. “What?” Dropping the cup, she peered down at the label, and saw the tiny x she put on all doctored bottles. “Oh, I need to get the balm,” she said, irritated. The medicine wouldn't hurt her if she followed it up quickly enough with balm. Now, where had she put the balm?

She started to get up to go find it, but fell back into the chair, doubled over. When the pain was at its worst, she looked up to see Windish standing in front of her, almost on top of the fire. He was smiling. It was unnatural: he never smiled.

Suddenly she didn't hurt anymore. Still, she asked irritably, “What are you doing here?”

“I've come for you, Malaga,” he said.

“I don't want to go with you. I don't like you,” she told him.

“But we belong together,” he said.

“No, we don't. I'm right where I belong, finally, in my forever home. No one is ever going to take it away from me again.” She was glad that her stomach stopped hurting. This meant that there was nothing wrong with the bottle after all, and she could finish it off. Raising her hand, she found that she had lost the cup. She looked down at the spilled cup on the floor beneath her abnormally white hand resting on the upholstered chair arm. Somehow, the hand that she raised was not that one.

She looked up to see Windish directly in front of her. Still with that unnatural smile, he said, “Yes, Malaga, we belong together. We kill, you and I.” He held out his hand, and she found herself rising from the chair to meet him. They were both standing atop the fire, but she felt nothing.

“I don’t want to be with you,” she protested. Whatever he was now, there was nothing left of the Windish she had married. Another mental step would have taken her to the realization that neither was she the girl she had once been. But such a step was beyond her now.

In malicious delight, he said, “But here you are, with me. We kill, and you killed more than I did! And we will be together forever. Come,” he ordered, as he had ordered her around all their married life.

Against her will, she found herself leaving with him while the other part of her sank back in the cozy chair, cold and still.

And Marguerite, in her own chapel home, sat upright from a sound sleep. She looked around the dark room, Wendt asleep beside her. Then she put a hand over her face, murmuring, “Oh no, no.”

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on October 15th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

AUTHOR’S NOTES:

I previously used Chapter 9’s riddles in [Games of God and Men: Book Six of the Latter Annals of Lystra](#) after finding them in the *Arts Forge Middle English Book of Riddles*, translated by Tobin James Mueller.

Regarding forgiveness (as Efran felt compelled to show Neale), I see no better example than Corrie Ten Boom’s [experience](#).

Here are the Scriptures that Madgwick found which illumined the prophet Zenz’s warning to the trolls:

[Revelation 16:14, 16:](#)

“These are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. . . . And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called *Har-megiddo*”—which means “hill of Megiddo,” an ancient fortress in the Jezreel Valley. The battle itself is called Armageddon.

[Revelation 19:17-18:](#)

“Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in mid-heaven, ‘Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders—flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.’”

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran at the Faire* (Book 26)

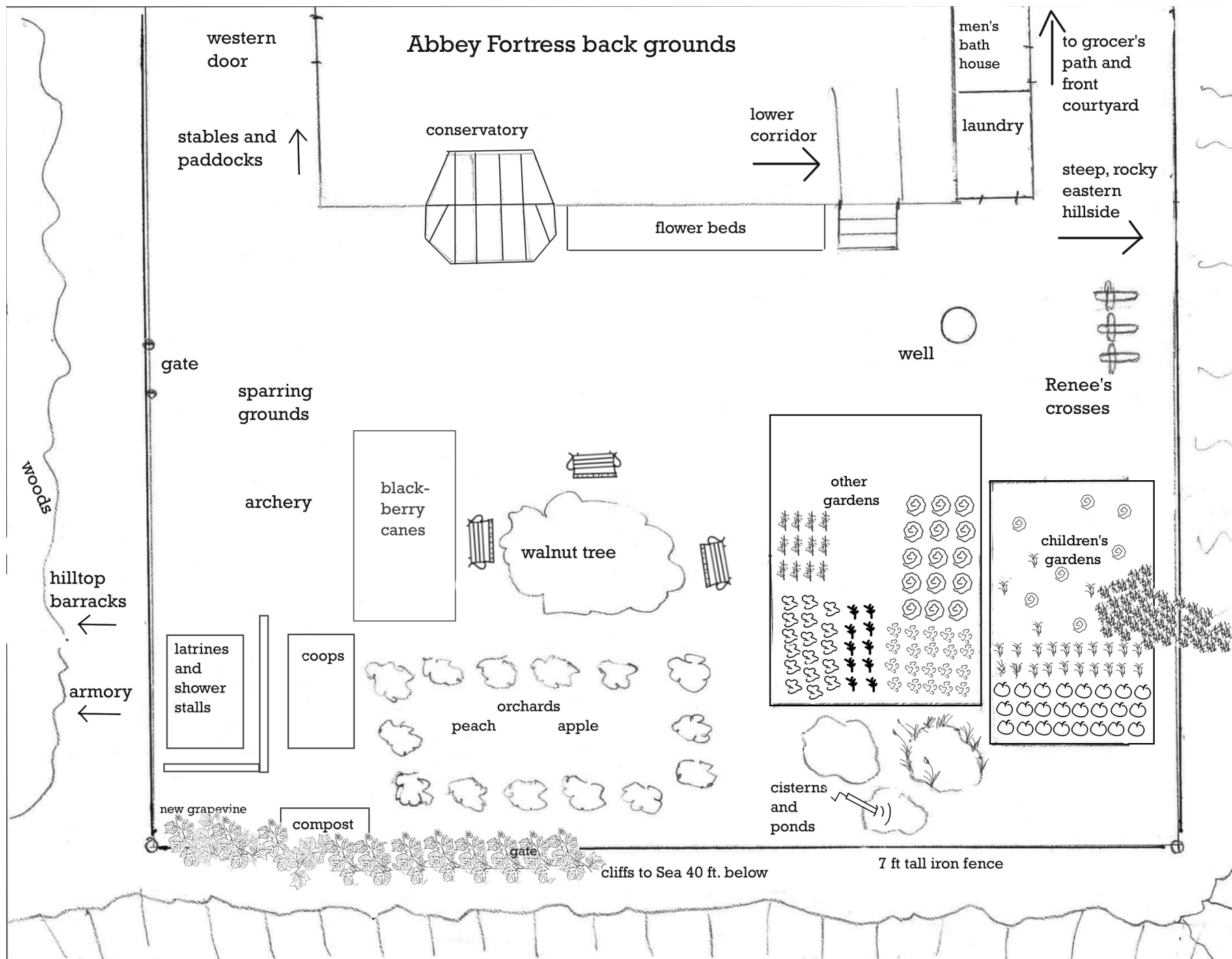
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Aceto—ah SEE tow	Hadewidis—hay DWEH dis
Adele—ah DELL	Hartshough—HART soh
Allyr—AL er	Heus—rhymes with the noun <i>use</i>
Arenivas—air en EEV us	hors d'oeuvres—awr durvz
Ares—AIR eez	Imelda—eh MEL dah
Arne—arn	Ino—EE no
Auber—aw BER	Ionadi—ee YON ah dee
Averne—ah VURN	Jehan—JAY han
Barrueta—bare ooh ET ah	Jonguitette—john kweh TET
Beaufoy—BOH foy	Justinian—jus TIN ee un
Bennard—beh NARD	Kaas—kahs
Besiana—BES ee an ah	Kele—kay lay
Bortniansky—bort nee AN ski	Kelsey—KELL see
Brogna—BRONE ya	Koschat—KOS chat
Bullara—bu LAR ah	Kraken—KRAY ken
Calix—KAY lix	Leila—LYE la
Capur—KAH pir	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
cévapi—chae VAP ee	Leneghan—LEN eh gan
Clough—chloh	Ley—lay
Conte—cahnt	<i>lignéer</i> —lean YEAR
Culliton—CULL eh tun	Lilou—LEE loo
Cyneheard—SIGN herd	Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
Delano—deh LAN oh	Loseby—LOWS bee
Deneau—deh NO	Madea—mah DAY ah
dénouement—day noo MAHN	Malaga—MAL ah gah
Dileonardo—dee lee on ARE doh	Marguerite—mar ger EET
diva—DEE vah	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Efran—EFF run	Megiddo—meh GEE doh (hard g)
Elowen—EL oh win	Melott—meh LOT
Elvey—ELL vee	Milo—ME low
Endelion—en DELL ee un	Minka—MINK ah
en masse—ahn mahs (all together, all at once)	Minogue—men OGE (hard g)
Ennemon—EN eh mund	Moises—MOIZ ez
Enon—EE nun	Mumme—mum
Escarra—ess CARE ah	Nevares—neh VAIR ez
Estes—ESS tis	Neylon—NAY lun
Eurus—YOUR us	Nibor—NEE bor
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	Nomus—NO mis
Eustace—YOUS tis	Nyarko—nuh YAR koh
Eviron—ee VIRE un	Onfroi—ON froy
Faciane—fah see ANN	Ori—OR ee
Folliott—FOH lee uht	phyllo—FEE low
Gaea—GAY uh	Pia—PEE ah
Gevorgyan—geh VOR geh yan (hard g's)	Picco—PICK oh
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)	Pieta—pie ATE ah
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)	pique—peek
Gores—GORE ez	Pleyel—PLAY el
Goss—gahs	Ploense—plonse
Graeme—GRAY em	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Guerry—GEHR ee	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran at the Faire* (Book 26)

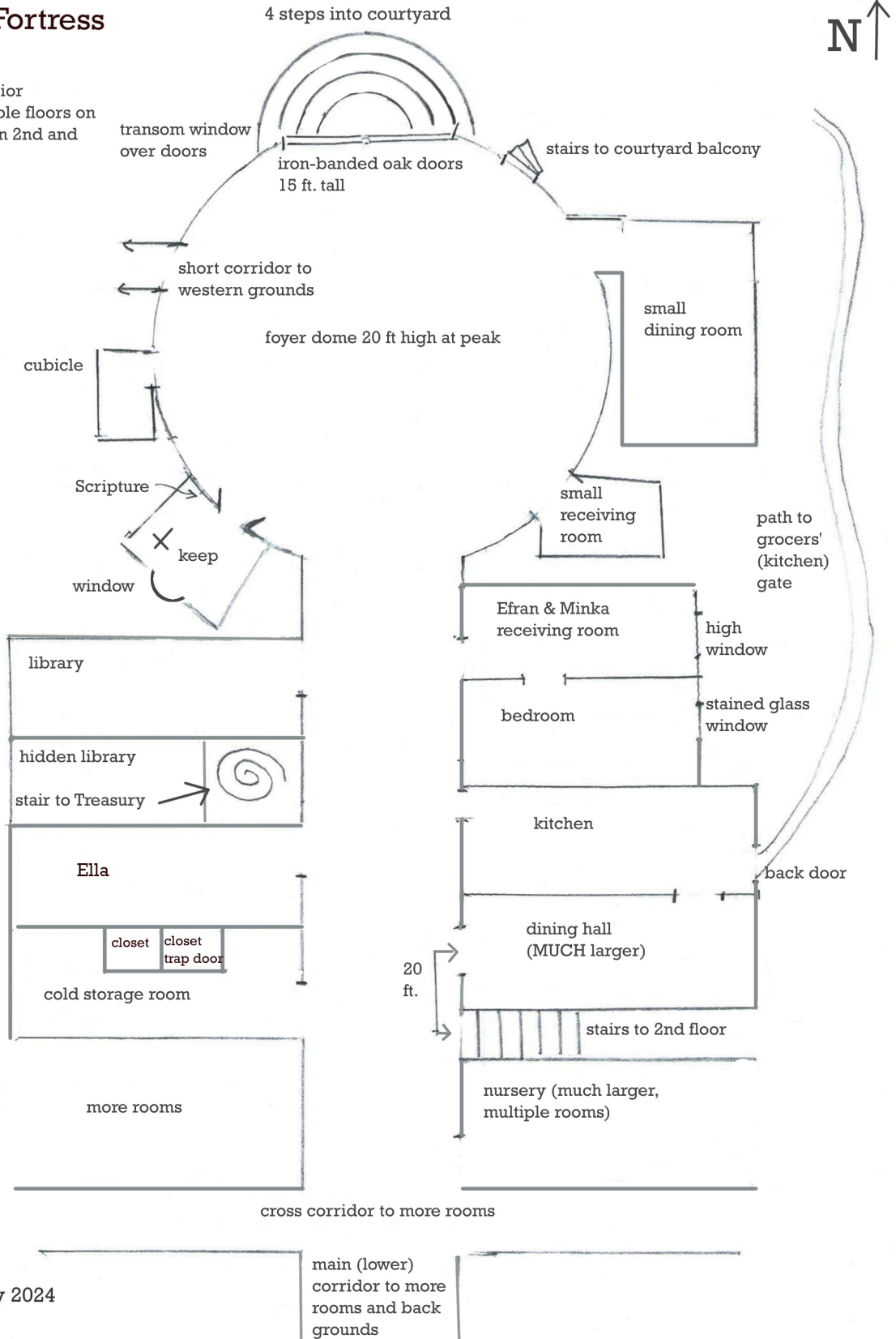
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Prie Mer—pre MARE
prosciutto—pruh SHOO toh
Reinagle—REN ah gull
Ricci—REE chee
Robello—roh BEH low
Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee
Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
Seger—SEE gur
sommelier—soh muh LEE eh
Squitieri—squeh tee AIR ee
Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Stief—steef
Stites—stights
Suco—SUE coh
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Telo—TEE low
Tera—TEE rah
Teschner—TESH nur
Tica—TEE kah
Tiras—TEER us
tympanum—TIM pah nuhm
Ure—YOUR ay
Velie—veh LEE
Venegas—VEN eh gus
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
Verbeke—VER beek
Verlice—ver LEESE
Verrin—VAIR en
victuals—VIH tuhls
Viglian—VIG lee en
Vories—VORE eez
Windry—WIN dree
Wirrin—WEER en
Woldemariam—wohl de MARE ee um
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



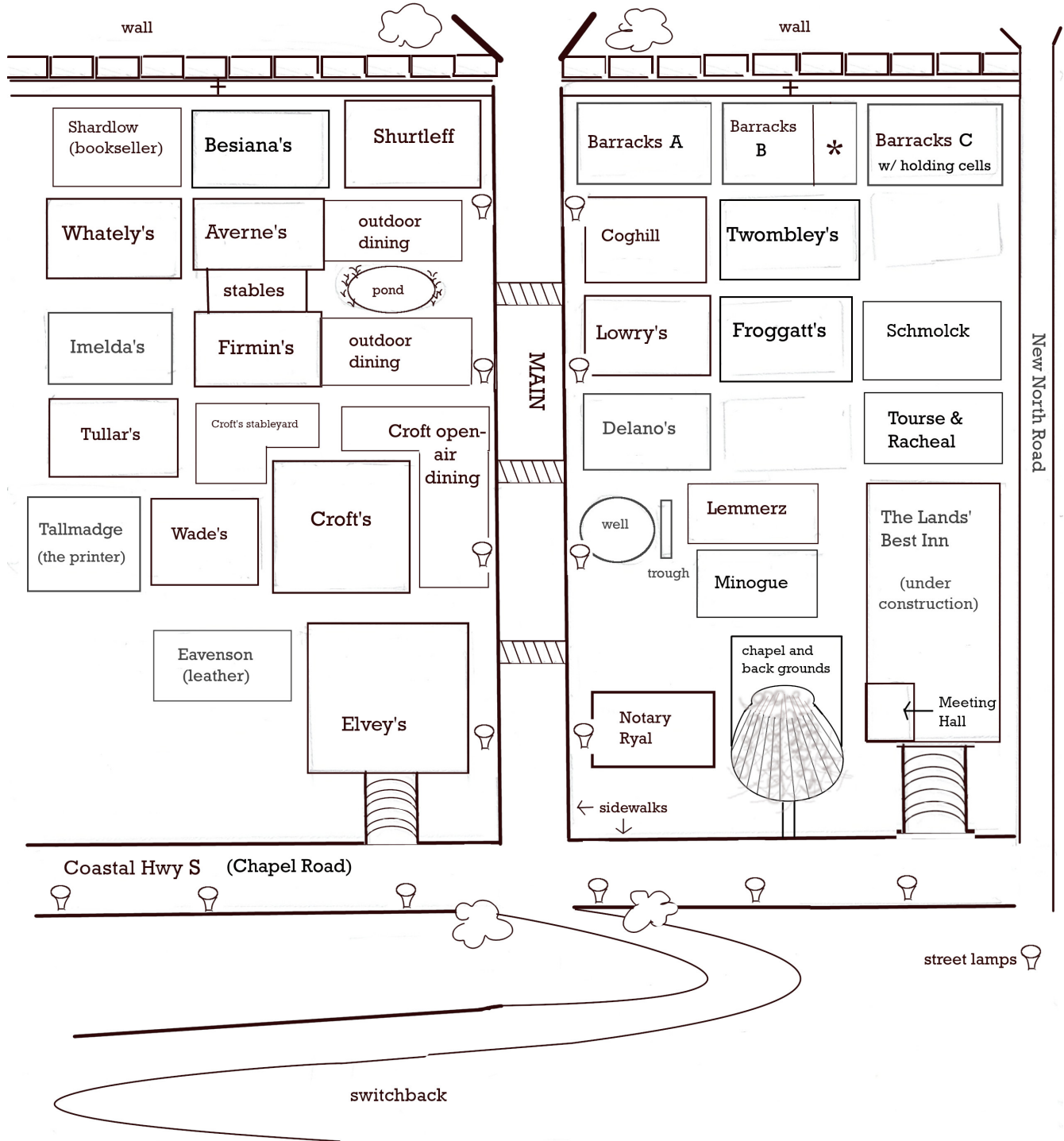
NOT TO SCALE

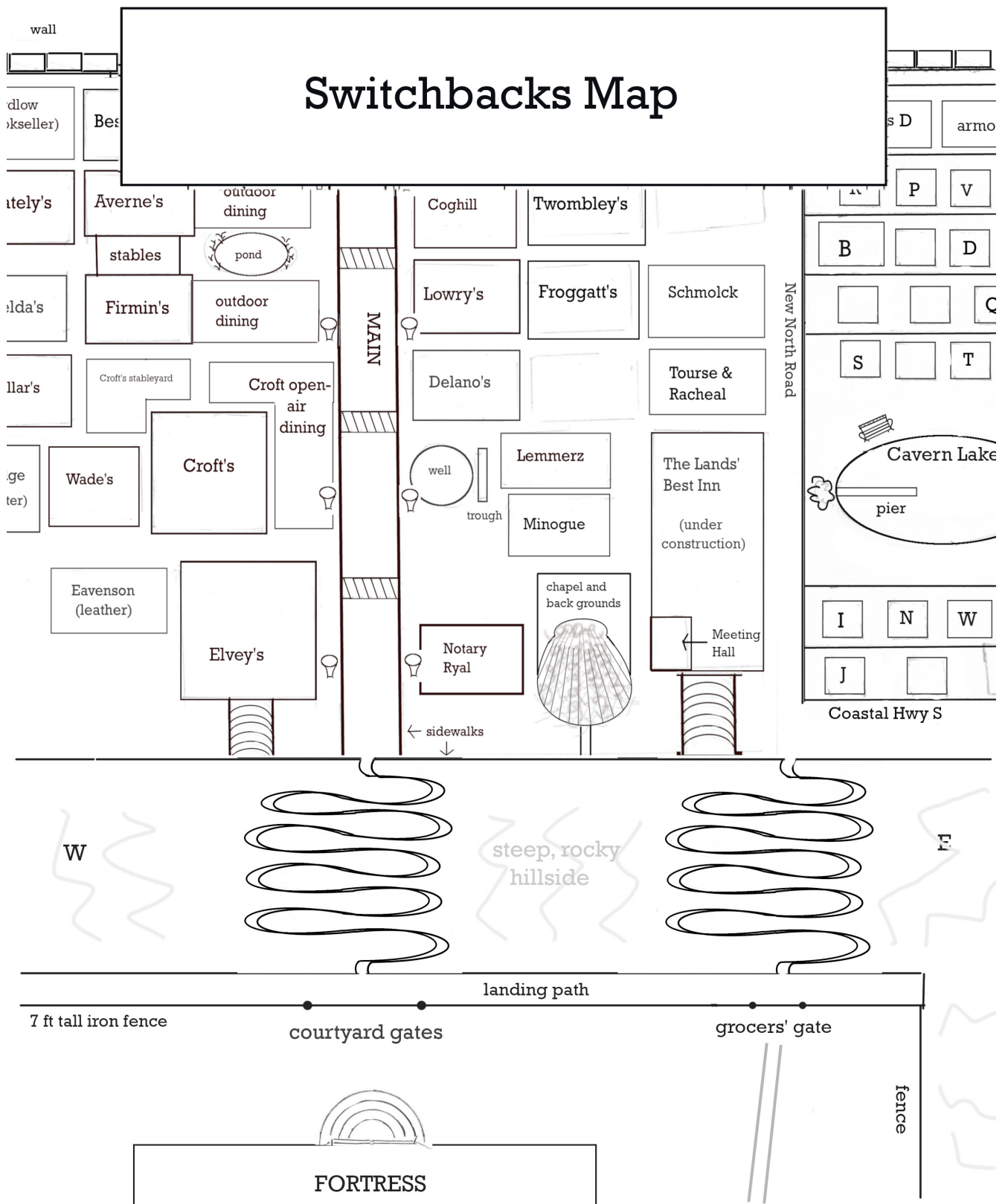
Robin Hardy 2024

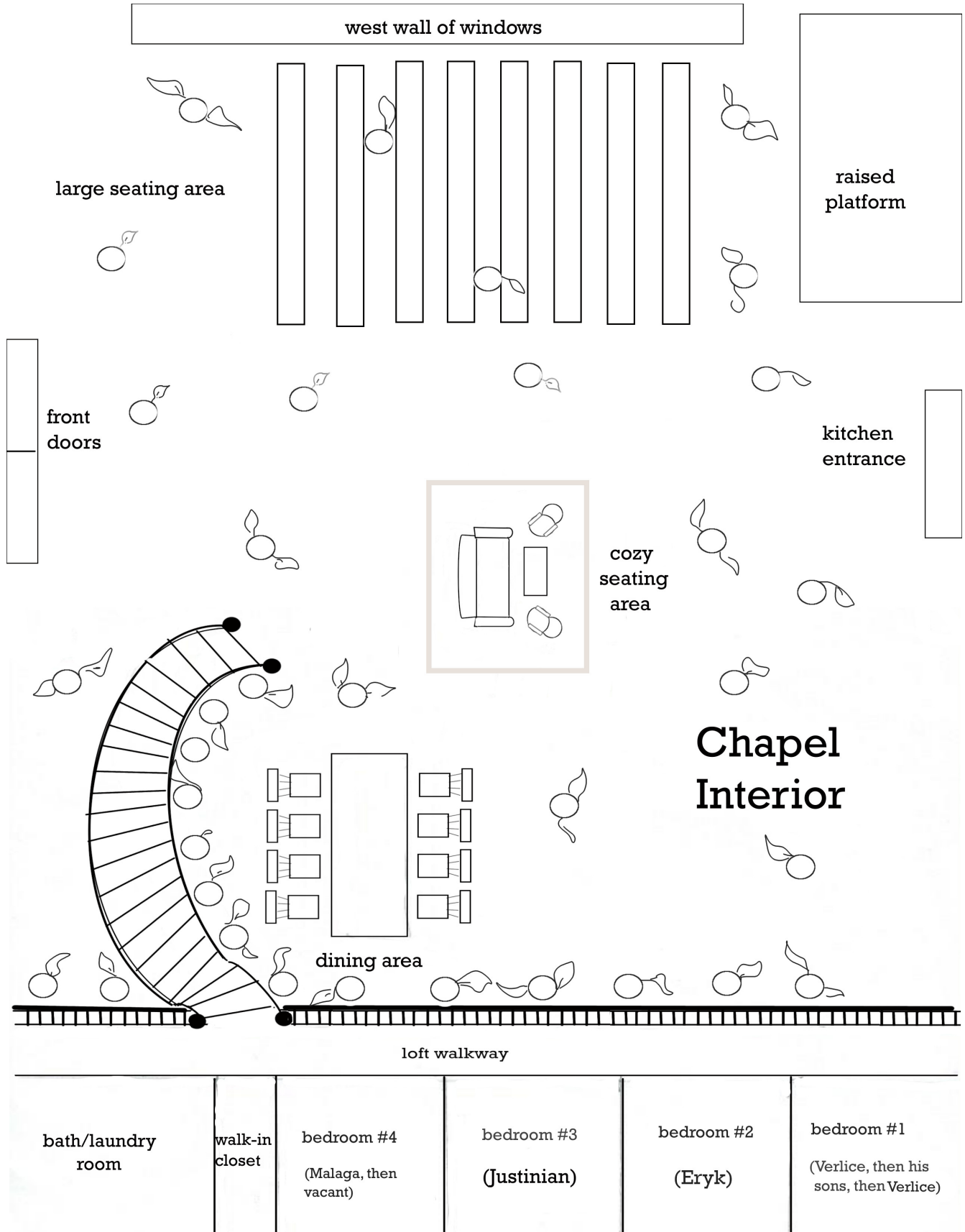
Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements







large seating area

west wall of windows

raised platform

front doors

kitchen entrance

cozy seating area

Chapel Interior

dining area

loft walkway

bath/laundry room

walk-in closet

bedroom #4
(Malaga, then vacant)

bedroom #3
(Justinian)

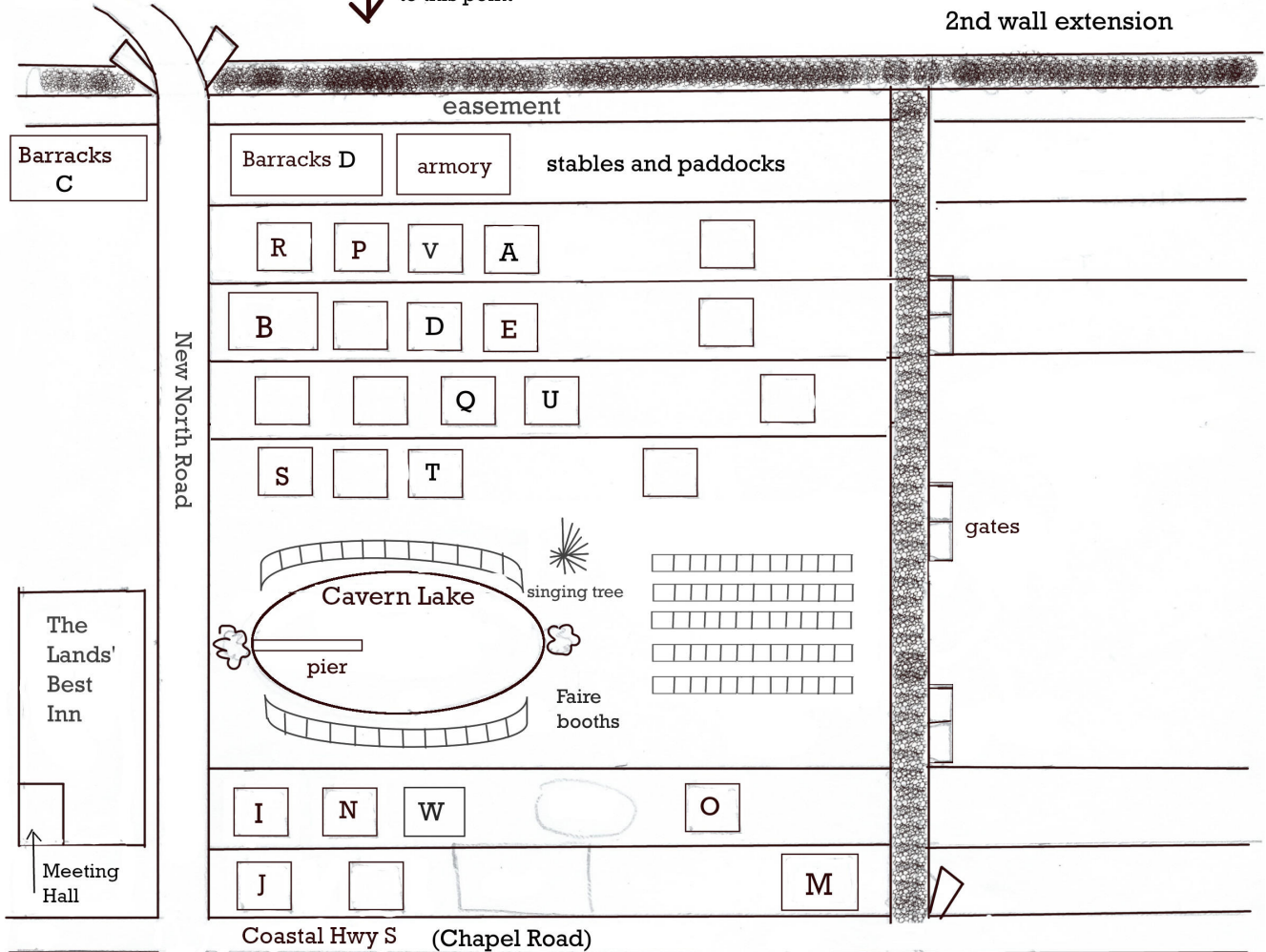
bedroom #2
(Eryk)

bedroom #1
(Verlice, then his sons, then Verlice)

road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

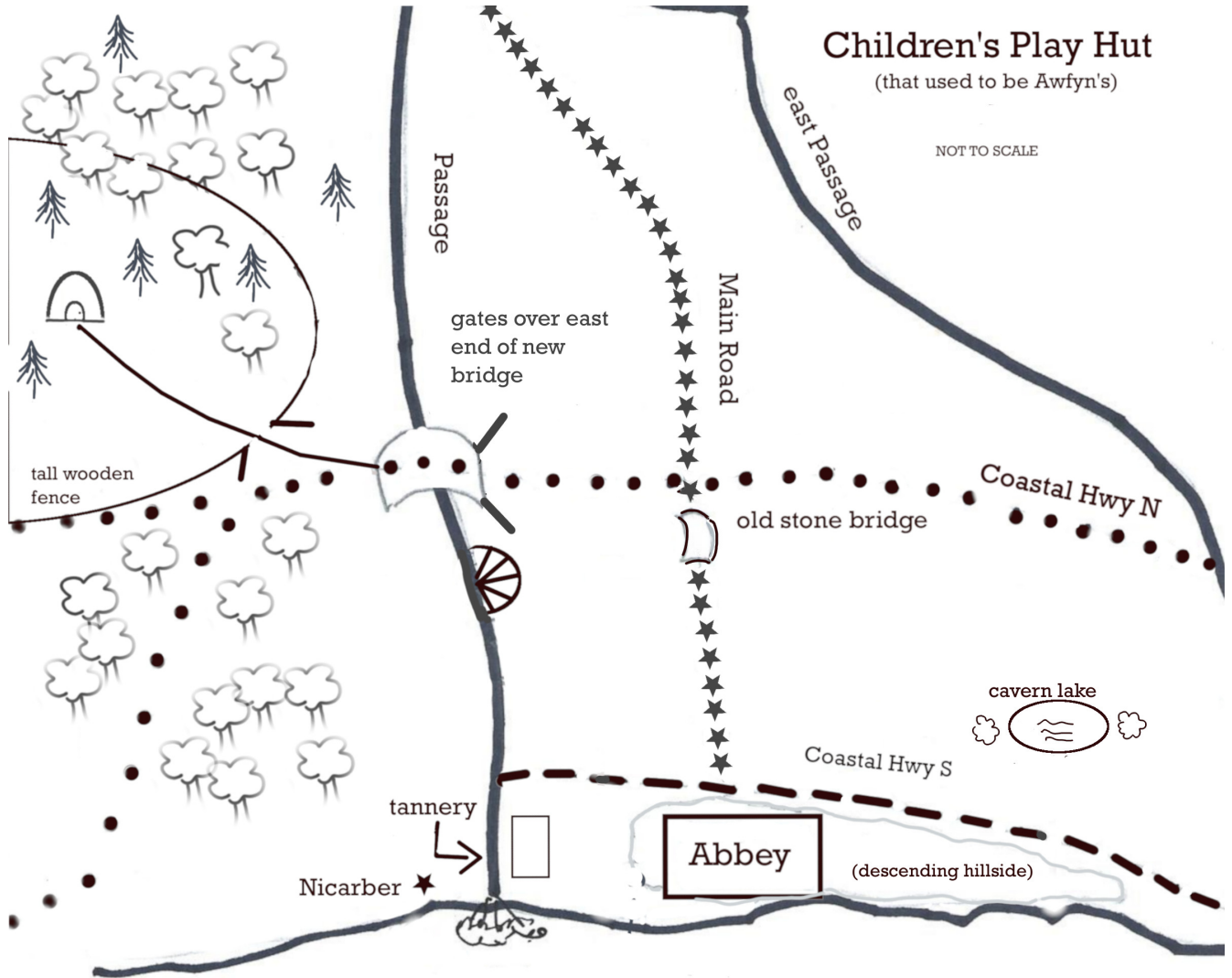
East Central Abbey Lands

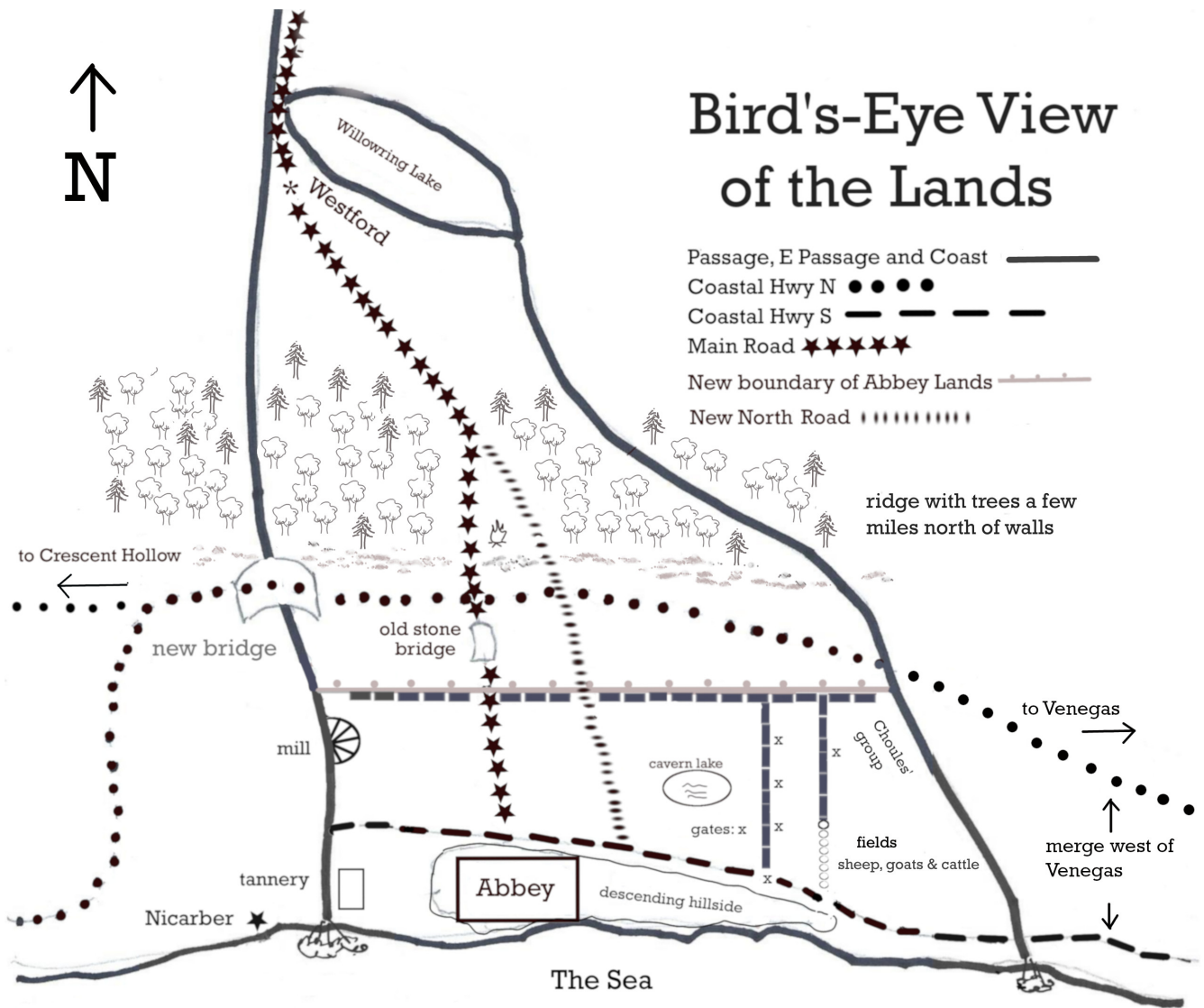
↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point



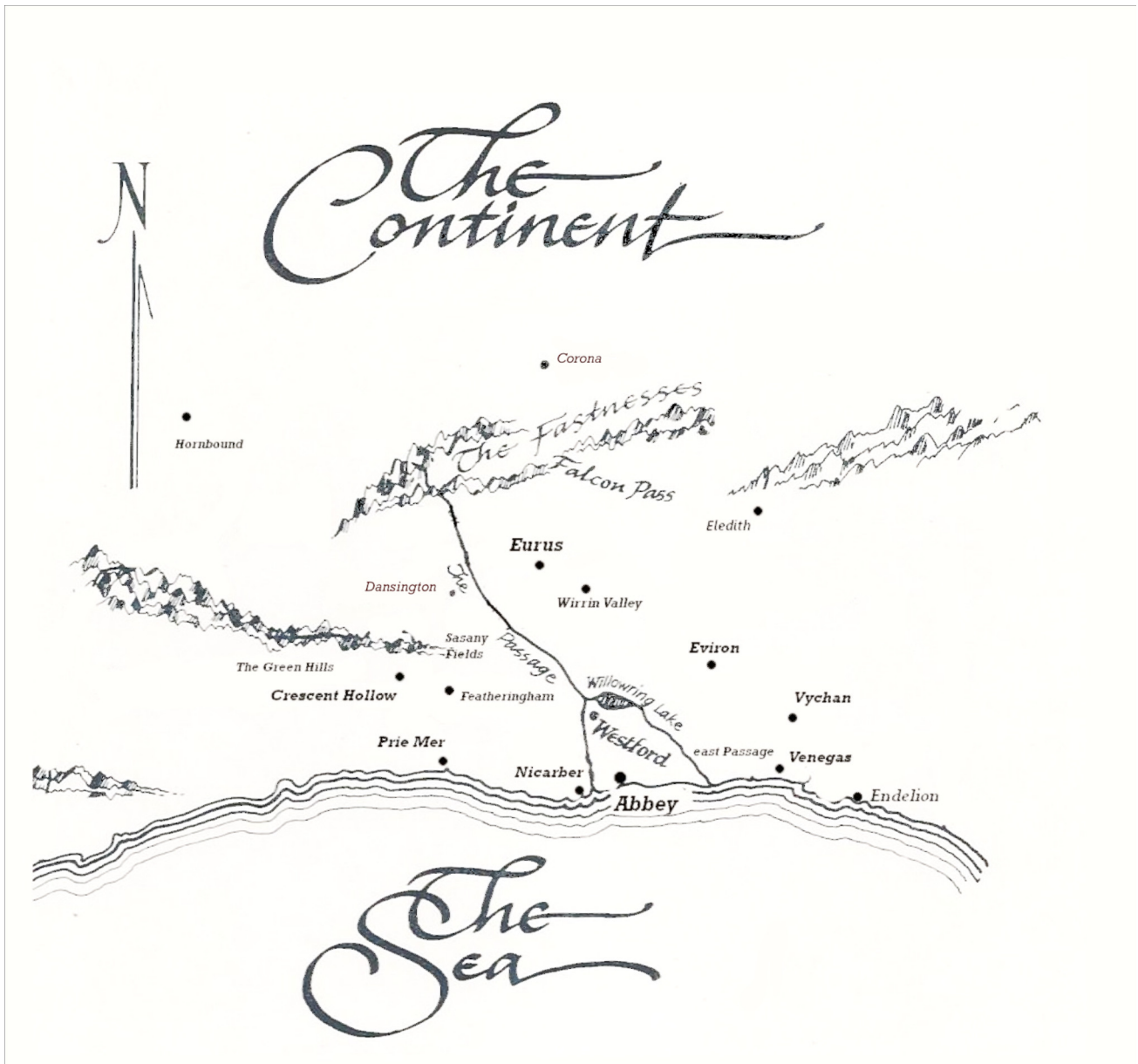
new switchback
to courtyard gates

- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring's House
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office
- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry & Eryk
- W - Barrueta & Colletta





NOT TO SCALE



Rondi and Mathurin
at the Faire (Book 26:
Lord Efran at the Faire)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



Welll, I'm not sure what I've done, but here it is. The backdrop for the Faire is [Nardey Bush Hill](#)¹, which looks like a wonderful place to have a Faire or a troll attack, either. Rondi is portrayed by this [ethereal girl](#)², and I drafted [this young man](#)³ for the part of Mathurin. (You'll remember he got a hair cut.)

Most of our Faire performers came from the Library of Congress. From left to right directly behind Mathurin and Rondi, the clown in the teal coat is from [here](#)⁴, the wacky sailor [here](#)⁵, and the guitalele player [here](#)⁶. The lady in pink and her accessories are found [here](#)⁷. Both stilt walkers came from [over here](#)⁸. I found the circus wagon [here](#)⁹ and tent [here](#)¹⁰.

In the background, the dragon Gevorgyan (in the process of finishing off Trollbrunnen) can be found at [Pixabay](#)¹¹. Trollbrunnen's body came from [here](#), and the spines on his feet were actually on loan from a [hatpin urchin](#)¹². You might barely make out that he's spewing one last troll there. Yes, it's a naked man, and not a pretty sight. Consider yourself [forewarned](#)¹³.

Robin Hardy
June 4, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

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