



The Stories of

The Abbey of St. Benedict
on the Sea

Book 20

Lord Efran and
De' Ath

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

“Dam’ Polonti overdo everything.”

The flat observation was uttered by the Polonti Captain Efran, who stood with his hands on his hips staring up at the invincible barricade which the Abbey Lands Polonti (and Southerners) had erected over a period of days while waiting on yet another Eurussian attack, this one led by the new Surchatain Wyse. The same Polonti (and Southerners) had turned away this attack only three days ago, greatly assisted by the impregnable barricade, constructed under the direction of Commander Wendt.

So, while Wendt could conceivably be blamed for the current dilemma regarding said barricade, this was unthinkable to Efran, who simply blamed the most blameworthy group he could think of.

Four other men were standing around him to regard the barricade as well. The Steward Estes, Administrator DeWitt, building engineer Gerard, and stonemason Ernst were deep in thought, or appeared to be. Finally, DeWitt noted, “Well, they were able to take down the barbed wire over the road and fill in the pit in front of the gate, so there’s that.”

Efran walked over to the south end of the barricade abutting the main east-west road. Yes, the barbed-wire fencing had been coiled up and removed to a storage shed. Standing on the road, Efran had a clear view of the east Lands, where two large funeral pyres still burned. Many more wounded Eurussians lay in doctor Coghill’s quarters and backyard. The overflow of wounded Eurussians occupied Ryal and Giardi’s spare room and yard.

Efran returned to the group at the barricade as they all looked north toward the solitary gate in this wall. In contrast, there were three gates in the first east-facing wall several thousand feet to the west of this newer wall. Ernst hesitantly asked, “Before they filled the pit in front of the gate, they took out the iron spikes, didn’t they?”

“Depends. Were they Polonti?” Efran asked.

Estes, also Polonti, chided, “Now you’re just being fractious, Efran.”

Efran swung to him. “‘Fractious.’ I like that. It will be my new title: ‘Efran, Lord Fractious.’”

Half-groaning, DeWitt gestured to a nearby soldier. As he came up saluting, DeWitt told him, “Go find Lady Minka.” She was the only one who could deal with Efran when he was being fractious.

“Yes, Administrator.” The earnest young Polonti saluted and ran toward the nearest switchback, the new one. Seeing her elsewhere, however, he changed course.

Efran watched him pensively without seeing his target. “I hope she’s not doing anything important, because she won’t be in a minute.”

Gerard exhaled. “Well, the point is, it would be extremely difficult to cut a door in the barricade, and impossible to take down, with all the concrete. Plus, if we’re ever attacked again, we’ll want it just as it is. So, let’s just hang a gate over the road and call it done.”

“Agreed,” Efran said, turning to walk toward the switchbacks. He had decided to go find Minka himself. In the late afternoon, he headed into the golden light of the lowering sun.

Shaking his head, DeWitt told Estes, “Efran’s looking to fend off another attack. He needs one a week to feel useful.”

“Apparently,” Estes said as he and DeWitt turned to follow Efran toward the new switchback. However, Minka was already riding her little mare down the old switchback even as the young Polonti messenger was ascending it. When he drew up to her with his message, they both looked over at the Captain walking up the new switchback, facing away from them. So Minka turned Rose back up the old switchback to walk over to the new one and began descending it to meet him. The young Polonti started back to his post below.

Watching, DeWitt wondered, “Did we just make everything more complicated by adding a switchback?”

“Probably,” Estes said. Glancing up, he said, “Ah. Kitchen carts blocking the new one at the top anyway. Let’s go on up the old.”

As they began up the old switchback, the faerie trees at the bottom tapped them lightly and swayed in circles to the east. “They keep doing that. What does that mean?” DeWitt asked.

Estes said, “I think it has something to do with the new switchback, and the fact that there are no faerie trees at that entrance.”

DeWitt muttered, “I don’t know that having them there is a great idea. Ow!” He reacted at the whack in the back from a faerie tree branch.

On the new switchback, Efran came upon Minka descending on Rose about halfway down. He told her, “Come with me to Ryal’s.” And he took the reins to turn and walk Rose down himself, with Minka riding. Passing them on the other switchback, DeWitt and Estes nodded to her and she smiled at them. Efran had his head down, leading the mare.

Minka didn’t try to talk to him while he was three paces ahead, so just watched his backside as he led the mare off the switchback and down the road to the notary shop. (What she noticed was that he was tossing his hair out of his eyes again.) He tied the mare at the post and turned to lift Minka down, although she was perfectly capable of getting off this horse. Then he took her hand to walk her into the shop.

He paused at the bell’s tinkling, looking back at it with red eyes while Ryal waited silently at the counter. Efran whispered, “If this were one of the Librarian’s books, I would walk in it to experience this shop forever.”

Ryal lowered his brows at him and Minka’s eyes started watering. “Freeing Martyn . . . finding out about Ella . . . the Destroyer . . . the bequest and the charter . . . marrying Minka,” Efran murmured, looking to her. “My whole life is bound up here.”

She leaned on his arm, and Giardi came from the back to watch quietly. “Nonetheless,” Efran said briskly, advancing to the counter. “Hello, Giardini,” he interrupted himself, smiling. She was spending a great deal of time tending the wounded Eurussian soldiers that lay in their backyard. And since she had been blessed at birth with the gift of helping, almost all of them were recovering.

“Hello, Efran. Minka,” she said quietly, fondly.

“I can’t get her to laugh anymore,” he complained to Minka.

“Because you’re making us all cry,” she said with adoring eyes.

“Nonetheless,” he repeated, turning back to Ryal, “did you research the title on the charter like I asked you? I have a new title now. I shall no longer be ‘Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands,’ but ‘Efran, Lord Fractious.’ How’s that?” He regarded them all, adding, “It was Estes’ idea.”

Minka and Giardi looked at Ryal with suppressed smiles. He sighed, removing his glasses to wipe them. Efran said ominously, “Uh oh. That’s a bad sign, when he takes off the spectacles. That means bad news.” Minka and Giardi both laughed at him, then.

Ryal exhaled, “Efran, it took me about fifteen seconds to research your question. The title is legal nomenclature established for hundreds of years. As long as you hold the charter, the title is irrevocable. I understand that it makes you uneasy, which is why I encouraged you to simply use ‘Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands’ as you have been doing for almost two years now.”

“All right,” Efran said in vague resignation. Lowering his head to Minka, he asked, “Where is Joshua?”

“Playing with the children,” she said, smiling.

“Well, we can’t have that,” Efran said, mildly disapproving. “Let’s go interfere.”

As he turned to the door, Minka looked back to say, “Thank you, Ryal. Giardi.” She smiled; Ryal rolled his eyes and Giardi did laugh.

Outside, Efran lifted Minka onto the mare, which she almost protested, because it made it more difficult for her to get her right leg over the saddle. But she got settled while he untied the reins and began leading the mare toward the switchback (the old one, right here in front of them). “Efran, why are you sad?” she asked quietly.

Breathing out, he stopped to draw the reins back over the mare’s head and put them in her hands. Then he walked beside her, enabling them to talk. “Neale. Lyte. Dobell. Geibel. DePew. Walch. Other men that are gone and won’t ever be coming back,” he said. These were all men he trusted who betrayed him. That he counted Neale as not ever coming back was telling.

“Efran, there are a hundred times that many who have been loyal to you, ready to lay down their lives with you,” she said. “Don’t let the few spoil what the many have done.”

He stopped to gather her up while she sat on the mare, which stopped as well. “You’re right. You’re always pulling me back.”

“Well, then. Let’s run up and see what Joshua is doing.” She kicked the mare to a reluctant lope so that Efran had to trot to keep up with them.

She gave up Rose in the courtyard while Efran patted the shoulders of the gate guards—a gesture he seldom made unprovoked. But they reacted as though he had showered them with royals. As he and she went up the steps into the foyer, he muttered, “Polonti are like dogs—pet them once and they’ll follow you anywhere.”

She abruptly turned to block his steps. “Stop disparaging people I love. They taught me that there are good men in the world.”

He picked her up, laughing. “You are my barricade. Won’t ever be hacked down.”

They lingered in the foyer just to hold each other for a little while. Someone entered behind them, but Efran didn't care. He was still trying to find equilibrium after the upheaval of the insurrection closely followed by another well-funded attack from Eurus—this one led by the former Commander of the Abbey army, whom Efran had hand-picked. These blows required the joint stabilizing of his faith in the Crucified and the love of his wife to keep him from falling off the edge.

Behind them they heard, “Lord Efran?”

He reluctantly released her to turn to his questioner, a man. “Yes?”

A Southerner in his mid-forties bowed. He was clean-shaven, with short, dark hair graying at the temples, dressed in well-made travel clothes, and attended by two men likewise dressed. “Lord Efran, I am Lord Verlice of Eurus. These are my associates Wiatt and Gastrell. Pardon the broken seal; your gate guards and door guards all wished to know why I should be permitted to accost you.” So saying, he handed Efran an open letter. Then the lord turned to bow to Minka. She studied him intently, as something about him resonated in her memory.

Taking the letter, Efran glanced smiling at the door guards Finn and Ley, who met his eyes in self-satisfaction. Efran looked down at the short letter, then extended it to Minka. She read silently:

“Dearest Efran and my darling Sybil,

“The bearer of this letter is Lord Verlice, a longtime friend whom Sybil may remember. If you will, please entertain him as an honest man deserving of your attention.

“With much love and much desire to see you again,

“Your Auntie Marguerite”

Below that was written,

“To my priceless gem:

“Once again, your Gargoyle proves himself indomitable against long odds. Henceforth, I shall afflict him no more with expressions of my deep desires.

“Endlessly Pining,

“Your Own Justinian.

“PS. Shockingly, I know little about the bearer of this letter. Therefore, see above note.”

Both short messages were easily recognizable, both from the handwriting and the wording.

Minka looked up to Efran to nod, handing him back the letter. He glanced at Skalbeck, standing at the door of Doane's cubicle, to ask, “Please have three plates and ales brought to the small dining room.”

“Yes, Captain,” Skalbeck saluted, turning to trot down the corridor to the kitchen. Meanwhile, the visitors were studying the faerie tree roots descending in the grooves of the arching stone dome of the foyer and down its walls to disappear through the floor.

Efran then thought to ask Minka, “Do you want to eat now?”

“No, I’ll wait,” she said. “But let me go check on Joshua, then I’ll come join you.”

“Thank you,” he said, watching her walk out of the foyer down the corridor. Then he gestured to the open door of the small dining room with the letter. “In here, Lord Verlice.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Verlice said. He and his men followed Efran into the elegant room to sit around the oval table.

While waiting for both Minka and dinner for the travelers, Efran tapped the letter on the table as he cast about for opening small talk. Verlice and his men settled into their chairs, regarding the faerie tree roots that also grew down the walls of this room. Gastrell put out a hand to feel one root. Although hard wood, it shifted slightly under his touch. He quickly drew back his hand.

Efran asked, “How did you come to know our Marguerite, Lord Verlice?”

Verlice turned to him, both men momentarily gauging the other. “I was frequently a guest of various councilors who all courted her favor, thus we often attended the same dinners or soirées. I found her a refreshing change from your standard Eurasian hanger-on. She required no help from anyone, but I was able to do her a small service when Surchatain Rowbotham’s head tax assessor began looking lustfully around her estate. He lost interest after my middling efforts,” Verlice said with mild sarcasm.

“Rowbotham,” Efran mused. “I don’t know him.”

“He preceded Loizeaux, Lord Efran. Fortunately, there was no question of foul play in his death; Rowbotham suffered a broken neck when his horse abruptly declined to jump a hedge. Loizeaux appeared in the midst of circling councilors who settled on him when none of them could gain majority support. While they worked to undermine him, he hung on for twenty-one years, until being murdered by an outsider,” Verlice narrated.

Yes, Cennick, Efran thought. And after that violent usurpation, there had been an almost unbroken string of usurpers murdered by other usurpers, all who ruled only briefly.

At that time, Madea’s kitchen assistant Loghry rolled in a cart from which he unloaded plates of sausages, kale sprinkled with olive oil and crushed pine nuts, freshly baked twisty rolls, apple pie, and mild ale. The mingled aromas made the men sit up, and they quickly picked up their pewter utensils.

The kitchen assistant looked at Efran in concern. “Do you wish a plate, Captain?”

“Not yet, Loghry, thank you,” Efran said, tightening his stomach against the growling. He was always hungry, but knew better than to eat as often as he wished. Loghry nodded and rolled the cart out again.

While the visitors dug into their plates, Efran asked idly, “Did you know Loizeaux’s son Wyse?”

Verlice stopped eating and slowly put down his fork.

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Chapter 2

Verlice's men likewise laid down their utensils. Minka entered at that time, glancing around at the silence. Efran stood to pull out a chair for her, so his guests stood. She ordered, "Sit down and eat."

The visitors complied, but the bodyguard waited to see their lord pick up his fork again before they did. Efran asked her (again), "Do you want a plate?"

"No, I'll wait," she said, still assessing the quiet room.

"What is Joshua doing?" Efran asked.

"Sleeping," she said, smiling. "He and Nakam, together, in his large bassinet that is now almost too small."

He looked pleased, then asked Verlice, "You were saying? About Wyse."

Verlice hesitated. "Yes. I only saw him briefly once or twice when he was growing up. Loizeaux did not like to parade his children in front of courtiers or guests. But I saw hundreds of Surchatain Wyse's troops skulk back into Eurus days ago, and it was reported to me that the man himself, heavily cloaked, entered a back door of the palace day before yesterday. Needless to say, his future as Surchatain is cloudy," Verlice said, then took another bite.

"And Councilor Baldassare?" Efran asked. Verlice paused to look questioningly at Wiatt and Gastrell. They shook their heads; Verlice said, "I've not seen him recently, Lord Efran."

"Because he was down here as well, and detained by us for a short time," Efran said, shifting. "We sent him back up to Eurus with the treaty that he, Wyse and Inglese signed so that we would let the Surchatain and the Councilor go."

Verlice ate without comment for a few minutes, then said, "If you would, please tell me briefly how you managed, again, to turn away what should have been crushing numbers."

Efran leaned back in satisfaction. "Commander Wendt had received intelligence as to where and when they would attack, so we prepared the barricade you might have noticed to the east of the switchbacks. When they did come, I invited Wyse—whom I knew as Lyte—up onto the barricade for hand-to-hand combat. As soon as he was up, I pulled him down on the inside, then we invited his officers to come negotiate for his release."

The three Eurusians stopped eating with their mouths full. Verlice swallowed, then laughed, "That's it?"

"Mostly," Efran said. He looked over to Minka, who was quietly studying Verlice.

She glanced at her husband, then said, "Efran has a way of provoking people to act rashly."

Verlice took a swig of mild ale, then looked at the label. "That's very good. We've a newly expanded brewery that's doing well with beer."

“We have a hard ale if you’d care to try it,” Efran said, gesturing to someone outside the doorway. A figure in red stepped up to salute, and Efran told him, “Bring us three hard ales, please.” Although Efran was not aware of any motivation but hospitality, inciting cagey guests to drunkenness was a good tactic for learning more than they wanted to tell you. And Lord Verlice was very careful in what he said.

“Captain,” Efran’s man acknowledged, flashing past the door.

“I suppose we’ll try it, then,” Verlice said with brief smile, leaning back. Then he turned his eyes on Minka. “And here’s Chataine Sybil. But I suppose you don’t go by ‘Chataine’ any more, do you?”

“No,” she said, feeling Efran tense up beside her, as he did whenever she drew a man’s attention. “Nor Sybil, actually; I’m Minka.”

“I see,” Verlice said, glancing at Efran, whose face was turned to his wife.

“But I do remember you,” she went on, and they all looked at her.

She was silent for so long that Verlice began to look uncomfortable. Efran looked fixedly at her. “Tell me,” he finally said.

She regarded him a moment, then turned to ask, “Who is your father, Lord Verlice?”

Efran watched the blood drain from his face. His men sat with downcast eyes. Verlice inhaled, then murmured, “You don’t miss much, do you?”

“We will tell no one,” Minka said. Efran quickly looked back at Verlice.

Verlice laughed lightly, glancing aside. He raised his fingers briefly to his lips, then said, “Lord Takoda of Wirrin Valley, which is just five acres of farmland east of Eurus. Very rich, fertile area, site of a prize-winning brewery. He is dead now, but I and my sons run the place. . . . How did you know?”

Minka opened her mouth, but paused as a soldier brought in three bottles of Delano’s Hard Ale. “Thank you,” Efran said, handing them to their visitors. Then he rose to quietly close the door and sit again. “Takoda,” Efran began hesitantly, “sounds like a . . . Polonti name.”

Bottle in hand, Verlice said, “He was half Polonti.” While his men held their bottles uncertainly, he opened his immediately to take a drink. “Ah. Gruit. That’s very good.” He looked back up at her, waiting for an answer to his question.

She glanced smiling at Efran, who narrowed his eyes, then she said, “Dear Auntie has a way of petting Efran’s men who—remind her of someone. And, you are the only other one I ever saw her pet like that. Also, you have her lips, her jaw, her nose—even her laugh.”

Efran turned his eyes to Verlice, who looked mildly embarrassed but unbowed. Minka murmured, “She must have loved him deeply. Why didn’t they marry?”

Verlice winced. “He couldn’t bring himself to divorce his wife, which—Mother knew nothing about.”

“Oh,” she said, downcast.

Efran raised his hands in mild bewilderment. “Now that we’re solidly in your corner—what do you want?”

Verlice groaned, “My sons. My two boys--Arturo is eighteen and Brayan is twenty-one. Both were conscripted into the Surchatain’s army to fight against you. Over five hundred returned to Eurus, but my sons were not among them.”

Efran was shaking his head. “We killed many. I’m very sorry.”

“They’re not dead,” Verlice said quickly. Efran was wincing, but Verlice insisted, “I know it; I feel it inside: they are not dead.”

“Well.” Rubbing his neck in discomfort, Efran glanced at Minka. Then he asked Verlice, “Do you have rooms below yet?”

Verlice blinked, then said, “No, we came straight up here.”

Efran got up to open the door and tell the sentry stationed there, “Get Lord Verlice and his men a large room at Croft’s, or whoever has one; tell them to bill the Fortress. You’ll find the lord at either Coghill’s or Ryal’s, to give him the key.”

“Yes, Captain.” The unseen sentry flashed away.

Efran turned back to Verlice, who stood with his men. “Our Lands doctor Coghill is caring for many wounded Eurusians—his quarters are next to Barracks A right at the gates. If you don’t find your sons there, or at the barracks infirmary, our Notary Lord Ryal and his wife Giardini are caring for a few more at his shop, which is just off the main switchback below. If you still don’t find them, I will escort you to Venegas tomorrow morning. I understand that they picked up a number of wounded as well.” He suddenly wondered why Venegas was taking charge of wounded soldiers, but didn’t dwell on the question right now.

“So,” Efran concluded, “send up word to me as to whether you find either of them, and, we’ll go from there.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Verlice said, extending his hand, which Efran shook. Verlice then turned to bow to her. “Lady Minka.”

“I pray you do find them alive,” she whispered. His lips tightened, and he nodded.

After Efran and Minka watched the three visitors depart the front doors in the early twilight, he said, “It’s impossible. There were at least fifteen hundred that attacked us.”

“You never know,” she murmured, glancing back to the keep, where prayers were answered.

As they two and Joshua were at breakfast the following morning, April 26th, Eustace, on door duty, reported with a salute: “Captain, the Lord Verlice says that his sons are not among the wounded here, and he desires to ride to Venegas when you are available.”

Efran sighed, “As I expected.” He rose from the table with Joshua on his arm, then looked over quickly as Minka stood. “No,” he said.

She smiled placidly. “Surchatain Sewell has been very gracious, and I would like to see that you are not fractious in return.”

He gaped at her momentarily, then burst out laughing. “The bitter part is, I may actually need you to smooth things over. All right,” he groaned. “Joshua, do you want to go out to play with Toby and Arne?”

“Unh,” the toddler said affirmatively, rocking on his father’s arm. He was almost 16 months old now, and very close to walking.

“Well then.” Efran handed him over to Mathurin, who grinned taking him. “Get him fresh wraps and a teething rag before you take him out, please. We’ll be gone most of the day,” Efran said regretfully.

“We’re good, Captain,” Mathurin said as Joshua patted his shoulder.

“I know,” Efran said, watching them progress down the corridor. With a sigh of reluctance, he put his hand at Minka’s back. Then he told Eustace, “Have them bring Kraken for me and—a fast, gentle ride for the lady.”

As Eustace saluted and ran to the foyer, she cocked her head at her husband. He said, “Rose isn’t tall enough to keep up, and Gaunter is too slow. We’re going to ride fast. Are you sure you want to come?”

She drew up indignantly. “Are you threatening me with discomfort?”

“Only if it works,” he said pensively.

“I’m sorry; it doesn’t,” she grinned, leaning into him. “Oh! While you’re all looking, I’ll need spending money. Just in case. Polonti are good craftsmen; they make cute things.”

“Cute things,” he muttered, sending a man to the second-floor workroom for a pouch packed with royals. Upon receiving this, she strapped it onto her hip. Then he draped an arm over her to walk her out.

In the courtyard, they met up with Lord Verlice and his men Wiatt and Gastrell, all with horses. Verlice said anxiously, “We’re ready, Lord Efran. Lady Minka.” He paused as if uncertain of her coming.

“Our horses are being brought,” Efran said, glancing toward the unseen stables on the western side of the fortress.

“Pardon, Lord Efran, but—if my boys are injured, they may be unable to ride. They’ll need a carriage,” Verlice said.

Efran glanced at him in obvious reluctance, but nodded. To another new Polonti, Capur, he said, “Have them equip a medical cart sufficient for two.”

“Yes, Captain.” Capur saluted and ran toward the stables.

Efran and Minka received their horses, hers being a dun mare that she cooed over so much, Kraken nudged her in jealousy. “Keep your nose off the lady!” Efran barked. The Eurusians looked on in astonishment as Kraken laughed at him with bared teeth. To smooth things over, Minka petted him as well (Kraken, that is).

Soon enough, the medical cart driven by Goss came around, along with the mounted bodyguards Krall and Koschat. So the eight of them rode down the new switchback to exit the Lands east via the coastal highway.

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Chapter 3

It was a three-hour ride to Venegas at a moderate lope, but being slowed by the cart, the party arrived shortly before noon. Efran took them directly to Borthwick, the Surchatain's manor house in the middle of the city. Dismounting at the gate, Efran told the gate guards, "I am Lord Efran; my companion Lord Verlice is looking for his sons who were conscripted to fight against us. Since Captain D'Achille told me that you were picking up wounded, you may have found them. So we request permission to tour your medical station."

The guards looked them over carefully, then one said, "Let me check, Lord Efran. One moment."

Efran nodded as the man turned to trot into the manor house. While they waited, they all looked around. Goss noted, "Lot of improvements since I was last here, Cap'n."

"Yes, their cloth and lumber businesses are booming," Efran observed. "And they have shops," he noted as Minka grinned.

Before long, the gate guard returned with two men to say, "You are permitted to view the infirmary, Lord Efran, which is in the old brewery. These men will accompany you."

Efran glanced at the guards to see that they were armed with long knives. This was unsettling, as he and his men were unarmed. But he said, "Thank you, and give Surchatain Sewell my regards."

"This way. Leave your horses and cart," one man instructed. Increasingly wary, Efran nodded. He turned to draw Minka close to him for the long walk.

Arriving at the large building that once housed Barnby's Best Beer, the Landers and Eurussians paused to eye the fields being worked by men in chains, with overseers equipped with whips. None of them liked the look of this; Verlice broke out in a sweat. Efran scowled to see this new development in their ally. The Abbey Lands were governed by the Law of Roman, which forbade slavery.

They entered the large warehouse space, in which about fifty men lay groaning on cots. But they were well-tended by workers carrying water, chamber pots, medicines, ointments, and the like. Unconsciously, the group split up to begin walking down the rows of wounded, though only the Eurussians would recognize Verlice's sons.

Workers carrying bolts of cotton cloth or pots of dye went in and out of another room. Stacked along the far wall were bags of hops and barley which Venegasan laborers had harvested from Barnby's fields. These would probably be sold to Delano's Ale and Lager in the Lands.

Seeing nothing of the indications of commerce, Minka was tormented by the suffering of the wounded. Still, she went down the rows to press a hand on shoulders or heads that she passed. She doubted that her touch would heal away from the hill, but she ached to impart some comfort to them. Stopping at one cot, she looked down in shock to recognize its occupant.

His head was bandaged, his face bruised, and his left hand splinted. But he looked up at her as well. Without speaking, she raised her face toward Efran. Inevitably, he looked over to her, and paused at her gaze. Careful to be casual, he came over to look down at the man whom she stood beside.

“Oh. Oops,” he said. Turning to the closest guard, Efran said, “One of my men accidentally got himself brought here. So we’ll need the cart after all.”

The guard dubiously nodded, and Koschat said, “I’ll bring Goss, Captain.” As he ran out, Krall came over to look at the man on the cot—and shut his mouth to see his former Commander Lyte, who had just led an attack on the Lands as Surchatain Wyse.

Krall raised wide eyes to Efran, who glanced warningly toward the remaining guard. Lyte closed his eyes without speaking.

The relative silence of the warehouse was shattered by Wiatt shouting, “Lord Verlice!”

Everyone looked over as the lord ran to the cot at which Wiatt stood. Verlice fell to his knees beside it, crying, “Arturo! Lord Efran, this is my son Arturo!”

Minka gasped, looking to Efran. He wiped the sudden sweat from his upper lip and said, “Well, the cart’s on the way.” Verlice leaned his ear down to the boy.

There was dead silence until Goss and Koschat entered, and Efran directed them to take Arturo first. Meanwhile, Gastrell came over to whisper to Efran, “Arturo says that Brayen was taken out to work in the fields.”

“You and Wiatt go look for him,” Efran whispered back.

As Arturo was carried out, attended by his father, Verlice’s men slipped out as well. Then Koschat and Krall came back in to lift Lyte, who closed his eyes but uttered no sound. They took him out to the cart with Efran leading Minka by the hand. “Loosen up,” she whispered, pulling back her scrunched fingers. Sweating, he glanced back at her, but eased his grip. The stakes had suddenly risen exponentially.

As they emerged to stand by the cart, Verlice ran up to them, trembling. “That’s my other son Brayen in the field, in chains,” he said hoarsely. They all looked over at the young man standing limply between Wiatt and Gastrell.

Efran turned to the Venegasan guard to note, “Good thing we brought the cart. That one’s ours, too.”

The man looked dubious. “He’s a field worker.”

“I will pay you fifty royals for him,” Efran said.

The guard said, “I must get approval from the Steward.”

“Let me speak with Surchatain Sewell,” Efran said.

“We will see,” the guard said evasively.

Efran turned to glance around the fields, seeing almost as many guards as there were field hands. A man in a distant field caught his eye, and Efran squinted. “We’re ready, Captain,” Krall said, and Efran nodded absently.

So with the two injured men lying in the cart which Goss drove, Efran, Minka, Krall, Koschat and the three Eurussians walked with Brayen in between two Venegasan guards back to Borthwick. The lead guard spoke to the gate guards, who looked them over carefully before nodding him in.

As they tensely waited, Verlice hissed, "I thought they were your allies."

"Shut up," Efran whispered back.

In a while, the Steward came out, dressed in luxurious robes. "Ah. Lord Efran. What can I do for you?"

"Hello, Steward Theodulph. The sons of my friend Lord Verlice of Wirrin Valley were conscripted to fight against us, and we're very grateful to find them in your care. By chance, we also located a man of mine who had fallen among the Eurussian wounded. We wish to take these three back with us," Efran said cordially. Only his men and Minka could tell how tense he was.

"Ah. But we do need the field hands," Theodulph said in regret. He was still intensely peeved at the Captain for stealing the man they had paid 50 royals for and creating such havoc, for which he himself was blamed. And then they murdered Surchatain Clommel when she went to get him back!

"I will pay you for them," Efran said.

"One hundred royals each," the Steward enunciated.

"All right," Efran said slowly. "I will have to return to the Lands for the money, but Surchatain Sewell knows I am good for it."

"Of course you may go get the money and bring it back. But someone of your party must stay until you do." Theodulph looked around until his gaze landed on Minka.

"I will not leave my wife. Let me speak to Sewell," Efran breathed.

"Unfortunately," the Steward said silkily, "he is not available. You may leave with no one, or leave her as guaranty of pay."

Minka said, "Efran, I will stay. These people are our allies. I have no fear of them."

Jaw tight, he looked at her, but Krall said, "She has me and Koschat, Captain." Both these men were of the Forty, having served under Captain Efran in Westford.

For ten heartbeats Efran looked around at them like a caged bear, then he turned with a short gesture. "Put Brayan on the the lady's horse," he said, swinging up on Kraken, who reared just for show. Efran leaned down from the saddle to say something to Goss, sitting in the driver's seat of the cart. Goss saluted, and Efran turned Kraken to begin galloping away.

He was out of sight down the road by the time the homeward-bound party turned out of Venegas proper onto the westbound road. With Brayan on the dun mare beside him, Verlice rode up to Goss to say, "He was exceedingly angry. What did he tell you?"

Goss said placidly, "To get your boys and our man to Wallace and then . . . stay off the road."

"Who is that you found, anyway?" Verlice asked, looking down at the Eurussian with the stained blue kerchief knotted around his neck.

“A lost sheep,” Goss shrugged. Verlice peered at him.

At this time, Minka, Krall and Koschat were brought into the dining room at Borthwick and offered seats at the table. “The Steward will join you in just a moment,” the sentry said, then withdrew.

Koschat sat Minka at the head of the table, then he and Krall sat at her right and left. Servants began bringing in dishes to place before them. The bodyguards tasted everything, rejecting a few dishes which they set aside. Of the remaining dishes that they deemed acceptable, they served her plate. Minka watched in mild amusement.

When they were brought drinks, Koschat checked one label, then opened the bottle to taste it. He turned his head to spew the mouthful, then set the bottle apart from her. Having done all that, the two sat looking around or muttering to her or each other. The servants had withdrawn, and sentries were standing outside the closed doors to both exits. A third door led into the kitchen. All this while, Steward Theodulph was taking his time freshening up in front of a silvered mirror. After all, she wasn't going anywhere.

As Minka had not picked up her fork, Krall nodded, “You may eat, if you wish, Lady Minka.”

“I'd rather not,” she said watchfully.

“Well—have just a roll,” Koschat said, offering her the bread basket. “You may need it.”

She took one with a half-smile. “What are you expecting to happen?” She peeled off a piece of the roll to eat it a bite at a time.

“Depends,” Koschat said. “But Cap'n will be back with the whole blasted army, and if you're the slightest disarranged, he'll burn Venegas down,” he ended in a whisper.

“Oh, dear. Let's go for a walkabout, then,” she said. Rising, she went to a window overlooking the back grounds.

“Allow me, Lady Minka,” Krall said, unlatching the greenish panes and pushing them open. He crawled out, then reached in to help her over the stool with Koschat following. Then Krall closed the panes, shaking them slightly so that the latch dropped back down into the catch on the inside.

Minka gasped lightly. “How clever! They won't know how we got out! How did you learn to do that?”

“Practice, Lady. Loooots of practice,” Krall said. Koschat nodded, smiling.

They went wandering on the back grounds, where they happened upon a work shed. Opening it, Minka murmured, “Excellent. Take off your jackets and hats”—part of their distinctive red Abbey uniforms. The men did as instructed while she pulled baggy work shirts and overalls off wall hooks for them. She folded up their jackets and hats to lay them neatly in a produce basket.

She gathered her unruly curls to twist them in a knot on top of her head which she covered with a large straw hat. Then she draped a shawl around her shoulders that also covered the pouch on her hip. Picking up the basket, she said, “Let's go look around.”

At this time, the Steward Theodulph, having primped to his satisfaction, approached the main door of the dining hall. “Have they tried to get out?” he asked the guards.

“Not from this door, Steward,” one guard said.

“That’s surprising,” he mused, opening the door.

After blinking at the empty room a few moments, he barreled to the second door to thrust it open. “You let them out!” he roared at this pair of guards.

“No, Steward,” one insisted, while his fellow looked over, shaking his head.

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Chapter 4

Shortly, four guards and one incensed Steward were standing in the abandoned dining room. “They were here. Didn’t eat much,” one guard said, examining the table.

Another guard went to the row of windows along the back wall. “All are locked,” he noted.

So the Steward roared through the third door, that to the kitchen, crowded with activity in preparation for dinner. “Who let that Minka out?”

The workers stared at him until the kitchen mistress flew into his face, screaming, “Get out of my kitchen!” (Incidentally, all of these conversations were in the Polonti language.)

Theodulph retreated, flapping at his bewildered guards, “Find her! And the two Abbey men with her!”

In their well-worn disguises at the back of the grounds, Minka, Krall and Koschat encountered an unlocked gate in the high iron fence. Opening it, they found that it led to an open-air market of wares, jewelry, collectibles, and food—lots of food. So Minka set out at once in exploration, her men right beside her.

Although she knew that she must be an object of search, she did not allow that to interfere with her shopping at all the booths. However, in regard for their disguises, she restrained her tendency to chat, especially as she did not know the language very well. Koschat and Krall stood over her tightly, watching under their brows as Venegasan soldiers worked their way through the crowds, looking for a young, curly-haired EurAsian woman.

The more perceptive booth owners saw her, saw her guardians, saw the searchers, and knew that she was the one they were after. However, she was also taking royals from her pouch at almost every stall she entered. So when the proprietress of the next booth Minka came to--a large, fearless woman--saw the searchers approaching, she merely stepped out from behind her counter to begin a friendly discussion with a seller across the narrow road. Coincidentally, she blocked sight of the EurAsian girl completely. The Abbey Lands Polonti closed in on either side of the woman.

Koschat engaged her at once in their language, and she responded effusively. When a soldier advanced with the intent to search her stall, she indignantly harrumphed at him, and he respectfully withdrew. Minka, meanwhile, was nibbling a sample of her spiced beef jerky.

So when the soldiers passed and the woman returned to her counter, Minka pointed to the bin full of jerky and handed her two royals. That resulted in the largest bag yet for Krall to carry.

From that moment on, Minka was unimpeded in her shopping.

Hours later, when she tired, her bodyguards found a nice shady hill within view of Borthwick. Here, they sat under a tree, piling up shopping bags beside it, to wait for the Captain's return. It wasn't long before she took off the hat, wadded up her shawl for a pillow, and stuffed it under her head on Krall's lap. There, she fell right to sleep. To not be left out, Koschat put her legs on his lap. And they grinned at each other while watching her nap. Krall lightly stroked her curls. "Captain would kill us."

"Shhh," Koschat hissed, smiling. Meanwhile, the trembling Steward received report after report that the young Eurussian lady and her red-clad Abbey bodyguard were nowhere to be found.

Efran, having arrived back at the Lands an hour before his guests with their medical cart, burst into the workroom to pour out his anxiety and wrath on his hapless administrators: "We found Verlice's sons and Lyte but that dam' Steward kept Minka until I come back with three hundred royals!"

Estes and DeWitt calmed him down enough to get the details, then DeWitt said, "Didn't Sewell tell us he'd be out at their new logging camp for several days? What do they call it?" he asked Estes.

"Vychan," Estes replied. "Efran, if he left his Steward in charge, you have to remember what a gasbag he is. But he's harmless; he won't dare do anything to Minka that would imperil our relations. Let us pack up three hundred royals and get off fifty men with you."

"A hundred," Efran said sullenly.

"If you want," DeWitt said. "But are you *sure* it's Lyte you found in their infirmary?"

"Yes. He'd been pretty well beat up," Efran said.

"That means we need to be watching for a new Surchatain of Eurus," DeWitt mused, and Estes concurred.

"All right, give the orders; we'll get your royals," DeWitt said with a pat to Efran's shoulder.

"I want to take Wendt," Efran said, head down.

DeWitt looked cautiously to Estes, who agreed, "He'll enjoy the ride." DeWitt shrugged and nodded.

A great number of men wanted to ride with the Captain to rescue the Lady Minka, so a hundred and fifty of them managed to find horses, including Cyneheard and his protégé Henris. The vanguard of this group rode down to Barracks A to alert the blind Commander Wendt of the Captain's desire for his presence on this mission. The Commander was agreeable. However, as both his Seconds Barr and Gabriel strongly wished to accompany him, he conferred authority on Captain Towner to act in his absence, assisted by Captain Stites.

Efran divided up the three hundred royals among six men: Connor, Conte, Detler, Hawk, Martyn, and Shane. Then Efran took up Kraken's reins, telling him, "I'm going to ride like the devil back to Venegas. Do you want me to take another animal?"

Kraken bared his teeth at him. *If you tried, I'd bite you.*

Leaping up on him, Efran said, “Oh, you’re full of talk. Let’s see how you do.” And he spurred him down the old switchback so that they could pick up Wendt on their way out of the gates.

As it turned out, Wendt agreed to go as long as they rode at an easy lope, to enable them to talk on the way. Efran grudgingly conceded, so he, Wendt, Barr and Gabriel filled the road going eastward with the money carriers behind him and the rest of the rescuers following, some at a walk. Cyneheard carried a javelin on his saddle just in case; Henris wore a knife on his belt, feeling very warlike.

They soon passed the oncoming cart carrying Arturo and Lyte that Goss drove. Verlice and Brayan were riding alongside at a walk with Wiatt and Gastrell bringing up the rear. Goss saluted to Efran, who nodded, hardly even seeing the young man he had freed from the field chains.

Watching the grim Polonti Captain ride by, Brayan turned to his father to ask, “You’re friends with him?” Verlice wryly nodded, and they rode on past what seemed to be hundreds of warriors in red. “Can we go back just to watch?” Brayan asked again. His father laughed, shaking his head.

On the road past them, Efran was listening to Wendt tell him why he should have more confidence in his wife, especially with the bodyguard she had. “In fact, I’ll make a bet with you, Efran,” Wendt said. Everyone’s ears stood up; Wendt bet on nothing that wasn’t certain.

“All right,” Efran said cautiously.

“I’ll bet you that by the time we get there, Minka is in complete control,” Wendt said. Barr and Gabriel glanced at each other knowingly.

Efran breathed, thinking about this. “What are we betting?” he asked.

“What do you feel like risking?” Wendt asked.

“I’ll . . . admit you were right,” Efran said tentatively, which was a huge concession—but one he could make.

“About . . . ?” Wendt said leadingly.

“Minka?” Efran said fearfully.

“I accept those terms,” Wendt said, and Efran looked deeply conflicted.

About a quarter hour after Minka woke from her nap, the forefront of a red stream surged off the coastal road toward Borthwick. Standing, Krall said, “There’s your husband come to fetch you, Lady Minka.”

She and Koschat stood to peer down at the stream. She yawned, then said, “What—all these men--?” Her face screwed up in bafflement.

Koschat laughed, “Oh, he’s mad.”

Krall said, “I can hardly wait to see this. Let’s go.” So the men gathered up all Minka’s shopping bags while she put her hat back on and took up her basket, draping the shawl over her arm. Her pouch hung almost empty on her belt. Then Krall led on a path downhill toward the center of Venegas.

Efran had pulled up to the manor gates to shout, “Theo--!” But Kraken chose to rear for effect at that time,

almost unseating him. A few men behind him had to hide their laughter.

When Kraken landed, Efran tried again. "Theodulph, bring out my wife! Here's your money!" Gesturing to the carriers behind him, he said, "Throw them at the gates." They did, causing the iron gates to rattle for the blows. A few pouches fell open, spilling the royals in a glittering display.

"STEWARD THEODULPH!" Efran roared. But the Steward was cringing under his desk, as no one had found the Lady Minka.

The Abbey men filled the streets around Borthwick so that Krall, Koschat and Minka had to pick their way through them to the manor gates. Meanwhile, the invaders were quiet, looking around. There was no Steward, no guards, no one answering. Efran's heart began thumping against his ribs. "This is not a bet I want to win, Commander," he said.

"Efran!" Minka called from several lines back. Riders drew their horses aside to make a path for her and her bodyguard.

Focused on the dead house in front of him, the one addressed did not hear her. But Barr, Gabriel and Wendt turned their heads. "Efran!" they heard again.

"Isn't that her?" Wendt asked.

"Yes, Commander," Barr said, watching her slap one horse to make it move.

"Yes, sir," Gabriel laughed.

"Where? I don't see her," Efran gasped, still scanning the empty windows of Borthwick.

"Krall and Koschat reporting, Captain. Commander." Efran looked down at a pair of Polonti laborers in dirty overalls saluting him.

"Efran!" she laughed. So he turned to blink at a sweet face under a big straw hat. Stretching his neck, Kraken pulled the hat off by the rim to chew on it, freeing her curls.

Efran leaned down to bring her and her basket up, sitting her in front of him on his saddle. Koschat and Krall carried the lady's purchases over to bang on the gate. "Bring our horses!" Krall shouted. Meanwhile, he and Koschat stepped out of the overalls and shucked off the shirts.

Koschat went over to Kraken. "Lady Minka, may we have our uniforms?"

"Yes." She turned her face to relinquish the basket to him. The bodyguards dug out their jackets and hats, then passed around the remaining jerky in the basket to those waiting on horseback around them.

A stableboy, the only one brave enough to go to the gates, opened them to bring out two saddled horses around the piles of gold littering the grounds. Taking the reins, Koschat leaned down to pick up a royal and toss it to him. "There you go, Squirt."

The boy scrunched up his face dubiously. "I can keep this one?"

"Yep," Koschat said, mounting.

“Yes,” Efran sighed.

“I need a horse,” Minka protested.

“No you don’t. Back to the Abbey,” he gestured, turning Kraken.

“Someone tell me if I won that bet,” Wendt said facetiously.

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Chapter 5

Minka turned on Efran’s saddle. “Commander! Thank you for coming to rescue me!” she said happily.

“Yes, Commander, you did,” Barr said, admirably without laughing.

“What have you been doing?” Efran asked, scowling. Her face was mildly sunburned.

“Oh! Have you got my bags?” she asked her bodyguard behind them.

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Koschat said, holding them on his arm.

“Shopping, Captain,” Krall replied.

Wendt inquired, “And what does Efran have to say about that?”

“You’re right, Commander; you were right,” he sighed.

As Efran turned Kraken to ride back past the ranks, he glanced up. “Cyneheard! Glad to have you along. I’d like to see you toss that javelin through an upper window of Borthwick, but, I don’t want to bring down a chambermaid. So, next time.”

“Yes, Captain,” Cyneheard said, saluting smartly. Henris gaped at him in admiration; the veterans around them snickered.

After the Captain had reclaimed his wife and the throng of Abbey men left Venegas, it took so long for Steward Theodulph to work up the courage to go down to the courtyard that only a handful of the 300 royals was left among the six dusty pouches flung against the gates.

While disallowing Minka her own horse (as no one had brought one for her), Efran allowed her to sit behind him so they could lope on the way back. Still, he kept a firm hand on her arms around his waist. Since the men were more experienced riders who could talk and ride at the same time, and had deeper voices to be heard, Minka let Krall and Koschat tell how the lady had ordered a walkabout, found appropriate clothes, and shopped the booths for better eats than what the Steward’s table had provided.

“Oh, and I found the cutest vest and some lovely turquoise and silver jewelry,” she said, reaching a hand toward Koschat with the bags.

Flailing for the missing hand, Efran said, “We’ll look at it all when we get back.”

Wendt asked, “So, you’re telling me that Minka organized your breakout?”

“Oh, yes, Commander, we merely followed orders,” Koschat said placidly.

Efran raised his face to protest, “I already conceded, Commander.”

“Just checking,” Wendt said.

Minka topped it off with, “That was fun.” And a few riders almost fell off their saddles to hear Efran’s stock phrase.

Upon returning to the Lands, Efran thanked his volunteers while Minka petted Kraken for the extra effort he had to expend today. He puckered his lips at her, but Efran pulled her away before she could kiss his nose. Then he and she washed up and reclaimed Joshua from the nursery to go in to dinner.

The door sentries informed Efran that both Lyte and Arturo had been taken up to recuperate in Wallace’s suite at the fortress, where Brayan had also been examined and released. But because everyone except Minka was exhausted, Efran put off seeing the new arrivals until the following day. As it was, he could hardly stay awake to eat.

After dinner, she sat on their bed to empty her bags for him, one item at a time. He lay on his back with his arm around her hips, trying to keep his eyes open. “And here’s the vest. Isn’t it pretty? I love the fringe. I’ll wear it with pants tomorrow. Oh, I want a commendation for Krall and Koschat.”

He barely opened his eyes. “What? No, it was purely a pleasure trip for them; they had the most fun of anyone except you,” he muttered.

She straightened attentively. “Do I get a commendation for arranging my own escape, then?”

Howling, he pulled her down to him, so nothing more was determined regarding that question.

After breakfast the following morning (April 27th), Efran went up to Wallace’s quarters to see his newest patients. The doctor told him, “It appears that Arturo took a slung rock to his shoulder, which broke his collarbone and caused deep bruising. I’ve got him in an arm sling, and he has to stay still for as long as possible—no riding for at least two weeks.”

Nodding, Efran looked into the side room in which Arturo lay with his father and brother sitting beside him. “How about Brayan?” he asked.

“He was extremely fortunate to receive only a glancing strike to his head from a sling as well. Had it hit full on, it would have killed him,” Wallace said.

“I’m sure. . . . Now, Lyte?” Efran looked into the second room where the former Commander lay under the watch of two Abbey men.

“His injuries suggest a brawl rather than a battle. He’s taken a beating, but there are no penetrating wounds. I’m not sure why he’s not sitting up,” Wallace murmured.

“He wasn’t hurt when he left our treaty signing. The last I saw, he was riding north with his Commander and his Seconds,” Efran said. They kept their voices down so as not to be overheard.

“You think his officers turned on him?” Wallace asked.

“If that’s what happened, they would have killed him,” Efran observed, hand over his mouth.

“What are you going to do with him?” Wallace asked.

“I don’t know. Keep him under guard for now; he may be feigning hurt,” Efran said. Wallace nodded, turning back to Lyte’s room.

Efran looked again to the room where Arturo lay. But before going in, he told one of the men at the outer door, “Go ask Captain Towner to send two Southerners to Marguerite’s Featherstone today. Tell her Verlice found both his sons wounded but alive, and that we found Lyte--Wyse--as well, in like condition. I want to know what’s going on in Eurus. Make sure Commander Wendt hears all this, and let me know when the men are off.”

“Captain.” Routh saluted and turned to run down the stairs because Efran forgot to warn him not to.

Gesturing the sentry Heus to his side, Efran went back to stand in the doorway of the room in which Arturo lay. Verlice rose from his bedside as both young men looked to the door. Their father said, “Lord Efran, I am--overwhelmed by the--unhoped-for results of your help. I wish to repay you the two hundred royals you advanced for the return of my sons.”

Efran waved lightly in dismissal. Looking between Arturo and Brayan, he said, “I want to know more about your conscription. Where were you taken from?”

Brayan replied, “Eurus, Captain Efran. We were buying supplies for the brewery when the soldiers just--swarmed us. They took us, our horses, our cart, our money--everything but Father’s manager Slorra. If he hadn’t gotten away to return to Wirrin, no one would ever have known what happened to us.”

“Where were you taken from there?” Efran asked.

“A--a camp a day’s march south of Eurus, over against the river. We had no idea what was going on, but we managed to stay together. We were given grub at the end of the day, and told to bed down. We tried to sneak away during the night a few times, but we had the river on one side and a ring of guards with torches on the other. The next day they got us up to march us south down the Passage almost to Westford, where we had to bed down again. We were practically starving by then, so they let us fish in the river and eat what we caught,” Brayan related.

“How many of you were there?” Efran asked.

Brayan shook his head. “I can’t guess; I never saw the whole. Hundreds, at least. We were all on foot; the soldiers marching us were on horseback. I didn’t see anyone try to fight with them. The next day they marched us past Westford--or what used to be Westford. Then we turned and marched down the east Passage for--how many days? I don’t know,” he said, glancing at his brother on the bed.

“They handed out uniforms which didn’t fit, and we waited—days again. Hungry and tired. Then they roused us up before sunrise, put us on horses, and stampeded us toward your wall of trees. And then the clouds and the rain, the arrows and rocks that came hurtling out of nowhere—it was a living nightmare,” Braylan gasped. “I got winged; lost Arturo, then crawled around underneath the horses’ feet to find him down.

“I just pulled him as far away as I could, and we waited. Saw the whole mass of them stampede away, and I passed out for a while; woke to find a wolf standing over me. Thought I was dead, then, but, it just sat there until I fell asleep again.

“The next day—or the day after—the Polonti came from the east; piled us into carts, took us back to the place you found us. I blacked out several times, but managed to stay close to Arturo. When they saw he couldn’t work, they let him lie, but took me out to the fields. At least they gave us bread and water,” Braylan breathed. “Then it was—two days later?—that you came.” He fell silent, blinking rapidly.

Eyes searching the opposite wall, Efran absorbed this. The first thing he realized was: *That’s why they all ran after we nabbed Lyte. When they were forced to fight without pay, they had no reason to hang around when everything fell apart. They may not even have known he was captured, or who he was.* Throughout Efran’s years at Westford, the army never used conscripts, who would run at the first opportunity.

Then he looked down at Verlice. “You’ll have to stay until Wallace gives Arturo leave to ride, which will probably be weeks. But we’ve sent to Marguerite to tell her they’ve been found.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Verlice said.

“Just Efran,” he said impatiently. “Where are your men—Wiatt and Gastrell?”

Verlice said, “They’re buying supplies to return to Wirrin with the news, if you permit.”

“Yes, of course. But I want to send a couple of men with them, so have them stop by the barracks before they leave,” Efran said.

“Yes, Captain,” Verlice said with a bare smile, as this was a title Efran could not refuse.

Efran regarded him for a moment, then nodded to Heus. “Go repeat all of this to Commander Wendt.”

“Captain.” Heus saluted, walking out.

Thinking, Efran stepped out to the corridor where men were gathering. He looked around, then ordered Seagrave, “Come.”

“Captain.” Seagrave followed him back into Wallace’s suite to stand at the door of Lyte’s room while Efran went in.

Efran walked over to the foot of the bed. Lyte was flat on his back, looking up at the ceiling. Efran asked, “What happened?”

Lyte gave no indication of hearing, much less answering. So Efran said, “You will talk to us.”

Again Lyte declined to reply. So Efran left again, motioning for Seagrave while two Abbey men remained in the

room. At the door of the doctor's quarters, Efran told him, "Stand guard here. No one goes in to see Lyte without my word."

"Captain." Seagrave saluted, then Efran went on down the corridor to the workroom.

When he entered, Minka turned toward him from her seat at the table to chide, "There you are! You were gone for so long." DeWitt mildly snorted, turning a page of numbers.

"Don't mock your guardian," Efran muttered, bending to kiss her head.

"I'm perfectly serious. I've been waiting for hours. Joshua wants to ride," she said. "Do you like the vest? It has real Polonti letters." She turned her back to show him.

Efran dubiously studied the lettering burnt into the leather. "Estes, what does this say?"

Glancing up from his worksheets, Estes said, "Don't ruin it for her, Efran."

Efran's face grew wary, and he began, "Estes--"

"It's just a joke. It says, 'real Polonti letters,'" Estes said.

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Chapter 6

Efran closed his eyes as Minka said, "Didn't I say that? Did I not just say that?"

"Well, then," Efran said, leaning on the table, "you can tell us how to make Lyte talk." Estes and DeWitt looked at him, then, so he gave them a quick summary of everything he had just heard in Wallace's quarters—including the fact of Lyte's silence.

"We're not permitted torture, which I don't want to use anyway. But I *must know* what he knows," Efran said. He looked over to Minka, then slowly raised up. "You're wearing your devious face."

"Don't be silly," she said, looking off.

"What are you thinking?" he demanded.

"Nothing helpful," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because faeries are unaccountable," she said.

He looked over to his advisors. DeWitt raised his brows, murmuring in a singsong, "Unintended consequences."

Estes grimaced slightly. "Yes, things tend to spiral out of control."

Efran thought about that, then said, "I don't see how they can help, anyway. They can read his thoughts, obviously, but for them to simply tell me what he's thinking is no good. I've got to hear it straight from him."

He envisioned hours listening to Sirs Ditson and Nutbin telling him that Lyte was thinking about picking his nose or the fact that he had an itch he couldn't reach.

"Yes. That's right," Minka agreed quickly.

Efran sagged. "Well, now you're wearing your innocent devious face."

DeWitt narrowed his eyes at Estes, then peered at her through his glasses. She turned her large blue eyes away righteously. "Don't be absurd; this is how I always look."

Efran raised his hands in surrender. "Just tell me what you're thinking."

"Faeries can impersonate anyone," she said idly, tracing an ink stain with her finger.

Efran was shaking his head. "I won't have Faerie Minka working on him."

"Not me, silly," she chided. "Someone who was his ally here. Someone he can't know is dead or gone."

The three administrators studied each other. DeWitt said, "You're thinking of having this ally approach Lyte with a plan to escape?"

She drew in a breath. "Oh, DeWitt, that's very clever!"

"How many ways can that blow up in our faces?" Efran asked pensively.

Estes asked, "Can Lyte even get out of bed?"

Efran looked at him. "Wallace doesn't see any reason why he's not sitting up." As they continued to look blankly at each other, he added, "Someone quickly tell me how bad an idea this is."

Estes inhaled; DeWitt looked constipated, but neither said anything. So Efran sat heavily to look at the faerie tree. "Queene Kele, may I have a word with you?" After a few seconds of silence, he repeated, "Kele?"

"Yes, Efran," they heard her say. "I'll be right with you. We're having a bit of a tussle."

"What? 'We'? Show yourselves," Efran said.

Whereupon Kele, Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin sprawled upon the table as though having been poured out from the tree. Ditson was the first to right himself, arranging his daffodil-yellow spring suit with its matching top hat. "We are so gratified, Lord Efran, that you properly recognize Sir Nutbin and myself as the proper and most experienced faeries for Impersonations and Impostorizations." He was fairly trembling with emotion.

Rising to dust herself off, Kele sighed, "I was going to summon you, Ditson; Lord Efran certainly meant no slight to your abilities and unimpeachable track record."

Sir Nutbin was taking longer to locate his monocle at the end of its cord and find his balance on his haunches. "Indeed," he said, his bristly tail askew, "not only that, but Lord Efran is certainly aware that two are necessary for this most sensitive assignment with the *unaccountable* Wyse." The twitching of his nose indicated how deeply the pejorative "unaccountable" had stung.

"Well, *I* was using 'unaccountable' ironically," Minka said righteously.

"Of which we are *quite* aware, dear Minka," Kele insisted with a searing glare at Nutbin.

DeWitt put his head in his hands, breathing, "The drama."

"How is it that two are necessary?" Efran asked in all seriousness.

Ditson lectured, "Two personalities, both of whom Wyse trusts, are more easily able to coax him into speaking all his thoughts—that is, the relevant ones. Moreover, with the concurrent thought patterns, we can project the resultant conversation to you here in this room, so that nothing need be related secondhand, Lord Efran."

DeWitt raised his head. "Do you mean that we can see and hear you here, no matter where you are?"

Ditson replied, "For clarity, Administrator, it is preferable for us to speak to him in the doctor's quarters on this floor. I cannot guaranty reliable transmission over a greater distance."

"Who would you impersonate?" Efran asked dubiously.

Nutbin and Ditson looked at each other a moment, then suddenly two men were standing beside the table. Both wore red Abbey uniforms. They saluted Efran as they said, one after the other: "Nighy reporting for duty, Captain." "Furse reporting for duty, sir."

Efran looked between them. "I don't know either of you."

Nighy replied, "No, sir; we're Eurusians in Abbey uniforms. No one questioned us because we reported directly to Commander Lyte."

Efran looked stricken. "Are the real Nighy and Furse still on my Lands?"

"No, Captain," Furse said. "The Destroyer did his job."

Efran lowered his face at the reminder, then asked, "Do we need to warn Wallace?"

"No, Captain; it will all be cloaked," Nighy said.

"Do it," Efran said. The three faeries vanished.

Efran reached over for Minka, but before he could lift her to his lap, the corner of the workroom opened to reveal Wyse in bed in Wallace's quarters. Efran froze, and they all silently watched Nighy and Furse, in uniform, enter his room.

Wyse's eyes flicked up, and he halfway rose in astonishment. "I thought you were dead." Then he quickly looked over to see that the two Abbey men who had been left there to keep watch were gone.

While Nighy stood at the door as lookout, Furse cautioned silence, whispering, “No, we went in hiding, but couldn’t catch up with you before the blasted Polonti snagged you.”

“How did you know?” Wyse asked, sitting up with a cautious eye on the door.

“We have friends in Venegas; we just don’t know how you got there,” Furse said.

Wyse exhaled, “We were ambushed on the road about an hour north of here by these—Polonti rats. They surrounded us, tied us up on our own horses, herded us by back roads to Venegas and sold us as field slaves. I pretended to be hurt, which they didn’t believe, so they hurt me to make sure I wasn’t pretending.” He snorted.

“What of Inglese? Baldassare?” Furse hissed.

Wyse laughed quietly. “As far as I know, Baldassare is working the fields around Venegas. But Inglese and his Seconds thought to escape, so the rats killed them.”

At this point Efran jumped up to tell a door guard, “Go make sure the men en route to Eurus have arms. There are slavers preying the road.” The man saluted and ran off.

Efran apprehensively reseated himself, taking Minka on his lap at that time. Furse was asking Wyse, “But what are you doing *here*?”

Wyse laughed in disbelief, “Efran was there looking for someone else, and saw me! I’ve got to get back to Eurus before Molyneux declares me dead.”

“Can you ride?” Furse demanded.

“Of course I can ride,” Wyse spat. “Just—call for horses and walk me out of here as a prisoner.”

Suddenly there was a man’s arm in a red Abbey sleeve waving in the air. “What is--?” Wyse gasped.

“Lie down; pretend to be asleep,” Furse said quickly.

Wyse did that at once, closing his eyes. Then the scene in the corner of the workroom vanished. As the onlookers were staring at each other, Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin appeared on the table.

At almost the same moment, Seagrave came to the corridor door. The faeries promptly disappeared again. “Seagrave reporting, Captain. There are faerie shenanigans in Lyte’s sickroom, sir.”

“That was your arm!” DeWitt involuntarily exclaimed.

Seagrave eyed him. “Yes, Administrator. I felt the tingle of faerie, so probed for illusion. The whole area around Lyte’s bed is covered with illusion. He may already be gone.”

Without letting Minka up, Efran waved him to sit at the table. “At ease, Seagrave; that was our doing, but I’m pleased you saw through it. Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin—kindly explain to Seagrave here what you were about. He’s earned it.”

Only mildly affronted at the exposure of their “shenanigans,” the two faeries reappeared in order to enlighten him regarding their Impostorization, which he had very nearly ruined. Following their elucidation, Seagrave

said, "I deeply apologize for interrupting, but am greatly impressed with your cloaking. I only found it because of my experience with faerie. The two other men in the room saw nothing."

This speech earned Seagrave their complete forgiveness, and Efran promised to alert him next time any faerie operations were scheduled. Sir Ditson asked, "Shall we resume the Impostorization, Lord Efran?"

He shook his head. "I learned all I needed to know. Thank you, Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin. Your performance was most accountable."

"You are most welcome, Lord Efran. Please do not hesitate to summon us again, *personally*," Ditson said, bowing.

Before they could disappear, DeWitt said, "If you don't mind, I'm deeply interested in learning the difference between an Impostorization and an Impersonation."

Sir Ditson spread himself in tutorial mode. "Oh, well, Administrator, it is quite elementary. An Impostorization involves replicating a human who is dead and an Impersonation replicates several people who are dead or alive but missing."

Nutbin's tail suddenly stood erect and he said, "My dear friend Ditson! We mustn't confuse our human friends. An Impostorization involves replicating the dead or missing, whereas--"

Ditson burst out, "Oh my goodness, dear Nutbin, your nuts have gone to your head! Surely the Impostorization cannot extend over both living and dead, regardless--"

"But my dear misguided friend Ditson!" cried Nutbin. "Surely you remember that both were once under the umbrella category of Impressions, Imitations and Parodies before the Lower Slaughter Conclave of twelve twenty-two--"

Lurching up so that Minka was fairly pitched from his lap, Efran cried, "Thank you both! You're dismissed!"

The faeries vanished, but it took a few moments longer for the echoes of their ongoing argument to die away.

Swaying slightly, Efran barely whispered, "Don't *ever* ask--" Abruptly changing course, he looked up at Seagrave. "Get you two men and take Wyse down to one of the holding cells in Barracks C. Warn Commander Wendt that he's dangerous; tell him why."

"Yes, Captain." Seagrave saluted and turned out, slightly dazed.

"Are you all right, Minka?" Estes asked as she hauled herself up from the floor by a hand on the table. Efran looked down at her in confusion.

"Yes, thank you, Estes. Efran, Joshua is waiting to ride Soup." She smoothed her curls, then her vest.

"Then let's do that," he said, taking her hand to walk out.

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Chapter 7

While Efran and Minka were walking an exuberant 16-month-old around the training pen on Soup, Seagrave quietly told Wallace what the Captain had learned about Wyse and where they were taking him. Wallace gave his leave, so Seagrave entered the back room to say, "I'm here to transport you to your new quarters, Surchatain."

Wyse looked over from his pillow, assessing that. Seagrave nodded at the Abbey guards, Elowen and Loseby. They were paying attention, given that he had quickly left the room after they'd seen his arm disappear over Wyse's bed. He instructed them, "Assist him up, please."

Noting the binding ropes that Seagrave drew from his back pocket, they went to the bedside to hoist Wyse by his upper arms. He groaned pitifully, but Seagrave merely drew his hands behind his back to tie his wrists together.

Standing back, Seagrave said, "Follow me, please." As he briskly set out, Wyse let his handlers mostly drag him until they came to the stairs. Seagrave said, "Take care going down, gentlemen. We will not run."

"No, sir. I sure hope I don't lose my grip here," Loseby, a Southerner, said.

The Polonti Elowen added, "I fall down stairs a lot. I don't know why." When they began dragging the Surchatain down the stairway, he miraculously got his feet underneath him.

They walked him up the corridor to the foyer, where the door guards watched the erstwhile Commander being led out in shame. "Prisoner transport!" Gaul called loudly to the gate guards.

Arne turned to look. "Huh. That looks familiar, don't it?"

The second gate guard, Fellowes, said, "Top man being dragged out. But there's something missing."

"Ahh, right," Arne breathed. "A dozen men beating on him. Shouldn't we provide it, just to be all consistent? See if he holds up as well as the Captain did?"

Wyse looked off, sweating. Seagrave said, "Now, we're just to walk him down today, but we'll pass along your suggestion."

"Right," Arne grunted. As the Abbey men escorted their ex-Commander down the switchback, Arne began whistling, "Evil Will Leave Me Alone." And they had to hurry him past the faerie trees, which were flailing his head and shoulders.

It was an uncomfortable walk for the Surchatain up Main as well, in that Abbey soldiers stopped in their tracks while he passed. A few began following, just to see what was up.

Seagrave led into Barracks A, where Commander Wendt and Gabriel looked over. Captain Towner's scribe Viglian was the only other one there at the time. Wyse's escort saluted: "Seagrave reporting with Elowen and Loseby in the transport of Wyse, Commander. Request permission to secure the prisoner in Barracks C as Captain Efran instructed. Then with your leave, I'll return to report."

Wyse's face went slack at this information; Wendt said, "Granted." Seagrave saluted again, as did Elowen and Loseby, then they turned out. Wendt murmured, "I can hardly wait to hear this."

Seagrave, Elowen and Loseby walked Wyse down to Barracks C, leading him inside around the startled door guard. Then they took him to one of a few high-security cells. While the guard on duty opened the cell door, Seagrave turned Wyse around to remove the bonds. They allowed the ex-Commander the dignity of entering the cell under his own power. The guard clanked the door shut, and Wyse threw himself down on the cot to look up at the ceiling.

As before, Minka led the pony Soup around the pen while Efran walked beside the toddler perched on the saddle as though he were Commander. Instead of rocking to try to make Soup go faster--which he had done before-- Joshua was paying attention to the pony's rhythm, to rock with it. Efran watched, quietly approving how the boy absorbed what Soup had to teach him about riding.

Minka occasionally looked over her shoulder at them both. "He certainly looks comfortable."

Efran agreed, vaguely smiling. "And he can't even hold on yet. The only way he can stay on is to balance."

She looked back again. "You haven't steadied him at all, have you?"

"Today? No, not since I set him there," he replied.

"He makes me proud already," she said, turning to lead Soup straight.

"Yes," Efran whispered.

Seagrave, with Elowen and Loseby, had just explained to Commander Wendt and his Second Gabriel all about the faeries' Impostorization and what had been learned from it. Wendt absorbed this silently, then asked, "Has Efran said what he intends to do with him?"

"No, Commander. I don't think he knows what to do yet," Seagrave said.

"I see. Very good; you're dismissed," Wendt said. The soldiers saluted and left for the fortress, where Seagrave reported again to the administrators, who sent word down to Efran.

Meanwhile, Wendt settled back to contemplate everything he had learned today. A few minutes later, he stirred. "Gabriel."

"Yes, Commander," he replied, right at his side.

"Is Efran up at the fortress?" Wendt asked.

"As far as I know. Should I call for him?" Gabriel asked.

Wendt stood. "You know, I think I'd like a walkabout. Let's hike up there and see."

"Yes, Commander," Gabriel said, grinning. Wendt was wearing his devious face.

With Wendt walking beside him, Gabriel escorted him up Main, and passersby made way for them respectfully. As they gained the switchback, the faerie trees saluted, of which Gabriel informed the Commander.

"I see their outline," Wendt noted. His head swiveled to the right at another bright outline. "And is that the snobbles eater lounging on the hillside?"

"Yes, Commander. He looks full," Gabriel commented.

"Ah," Wendt said in humorous gratification.

The courtyard gates were standing open for them, and the guards saluted as Wendt and Gabriel arrived. "Arne and Fellowes at your service, Commander," Arne said.

Wendt paused in the courtyard. "Where is Efran?"

"One moment, Commander," Arne said, then stepped back and bellowed, "Commander wants the Captain!" This could be heard in the stables as clearly as in the foyer.

A whistle from the area of the stables answered him, and another man shouted back, "He's got Joshua riding in the pen!"

"Excellent. We'll just go on back there," Wendt said. "Thank you, Arne."

"My pleasure, Commander," Arne said complacently.

Gabriel walked Wendt to the west side of the fortress. At the northwest corner, Gabriel said, "Ah, he heard. Captain coming to meet us, Commander." That was a fact, and Joshua was not particularly disturbed that his father had drafted another man to walk beside Soup in his place.

Efran drew up to Wendt and Gabriel across from the faerie tree (that was outside the fence). Saluting, he said, "Captain Efran reporting as summoned, Commander."

"At ease, Captain," Wendt said with a bare smile. "I assume your man Seagrave informed you that Wyse has been secured in a cell in Barracks C."

"Yes, sir, I got word," Efran said.

"What do you intend to do with him?" Wendt asked.

Efran sagged slightly. "I haven't the faintest idea, Commander."

"Suppose . . ." Wendt began thoughtfully. "Suppose we were to inform the Council of Eurus that we have him, again."

Efran studied him. "If we want to deliver that message most effectively, we need to get Councilor Baldassare out of Venegas' fields and send it up with him."

"Oh, that's a nice touch," Wendt said in admiration.

"Well then, tomorrow morning--" Efran was interrupted by more whistles. He, Wendt and Gabriel turned as a sweating Abbey rider came around the corner of the fortress, paused upon seeing them, and then spurred toward them.

He dismounted his slightly frothing horse to salute. "Commander, Second, Captain--Truro reporting; I was one of those dispatched to Eurus this morning. We were set upon by renegades that tried to take us away in ropes. We gave them second thoughts about that; killed eight of them. The rest of them, ten or twelve, scattered through the woods, and our party resumed north unhindered. I was sent back to inform you."

"How far up the road?" Efran asked.

"About—two hours, sir," Truro replied.

Efran breathed, "Where are the dead?"

"We left them in the road, Captain," Truro said.

Efran told him, "Take at least thirty with you, equipped with ropes. Drag those bodies back here. We're going to deliver them to Theodulph."

"Yes, Captain," Truro said, then paused, looking at the Commander.

Efran winced. "Pardon, Commander—what do you think?"

"Good plan, Efran," Wendt said.

"Thank you, sir," Efran said, then nodded at Truro, who saluted and remounted to ride over to the stables, calling for horses and volunteers.

Wendt noted, "Now, when were you going to get Baldassare out of Venegas?"

"Ah. Looks like that will be today," Efran said.

"From the fields," Wendt said.

Efran looked uncomfortable. "I suppose so, Commander."

Wendt was silent for so long that Efran and Gabriel grew uneasy. Finally Wendt said, "Efran, how long have you known that Venegas uses slave labor?"

"Since yesterday," Efran said quietly.

"Uh huh. But it's all right, because they're using captured enemy soldiers, right?" Wendt said. Efran didn't reply. "Like Verlice's boys," Wendt added. "Or your own messengers."

"How do I approach Sewell about it?" Efran asked.

"That's tricky," Wendt admitted. "Before you do, you have to settle one question in your mind: Are you willing to go to war with your closest ally? Unless you are, it's pointless to confront him."

Efran considered this silently, then said, "If we freed the slaves. . . . He's got—a hundred? I don't know how many in his fields and recuperating in his infirmary. What's to be done with them?"

"I guess you have to find out where they're from, to start with. Some of those people may want to go home," Wendt said.

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Chapter 8

Efran closed his eyes, exhaling. Then he looked up to whistle to Truro, who ran over to salute. "Yes, Captain?"

"Forget the slavers' bodies for now. We're riding directly to Venegas," Efran said. "But—scale down to twenty. I don't want to be confrontational, yet"--for all the good it would do, after Theodulph's keeping Minka. "But I'm also looking for men who would recognize Baldassare."

"Yes, Captain," Truro said.

"Saddle Kraken, please. And an extra horse for Baldassare, in case we find him," Efran said. As Truro sprinted away, Efran added, "Excuse me, Commander." Wendt nodded, and Efran started toward Minka, who was watching from the pen. Then he paused to say, "It will be late when we return, Commander."

"You can wake me," Wendt said.

"Thank you, sir," Efran said, dropping his head.

"All right, Gabriel; we're done," Wendt said, turning. Gabriel put Wendt's hand on his shoulder to walk back to the gate. And Efran returned to Minka to tell her not to wait up for him.

Efran, Truro, and their twenty rode out to Venegas at a fast lope. On the way, he was thinking, *God of heaven, what do I do? How can I take their slaves without starting a war? What a nightmare—Eurus conscripting soldiers for us to kill and Venegas picking through the survivors for slave labor. We can't fight them both at once.*

They arrived at the outskirts of Venegas while it was still daylight, barely. The guards at the gates of Borthwick stonily watched Efran and his men approach. Dismounting, Efran walked Kraken over to tell them, "I am Captain Efran. We've just learned that your slavers may have taken a Eurusian emissary who was on his way back to them with an important document. Please tell Surchatain Sewell I must speak with him."

One sentry looked at the other, who proceeded at a walk into the house with the message. Efran looked off with almost glassy eyes.

Long minutes later, Steward Theodulph came to the other side of the gate, not too close. "I regret that Surchatain Sewell has not yet returned from Vychan, Lord Efran. How can I help you?" he asked superciliously.

Efran repeated his request to look for the missing emissary, to which Theodulph waved. "You and two others may look, Lord Efran." He told the gate guards, "Send an escort with them."

"Yes, Steward," one guard saluted. The Steward returned to the house until Efran should produce the emissary, if he were here, for which Theodulph would charge 150—no, 200 royals. An emissary should be worth that much.

Shortly, two Venegasans on horseback rode out of the gates to lead the Abbey riders toward the fields on the far

western edge of the city. Not about to leave any of his men at the manor gates, Efran gestured all of them to follow. They met an oncoming group of Venegasan soldiers—at least 30 of them—who passed them without a glance.

As Efran and his men approached the fields in the early twilight, ranks of slaves were being led toward the large building that had housed the brewery. They all looked to be Southerners, probably Eurussian.

At once they heard the urgent call, “Efran! Efran!” They quickly looked to see the shouting man receive a blow across his face from one of field guards that knocked him down.

“That’s our emissary,” Efran said tightly, spurring toward him. The field guards backed away suspiciously as Efran looked down on the man who was slowly picking himself up. “That’s him. That’s the man we sent back to Eurus with a treaty.”

In rising anger, Efran watched Baldassare, filthy and bruised, slowly lift himself up to his knees. “Unlock him,” Efran breathed. The guard, one of only two in the fields, pulled out his keys while glancing at the pair of Venegasan escorts, who shook their heads. So he held the keys, declining to unlock the Councilor’s neck ring. Baldassare sank back to the ground.

From his saddle, Efran looked around at the sixty or so in chains, who were watching him fixedly. They were mostly young to middle-age men, but--

His heart seized when he saw two children in their midst. They were the two that the water giant had shown him, who had accused Efran of causing their deaths when he had killed their father and brother in battle, leaving them alone. “It can’t be,” he whispered. “They can’t really be here.”

Whether the vision then was a foreshadowing of these children here now, or whether they were now a vision didn’t matter—it was clearly a message to him: even if he got Baldassare free, he would be held accountable for those left in chains. The Law of Roman forbade slavery.

Efran dismounted to take the keys from the guard and then backhand him so that he hit the dirt, unconscious. Before the second guard could do anything, Efran turned to knock him out as well. Baldassare scrambled to his feet.

On this cue, his men behind him dropped the two mounted escorts. Hefting the keys, Efran directed Truro, “Take some with you to check the brewery; see who’s inside.”

Truro gestured to several other men, and they fell off their horses to run inside. Efran began sifting through the various keys, looking for the one that would unlock the neck rings. The slaves pressed forward, and one said, “The long shank that’s scraped free of rust.”

Efran glanced at him, nodding. Shortly, Truro’s group emerged again, and he ran up with a burning torch. It was getting dark. “Captain, the building is empty but for the dead. No one alive.”

Efran looked astonished. “They had two on guard out here? That’s all?”

“Dinner hour for the guards,” one slave said. “They just left; three of ’em will be back when they’re done. They expect us all to be locked up for the night by then.” And Efran realized they’d passed the guards going in to dinner on the way here.

Efran regarded him, then looked at two large wagons sitting just off the road. They were loaded with bags of produce and bolts of fabric, no doubt destined for the Lands. A pair of draft horses was hitched and waiting with each wagon—but why so late in the day? Then Efran saw that last-minute deliveries were still being loaded—or had been, before the guards took a break for dinner. He was aware that, with the volume of orders from the Lands, Venegas often made nighttime deliveries via the relatively safe coastal highway.

He glanced behind him where his men were on their feet, awaiting instructions. Efran ordered, “Tiras, Pleyel, Hawk, Capur—unload those wagons.”

“Captain!” They saluted, running to leap into the wagons and begin throwing out bolts and bags.

Turning to Baldassare, now standing, Efran unlocked him and said, “Go sit in a wagon.” Freed, Baldassare staggered over to climb into one wagon and assist its emptying.

Efran turned to the next man in chains to unlock him, and the rest pressed forward. As he rapidly unlocked one after another, scanning the number remaining, his mind was working. So he glanced back at Truro to instruct, “Go back and search every side room; make certain no one’s in the building. Bring out any food or water you find.”

Truro started to run with the torch, but Efran amended, “The rest of you go search with him, except Jehan and Coish. Bring out more torches!” The men surged behind Truro while Efran continued unlocking the field slaves one by one. Those he freed promptly ran over to the wagons. But one of them stooped to pluck the keys off the other unconscious guard to hasten the unlocking.

Throwing aside neck rings, Efran periodically glanced back toward the heart of the city. Darkness was falling, and although shops in the distance were lit up, no one appeared to be coming this way. He looked over to the wagons, where the newly freed were settling down to ride. A number of his men appeared from the brewery with bundles, bags, or jugs. Efran kept unlocking; the slave who had been assisting him ran over to help load supplies instead, as only a few men were left chained.

In the deepening twilight, Efran unlocked the last of the slaves, of whom there were no children. Truro came running up. “Building’s thoroughly searched, Captain; no one left.” Besides the burning torch, he carried two more unlit.

Efran looked toward the reloaded wagons. A pair of Abbey men sat in the drivers’ seats, and every horse but Kraken had a waiting rider. Walking over to the wagon in the lead, Efran asked the field workers, “Where does this path lead?”

“To the coastal highway,” someone said.

“Excellent. Proceed homeward.” Efran nodded to Lambdin and Graeme in the driver’s seat. They saluted; Lambdin clucked to the horses, and they set out, followed by the second wagon driven by Arne and Gaul. To those mounted behind them, Efran waved, “Go on.” But he pulled out two riders, Finn and Enon, instructing them to gallop ahead of the wagons to alert the Commander.

Efran watched the caravan melt into the dark twilight, then he turned back to Jehan and Coish attentively waiting on their horses. Truro stood beside his horse with the three torches, one of which was lit. Efran took the torches, glancing around at the four unconscious guards. “Drag them over to the clearing off the road.” It looked like a loading area, broad and barren of grass.

Jehan and Coish quickly dismounted, then they and Truro got the four moved to the space off the dirt road.

When they three returned, Efran lit the remaining two torches from the first. He gave those two to Jehan and Coish, telling them, "Mount up and stand by." They did, quickly, and Efran looked back to the brewery. He handed Truro the third torch with, "Burn it down."

Truro ran into the large, empty building to light particularly combustible areas, then came out to turn and fling his torch in through the doorway. Returning to mount, he looked to the Captain, as did the two young Polonti on their horses. They held their torches eagerly, waiting for the word. The horses were skittish with the smell of smoke—except Kraken, whose gaze never left Efran.

Eyes sweeping the fields, Efran uttered, "Burn it all down."

They barely restrained whoops as they spurred far into the fields to fling their torches in a sweeping arc. Efran leapt up on Kraken, glimpsing two of the Venegasan guards stagger up in the clearing. Seeing the flames, they began lugging their cohorts down the road toward the city. Meanwhile, Jehan and Coish caught up to the Captain and Truro.

Looking complacently over the conjoining fires, Efran said, "They don't need slaves anymore." His men grinned tightly, and the four of them turned to lope westward toward the coastal highway.

Upon the arrival of Finn and Enon, Wendt ordered cots set up in the lower barracks' dining hall, and awakened the mess cooks to get out victuals. Also, he summoned the army medic Tourle and his assistant Milo to be on hand.

When the wagons pulled through the Abbey wall gates, they were directed to unload at the barracks. Most of the freed slaves fell into cots to go right to sleep. Some wanted more to eat, and a few wanted to talk, including Baldassare. Wendt sat with him and two others for about an hour, just listening.

When Efran arrived with Truro, Jehan and Coish, he saluted Wendt, muttering, "Captain Efran reporting, Commander. We're at war with Venegas now."

"Very good, Captain. Go to bed," Wendt said, smiling.

And Efran barely stayed on Kraken up the switchback to fall into bed beside Minka. That was when she could finally go to sleep.

Late the following morning, April 28th, Efran woke to eat a large breakfast and bathe under the waterfall in the vacant third-floor room. Feeling human again, he went down to tell Minka, "I've got to check in with Wendt this morning."

"May I come?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, of course. I'll need you to rescue me," he assured her.

"What did you do?" she asked, eyes widening. She had smelled the smoke on his clothes last night.

"Oh, mostly burned everything down," he sighed.

When he and Minka arrived in the vicinity of Barracks A, they were startled by the number of men dressed in mercenary clothing, arming themselves. Instinctively, Efran drew Kraken in front of Minka on her horse, but those men quickly looked over as word spread: “That’s Captain Efran.” “There’s the Captain.” “He’s the one.”

When Efran dismounted, there were men pressing forward to shake his hand. “We won’t forget this, Captain,” one man said.

“What--?” Efran asked generally, glancing around. “Who are you?” he asked the man who had spoken to him.

“My name is Choules, Captain; I’m a cobbler and beltmaker in Eurus. I was making deliveries when the Surchatain’s goons grabbed me and forced me to come up against you, here, in battle [six days ago]. Well, I’m one of those who laid low, but when it was all over, these Polonti rats—pardon me—set upon the whole group of us in hiding and put us in chains to work their fields. And then you came.” He paused to regard Efran for a moment, his lips tight.

“Well, your Commander is kindly equipping us to return to Eurus. We’re going in a mass, together—we have a wheelwright, a baker, a mason, an armorer, a carpenter, an ironmonger, and many others, all of us spread across Eurus. But no longer—we’re going to cluster our shops to defend ourselves and our families. Once we get settled, we’ll send word so you’ll know where we are. Though not on your Lands, we pledge ourselves to you,” Choules said.

“Bring your families down here,” Efran urged.

“It may come to that, Captain, but whatever we do, we’re committed to act as one for our common defense,” Choules said.

“Very good,” Efran said. “Very well done.”

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Chapter 9

Due to the number of horses that the Abbey had acquired after repelling this last attack under Wyse, they were able to provide mounts for all the returning Eurusian craftsmen—54 of them. That number of armed men had nothing to fear from a decimated group of slavers. And about an hour later, Efran, Minka, and Commander Wendt were among those watching when the group rode out of the gates to go home.

The three returned to Barracks A, where Barr was waiting for the Commander. When Wendt got settled into his chair behind the desk, he observed, “So, burn it all down, did you?”

Minka eyed her husband, and he pressed his lips together to admit, “That was fun. But Venegas will be sending their army next.”

“Well, you still have the barricade up. You just need the barbed wire back over the road,” Wendt said placidly. Efran exhaled, running a hand through his hair, which was a little bit grayer than before.

Minka asked, “Who’s still here, of the slaves you rescued?”

Efran was raising his shoulders in ignorance when Wendt said, “Five, whom I understand were taken from the prison in Eurus to fight. So I don’t think they want to go back. A few are too weak to do much, a few others we’re locking up until we can determine what risk they present. That doesn’t include Councilor Baldassare, who’s demanding to take his faerie wife Solace back to Eurus with him.”

Efran raised his brows. “I imagine so. But I’m not putting him on the road to Eurus again until we hear back from the scouts we just sent yesterday.”

A gate sentry, Stourt, entered to salute. “Commander, Captain, messengers from Steward Theodulph of Venegas are here.”

Efran winced as everyone turned to him, including Wendt. Efran said, “All right, keep them outside the gates, and, I’ll come think of something.”

“I want to come watch,” Minka said.

Reluctantly, he allowed it--“If you stay close to the barracks door.” She smiled sympathetically.

Shortly, he emerged from the barracks to stand at the gates at which four Venegasan soldiers sat on their horses. “I am Efran. Dismount to give your message,” he instructed.

They climbed down from their saddles and the lead messenger said, “Captain Efran, I am Hews. We had a terrible fire last night that destroyed our production plant and much of our fields. There are four men injured, wagons and goods gone. The Steward is demanding to know what happened.”

“He doesn’t know?” Efran shot back. The messengers looked stunned. “He sent us straight into an ambush that had been waiting for the field guards to go in to dinner. We fought for our lives to get away. I find it hard to believe that the Steward knew nothing of it. Stranger still is Sewell’s prolonged absence at this logging camp. I doubt that he would force us into the middle of a war between you and slavers. Theodulph has much to answer for. And that’s all I’m going to say.” Fortunately, the wagons that Efran’s men had taken from Venegas were now sitting behind the lower stables out of view of the gates.

The messengers gaped at Efran, looked at each other, and then Hews saluted him. “We will give your message to the Steward, Captain.” They grimly remounted and spurred back east. The Abbey soldiers at the gates were mostly quiet, though several were grimacing at the ground and a few more were smiling at the Captain.

Efran returned to Wendt, his father confessor, to breathe, “I lied, Commander.”

“Did you, now? Well, that happens. Perhaps Venegas will rethink the wisdom of relying on slave labor,” Wendt said placidly.

Efran looked mildly encouraged, then reached over to put an arm around Minka. “Request to be dismissed, sir.”

“Granted,” Wendt said.

Minka leaned over to kiss the Commander’s cheek. “It’s all right to be proud of him at times. I am too, now and then.”

Efran started swaying but Wendt only said, “Thank you, Minka. I’ll keep that in mind.”

As Efran walked her toward their horses, he hissed, “You don’t have to kiss him.”

She hissed back, “Yes, I do, sometimes.” Wendt smiled. And the Captain and his wife rode on up to the hilltop to watch Joshua ride on Soup.

Two days later, on April 30th, the scouts that Efran had sent to Eurus returned. There were six of them: four had ridden to Marguerite’s, and two had accompanied Lord Verlice’s men Wiatt and Gastrell to Wirrin Valley. As usual, Efran had dinner sent to the six in the small dining room and collected Minka, Wendt, Barr, Gabriel and DeWitt to hear their report. (Estes was finishing up interviews with adoptive families.) Efran also invited Verlice to hear them, as he was still here with his recuperating sons.

Efran allowed the scouts--Clough, Connor, Leneghan, Serrano, Teschner, and Verrin--to concentrate on the veal before he made them talk. That’s because Connor, one of those sent to Marguerite’s, handed him the sealed letter from Justinian.

“Oh, good,” Efran said, breaking the seal. “He was down here three weeks ago just after the insurrection. He identified Baldassare for us, then went back up to Eurus to write us about Lyte—Wyse--being named Surchatain, since he was Loizeaux’s son to start with.”

A couple of the newer scouts paused at this information, but Wendt noted, “Justinian will be amused to hear that Wyse and Baldassare are both back in your keeping.”

Efran mildly snorted. “Yes, Commander, but I’m bouncing Baldassare right back to Eurus, even though—he lost his copy of the treaty, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” Wendt confirmed.

DeWitt said, “We still have our copy, to produce if needed.”

“Right,” Efran said. “As for Wyse . . . I don’t know. Nonetheless, let’s hear what Justinian has to say.” He glanced over the letter before beginning:

““To my Faerie Queene””--he paused to tell the new men, “Justinian addresses his letters to Minka; I am ‘the Gargoyle.’”

The men appreciated that, but kept eating, so Efran read on: ““What has happened to Councilor Baldassare? He has not returned to Eurus, but faerie Minka has, as his wife Solace. She has relayed the most amazing tale to the Council about how their returning carriage was set upon by a band of slavers, and how Baldassare, by acts courageous and cunning, managed to hold off the entire band single-handedly to allow her to escape in their carriage. Alas, her dear husband was taken captive himself, and while several members of this savage band pursued her, they were so exhausted by the fight he gave them that they fell away. She has since written her friends in the Abbey Lands, pleading with them to find him, and has great hopes that they will succeed.

““Therefore, by faerie magic or some other strange concoction of fate, due to the failure and subsequent disappearance of Surchatain Wyse, the Council has proclaimed Baldassare Surchatain *in absentia*, and his wife Solace as acting Surchataine until he appears.”” Efran broke off in astonishment to look up at them.

“Go on,” Wendt said.

Clearing his throat, Efran returned to the letter. “The new Surchataine has convinced the Council of her capabilities by explaining how he communicated to her his priorities as a leader of the Council. You will remember that one of Webbe’s last acts as Surchatain was to hang Grand Councilor Vanidestine. Baldassare had been favored to replace him, which adds credibility to his abrupt leap into rulership, wherever he is.

“As acting Surchataine, Solace has named Molyneux the new Grand Councilor, which is an astute action, as he is apparently the Councilor least encumbered with vices and the one most agreeable to the lovely Minka double being Surchataine.” Efran broke off again to look at Minka in consternation. “Does she look like you again?” She shook her head, unknowing.

“Go on,” Wendt said again.

Distressed, Efran returned to the letter: “Surchataine Solace’s early actions have been to reinstate Quilicus’ low tax rates, forbid forcible enlistment into the army, and remand two Councilors, Taaffe and Undergrewp, to face charges for embezzlement. While Lady Marguerite was offered a Councilorship but declined, she has recommended two unimpeachably honest men for the position, who have accepted. Since these actions are wildly popular with the citizens, Solace now holds a firm grip on the rulership with little danger of assassination.

“Am trusting that all is well in your Lands, and earnestly request that you not show your sweet face in Euris for a little while, else you may be confused with someone else.

“Your obedient subject,

“Justinian,” Efran finished, and the room was quiet for a moment.

“Well.” Efran wiped sweat from his upper lip. “We’ll just think on that for a while, and—who went with Verlice’s men?” he asked the scouts.

“That would be Leneghan and me, Captain,” Teschner replied, adding, “His wife was beside herself to hear what Wiatt and Gastrell had to tell her. They sang your praises mightily, sir, and he employs a whole township of people in Wirrin Valley. We barely escaped a week of celebrating.” Leneghan nodded in confirmation.

Everyone looked at Verlice, who exhaled, “All that sounds exactly right, and they’ll still be celebrating when we get back up there.”

“Good, that’s good,” Efran said, though he still looked distressed. “Connor? How is Marguerite?”

“Ever amazing, Captain,” Connor said wryly. “I’d almost think she’s faerie herself. She just feasted us and listened; was hardly astonished to hear that they’re being ruled by a faerie now. Best—at least in Justinian’s view—the new Surchataine has forbidden the tree faeries from dropping anything on sidewalks or clothing.”

That produced laughter around the room. Minka sighed, missing Marguerite; Efran was only minimally reassured. Then he said, “Queene Kele, I would have a word with you, please.”

She readily appeared, all decked out in her faerie finery. The men who hadn’t ever seen her definitely stared. And they all could see her. Even Wendt could see her outline. “Yes, Lord Efran? Hello, dearest Minka.”

“Hello, Kele,” Minka said warmly.

Efran exhaled, “Kele, I assume you know all about Solace ruling in Eurus.”

“Oh, yes, Lord Efran, and isn’t that such a wonderful turn of events for the Abbey Lands! Regardless of her status, Solace is constrained by Faerie Law to be loyal to you,” Kele said.

“Good,” he said, wiping his lip. “Kele, when she took the name ‘Solace,’ she altered her appearance to not look so much like Minka. How much does she look like her now?”

Kele looked uncomfortable. “A little, Lord Efran.”

“Show us,” he said.

“Well. . . .” Kele waved a hand, and there appeared in the room a living, moving picture of Solace in a gorgeous dress, conferring with a group of men around a table. She glanced up at Efran to wink, and several of those in the small dining room sucked in their breath. Minka studied her, not seeing any resemblance at all.

“That’s enough,” Efran said, pale. Kele waved again for the image to disappear. He stammered, “Why—why did she change to look so much like Minka?” In fact, she was almost a dead ringer for Minka when Alberon had taken her to be his Queene, and dressed her up as such.

“Oh, it’s not intentional, Lord Efran,” Kele said anxiously. “Just, having been promoted to a position of authority, she reverted to the appearance of the highest woman in authority she knows. Faeries love precedents, you see.”

Efran blinked, shaking his head slightly. “No, I don’t, not really. Why can’t she look like you? You’re the perfect vision of a faerie queene.”

“Oh, how kind of you, dear Efran,” Kele laughed, preening a little. “I’ll suggest alterations to her, but, a faerie’s appearance is such a personal matter, you know. I really can’t dictate that to her; it’s unaccountable meddling.”

“All right, thank you, Kele,” Efran said dismally.

“You’re welcome, dear Efran,” she said, and disappeared.

After a moment, DeWitt said, “It occurs to me that the longer we can keep Baldassare here—and Wyse--the better for everyone.”

There was light, affirmative laughter in response. “All right,” Efran said cautiously. “Unless there’s anything else, you’re all dismissed. Except for you, Commander.”

“I’ll dismiss myself, Efran,” he said, rising. The scouts rose to salute, and Efran turned to Minka, the real one, for comfort.

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Chapter 10

"I don't know what to do now," Efran murmured to Minka close beside him. They were the only two left in the small dining room. But because kitchen helpers came in to begin cleaning up, he rose, nodding to them and taking her hand as they walked out. "Where is Joshua?" he asked.

"I had Telo take him out to ride in his cart. The children are in class now, but he has Nakam to ride with him, and the men are so good about carrying him and talking to him," she said. They were progressing leisurely down the lower corridor.

They came out the back door to look around, not seeing either Telo or Joshua right away. Hearing Nakam bark, they looked toward the orchard at the back of the grounds. Under the trees, they saw Joshua in his cart and Telo sitting on the ground in front of him. A few men had paused around them. Curious, Efran and Minka came up quietly to watch, far enough away to not be a distraction.

Facing Joshua, Telo was clapping out the Polonti war drums: *bap bap BAP! bap bap BAP! bap bap BAP! bap bap BAP!* Watching intently, Joshua hesitantly raised his hands to clap, not quite on rhythm. But Telo kept clapping, and Joshua kept trying.

A garden worker happened by who dropped his shears to stand behind Telo and clap in rhythm. Joshua looked up at him a moment, but returned to the young soldier in front of him, who had not altered his clapping or his gaze. Nakam stood beside the cart, supervising.

In another minute, Joshua was suddenly in synchronization with his teacher and backup. A moment later, a passing soldier stopped to clap with them, and Joshua shrieked, but kept clapping. When another man stopped behind them to stomp in rhythm, Joshua grasped the front rail of the cart to lift himself up and begin stomping while holding the rail.

Telo kept clapping, his eyes on the toddler, while more men stopped behind him to clap or stomp. Watching them all, Joshua let go of the rail to stand upright and clap. It took another minute for him to get in rhythm, but finally he was standing and clapping just like all the men behind Telo. Efran was grinning broadly and Minka put a hand over her mouth.

The men broke out in huzzahs for him, at which he screeched, lost his balance, and fell forward over the front rail. But Telo was sitting right there to catch him. His parents came over as Telo stood with the newest member of the Polonti drum line. Minka cried, "Telo, that was wonderful!"

"Not because of me; it's in his blood, *Moiwahine*," he said happily. "Captain." He saluted as Joshua leaned off Telo's arm toward Efran.

"Well done, Telo," Efran said. The other men saluted--even the garden worker--then they went about their business.

While Minka pulled the cart and Nakam walked alongside, Efran carried Joshua over to the training pen. He was still clapping as they stopped to watch Ella and Tess work with their respective horses. Ella was training a new yearling, tossing a lead rope gently over his back to familiarize him with the sensations he would later experience being saddled. Tess, meanwhile, had a rope around a foal's neck, training her with just a touch to move her hindquarters to the side while her forefeet stayed in the same spot. All this was groundwork for later handling.

Efran and Minka paused at the pen, but with Joshua yawning, they decided it wasn't a good time to put him on Soup. So they went on in for an early dinner. Nakam thought he'd like to go into the dining hall with them, but they detoured to deposit him in their quarters before arriving at the hall. At the back tables, Minka said, "You sit with Joshua; I'll bring us plates." Dobell had usually done that, but, he was gone now.

Efran nodded, but when she turned around, Madea's son Wardly was coming over with plates for them. "Cap'n's got two cutlets and sides; Lady Minka's got the creamed peas, rice and apple crumbly. Is that right?" he asked in mild angst.

"Perfect, Wardly," she said, which is what she would have said even if it weren't.

"And I'll bring yer drinks. Mild ale for the Cap'n and lager for the lady?" the boy asked, pausing on the verge of wrongness.

"That's good, Wardly; thank you," Efran said. Breathing in relief, the boy skipped off for the drinks.

In the sparsely filled hall, they began eating quietly. Efran had to prop Joshua up on his chest to feed him bites, but he wasn't much interested in anything but the pie. "Oh, the rice is very good," she murmured.

"Here, have a little veal," he said, reaching around Joshua to cut a bite.

"No, thank you; I would have been fine with that until I saw the calves," she said sadly.

"And you just wanted to pet them," he murmured.

"Yes," she winced.

"I hope you don't mind if I eat it," he said tentatively.

"Oh, no! I've never known what it is to be hungry like you have," she protested.

"Thank you," he acknowledged, eating.

After a few minutes, during which he nodded to those who greeted him in passing, he asked in a murmur, "So, the floor's open. What do I do with Baldassare? . . . and Wyse?"

"Ohhh," she groaned, putting down her fork. "You don't really expect anything useful from me, do you?"

"Often," he said, mildly offended.

She waved. "Baldassare should go back to Eurus; we've no right to keep him. But, Lyte. . . . He's kind of like Adele, isn't he?"

He looked up quickly. "How so?"

"A menace regardless of where he is," she said. "After they've already named Baldassare Surchatain, for Lyte to show up would create chaos. And there's no reason to think he wouldn't try to attack you again. Oh, the apple crumbly is very good, too."

“True—I mean about Lyte. Wyse. And that’s assuming the Council restores his title. I think it’s more likely they’ll quietly kill him,” Efran said.

She snorted. “If only we could contain him in the faerie realm.”

“So he can cloak himself and try to rob the Treasury?” he offered, turning up his ale.

She laughed in acknowledgment. They were quiet again, eating, then she brought her napkin to her mouth. “Are you sure that . . . Wyse has no more friends on the Lands?”

He evaluated that. “Who might help him escape?”

“Yes.”

“No, I’m not sure,” he admitted. “But if I’m not sure, then the Commander is counting on it.”

“On his escaping?” she asked in surprise.

“No, on the attempt,” he said, eyeing her, and she inhaled in comprehension.

As they were both very tired, they crawled into bed shortly after giving up Joshua to his nursery caretakers. Late in the night, however, Efran sat straight up in bed.

Thinking that someone was knocking on the outer door, he gently disentangled from Minka to go check. First, he put a tentative foot to the floor to make sure Kraken hadn’t sneaked in again.

The floor was clear, so Efran went to the outer room to open the door to the corridor. No one was there, but the door guard, Tomer, saw him and came trotting over. “Captain?”

“Did anyone just now come in?” Efran asked.

“No sir, not for hours,” Tomer replied. The other door guard, Skalbeck, was watching from his post.

“All right; as you were,” Efran said. Tomer saluted and Efran went back to bed.

In the morning, however, Wendt summoned him down to Barracks A. As the Commander didn’t specify that Minka should come, Efran left her in Law class with Soames, Ella, and the Librarian. Efran took Kraken, but warned him, “I’m just going down to see the Commander. You’ll be bored.”

Just leave me in reach of water and I won’t bite you, Kraken replied.

Efran began, “Oh you won’t? Well, that’s--”

“Captain?” The gate guard Fennig asked, confused.

“At ease; I’m arguing with a horse,” Efran said in mild disgust.

“Yes, Captain,” Fennig said cautiously.

Kraken delivered his rider to Barracks A without incident, and he tied the reins to the water trough. Leaving

Kraken with a pat, Efran entered the outer office and saluted the Commander sitting at his desk. “Captain Efran reporting as summoned, Commander.”

Wendt stood, gesturing to the door to the conference room. “Back here, Efran.” He came around the Commander to open the door. Gabriel reseated himself at one desk while Captain Towner and his scribe Viglian stood over the other.

Wendt entered the conference room, closing the door behind them and reaching out to find the table. He sat at the end; Efran sat in the chair around the corner, just they two. Efran’s senses were on high alert at this casual confidentiality, which was—unusual. Something had happened. “What is it, Commander?”

“Is anyone else here? Are any doors open?” Wendt asked quietly.

“No, sir,” Efran said.

“Good,” Wendt said, leaning back. “Well, it finally happened. For four days now, after we brought Wyse down here and stuck him in a cell, I’ve been waiting for hidden accomplices to spring him. So last night, in the middle of the night, Wyse became very sick, even managed to vomit a bit. So, following my set instructions, the guards brought him out to take him to Coghill. And as they were rounding the corner of Barracks C, they were attacked by three men in hiding.”

“Killed?” Efran asked tightly.

“No, because they didn’t fight, also in accordance with my instructions. And his accomplices ran him around Barracks D to their waiting horses, where my men were also waiting. And I’m afraid they did kill Wyse’s friends. So I sent him off immediately to Sasany Fields. The party was to travel only as far as Willowring Lake last night, then bed down to rest and start again this morning,” Wendt said quietly.

“Who were his accomplices?” Efran asked, breathing in anger.

Wendt paused. “I will tell you that none were Polonti or of the Forty. But since there may be more, we’re putting word out that we thwarted Wyse’s abduction last night, and he’s been returned to his cell. But of course it’s a decoy with a similar build and hair—we have several of them, so as not to tax our regular men with lying on a cot for days on end.”

“So that’s what woke me last night. How many more traitors are there?” Efran demanded.

“Three fewer than there were,” Wendt said wryly. At Efran’s distressed jerk of the head, Wendt added, “Not every man burns with a pure flame, Efran, not even under the best leaders. There will always be a few on the edge, a handful ready to get what they can for themselves. We’re going to give the most eager of Wyse’s lieutenants another chance to prove themselves.”

Efran thought about that, then asked, “If they don’t kill him, then what will Hob and Wymond do with him at Sasany Fields?”

Wendt laughed dryly. “Make him sorry he got away the first time. Oh, and contrary to what I just said, there are no half-hearted hangers-on at the Fields—they’re deeply committed to preserving Polonti culture, which will afflict a EurAsian like Wyse to no end. Further, we’ve already seen that EurAs has passed on Wyse. He flubbed his big chance; there’ll be no flash-bang rescue, no boat waiting at the Passage. To make sure of that, we just sent Surchatain Baldassare back to EurAs in style.”

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Chapter 11

Efran sat thinking, head down, then murmured to Wendt, “You’re making me irrelevant.”

Wendt laughed, “Really? I’m going to jump up on the barricade to pick a fight?”

Efran slowly smiled. “That was fun. I almost fell off before he made it up.”

“The Polonti war drums are interesting. There’s a genuine undercurrent of power,” Wendt observed.

Efran looked over. “Is it related to that in the hill?”

Wendt considered that, then said, “Not exactly; it’s a lesser power, but can draw from it.”

There was a knock on the door, then Gabriel opened it from the outside. “Excuse me, Commander, Captain. The Captains are ready for their briefing.”

“Yes, bring them in,” Wendt said.

Efran stood. “Thank you for your counsel, Commander.”

“Dismissed,” Wendt nodded, and Efran clapped the shoulders of the Captains he passed on his way out.

Emerging out of Barracks A to untie Kraken, Efran began absently leading him up Main, thinking hard. He slowed at the silence around him, and Kraken’s sudden braying laughter.

Efran, almost in the middle of Main, looked to the left where Trina, fictionally an Empress, was glaring at him. He looked around in confusion at the matrons frozen with their market baskets and the children ignoring balls that rolled into the street.

Then he looked to the right to see Challinor on the opposite sidewalk, open-mouthed in surprised indignation. “What did I do?” he murmured. He looked again at the brightly patterned outfit she was wearing. “Where have I seen that before?” he mused.

Looking to the left again, he saw the same pattern on Trina, only in a slightly different ensemble, with more ruffles and flourishes. Belatedly, he realized they were not glaring at him, but at each other, so he hastened Kraken up the street and out of the line of fire.

Almost without realizing it, he tied Kraken off at Ryal’s door and entered his shop. Ryal was standing expectantly behind his counter. Efran regarded him pensively for a moment, then said, “The dress wars are about to result in fatalities.”

“What?” Ryal said, so Efran jerked his head toward the door.

Ryal cautiously opened it to look at the combatants circling each other while simultaneously trying to ignore the other. “Oh.” Ryal closed the door to return to his counter. “It had to happen. They’ve been buying the same fabrics from Venegas.”

“Oh, of course. Well, that may not be an issue any more,” Efran said tentatively, given his arson of Venegas’ dyeing facility. In a lower voice, he asked, “Did you know that the Commander shipped Wyse off to Sasany Fields last night?”

“No,” Ryal said, so Efran repeated for him everything he had just learned. After hearing him out, Ryal observed, “The Commander is—incredibly perceptive. Given his blindness, that’s even more remarkable.”

Efran said, “He thinks it’s partly due to his blindness.”

“Is that right?” Ryal said, looking off in thought.

Suddenly affronted, Efran demanded, “Where is Giardini?”

“Visiting friends, Efran. I do let her out now and then,” Ryal said.

“Oh. Minka’s in Law class,” Efran said defensively.

“That’s good. I should be there, as well,” Ryal noted.

“Ryal,” Efran began, leaning on the counter, “something more is coming.”

“Isn’t it always? I begin to see the wisdom of the Almighty in appointing a soldier as Lord of the Abbey Fortress. Fulfilling your charter involves constant warfare.”

Efran lowered his head. “I am inadequate, Ryal.”

“And there lies your salvation. The knowledge of your inadequacy makes it second nature for you to call on your Father, whose resources are far beyond what we can imagine,” Ryal said.

“I’ve seen it over and over, and still don’t believe it. The problem is, I never know what to do until the moment it’s required,” Efran vented.

“So you will know that it’s not your doing,” Ryal said slowly, emphatically.

“I know,” Efran said, drooping on the counter. Then he raised up to look around. “Weren’t you caring for a lot of the wounded here?”

“Yes, at least, Giardi was. And somehow they’re all better, so much so that they struck out north—but not to Eurus. They went to Westford,” Ryal said, smiling.

“Westford? What’s in Westford?” Efran asked, heart thumping. He thought that the city he had dreamt of seeing as a child was dead.

Ryal said, “The new inn being built by a coalition of Eurussian nobles. The construction supervisor Bortniansky is paying premium wages for skilled workers.”

“That’s—that’s good. That’s good to hear, Ryal,” Efran said, pretending that his eyes weren’t watering.

Ryal agreed, but a customer entered with plot needs, so Efran left. He did climb into Kraken’s saddle to ride up the switchback. Entering the courtyard gates, Kraken groused, *That was no fun at all.*

“I warned you,” Efran said. The gate guards heard him, but said nothing. They were learning that the Captain talked to his horse.

So you groom me. Squirt can’t reach high enough over my back, Kraken groused.

“For today only,” Efran said, leading him back to the stables.

As Efran brought him into his stall, he glanced over at Tuffin with another man in the next stall. He didn’t turn, apparently thinking it was Squirt, as usual, bringing the horse in. But Efran caught the tail end of Tuffin’s whisper, “--and he’s back in his cell.”

The second man nodded, walking out. At the same moment, Squirt entered the stall, raising his face to begin a question to the Captain.

“Here,” Efran whispered, upending a large wooden bucket next to Kraken for Squirt to stand on. Then Efran ran out of the stables to catch sight of the worker walking away. Efran followed him for ten paces, glancing aside to wave at a passing uniform.

“Captain?” Milo ran up, saluting.

“Who is that? In the dark gray shirt and baggy pants with a broken suspender?” Efran asked.

Milo looked, shaking his head. “I don’t know, Captain.”

Efran said, “Take him down to Barracks A; tell Commander Wendt I’d like for him to talk to him about what Tuffin said--‘he’s back in his cell.’”

“Yes, sir.” Milo ran to block the man’s progress and speak to him. He looked questioning, making an argument about his work, but Milo insisted he turn around and walk to the gates. As they drew near, Efran turned in disinterest to lean on a rail of a training pen. But he was eyeing the stables to see if Tuffin were watching.

Noting Milo walk the man down the switchback, Efran returned to Kraken’s stall. Both horse and boy looked over. Squirt, standing on the bucket, was running the curry comb over Kraken’s back. “Where is Tuffin?” Efran asked, glancing around.

“At the feed shed, Cap’n,” Squirt said watchfully.

As Efran continued to scan for eavesdroppers, Squirt watched him. So he resumed, “I want you to take note of anyone you see Tuffin whispering to; tell any soldier I want that man taken down to Commander Wendt. If you don’t know their names, follow them and point them out. Try not to let Tuffin see you do all that. Then come tell me if you made any catches.”

“Will do, Cap’n,” Squirt said, continuing to groom Kraken. Instead of ruffling his hair, Efran patted his shoulder, which was a more fitting gesture for a young man.

From there, Efran went around back, as Minka should be out of Law class by now. He saw her emerge from the back door with Chilcott following, carrying Joshua. So Efran went over to tell her, "There you are! I've been looking all over for you."

Lips parted in surprise, she laughed, "What a little liar. I was out here just now, looking for you."

"Then you found me. Thank you," Efran said, taking Joshua. Chilcott saluted and turned back into the fortress.

"Seriously, I've been looking for you," she said almost accusingly.

"I was down talking with the Commander and then Ryal," he murmured, glancing around. He covered those conversations with her, then what he had heard Tuffin whisper and what he had told Squirt to do.

She grew dismayed. "Still? There are still spies and traitors around?"

Efran was momentarily distracted watching Joshua clap the war drums, then said, "Wendt seems to consider it a—given in any body. Ryal thinks it's a special challenge of the charter. But he also pointed out the number of allies God has given us. And it made me think--the snobbles won't ever go away, but we have Jonguitud to eat them. There will always be someone trying to get into the Treasury, but the Librarian is standing guard over it, as well as the treasures in the library. And then there's Ino, Nonesuch and Asmuch, and Nakham, for heaven's sake. Even the Destroyer turned out to be a—a terrible gift to us, as we didn't even know about the military camp going up in the Northeast Sector."

"Yes," Minka said. "And Symphorien saved us all from Mounoussamy."

"That, too. Oh! The Dress Wars are ongoing. I almost got caught in the crossfire," he said solemnly. She looked at him in bewilderment, so he had to explain that to her.

She murmured, "I had the sudden vision of your wearing one of Trina's dresses."

"I did! Being led to the gallows," he reminded her. She groaned, remembering.

A moment later, she resumed, "Then Aleph made Adele a baby, and Madgwick took her in." Abruptly, she suggested, "Let's get Jehan and Coish to go see her."

"All right," he agreed—not excited, but understanding. "Where's Nakam? Your dog," he clarified, shifting Joshua.

"I can't find him," she said, vaguely worried. Walking around the western side of the fortress, they passed the archers practicing, the fight groups drilling, and Ella, Tess, and Jasque training the horses.

Efran glanced at Shanko emerging from a storage room with an armload of tack. "And Shanko's still running errands for Tess and Loriot," he observed. Then Tess turned to bark at him, upon which he took the tack back to the shed. "Or something," Efran muttered.

"We don't need horses," he added. "Delano's is just past Ryal's and the well; easier to walk than argue with Kraken."

She laughed, "Then why is he the one you always take?"

“Eh, Bastard got me in the habit of taking the cranky ones,” he muttered. To the courtyard gate guard, he said, “Summon Jehan and Coish.”

“Yes, Captain.” Mohr saluted, then ran far enough to catch another soldier on his way to the barracks so that Mohr could hand off the summons and return to his post.

“And Heye,” Minka murmured. Efran looked over to her with inquiring brows. “Heye found the box on the barge with the keys so that you could release the Destroyer.”

“Yes, once the mermaid brought up the box,” Efran said, smiling. “Minka misses all her pets.” She nodded in mild despondence, smoothing Joshua’s hair.

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Chapter 12

Jehan and Coish came running to the courtyard gates, Jehan holding a pouch underarm. They stopped to salute Efran, then Jehan held out the mail pouch, which contained a small, hairless, self-satisfied dog. “Nakam, Lady Minka,” he said, handing the whole bundle to her.

“Where did you find him?” she asked, draping the pouch strap over her shoulder.

“Flushing pheasants in the woods, Lady,” Jehan said as if that were fine.

She gasped, “No, Nakam! How do I stop him?” she pleaded of Efran.

He winced. “I’m afraid it’s instinctive. You’d have to keep him inside or with you.” She looked deeply dissatisfied, but Efran told the boys, “We thought to check on Madgwick and her baby Ruth, if you’d like to come along.”

Coish looked at Jehan with a suppressed smile; he lowered his head. “Thank you, Captain. Lady.”

Efran glanced at Minka to make sure she wasn’t going to respond with a hug, which looked likely. But she only nodded warmly at him.

They started off down the old switchback, the bodyguard walking behind Minka and the Captain, who was carrying Joshua. The toddler pulled up on his father’s shirt to look over his shoulder at the boys. Jehan said, “Hello, Joshua”--who got his pudgy hands free to begin clapping the war drums.

Jehan and Coish joined him at once, stomping as well while they walked. The courtyard gate guards began clapping. Soldiers at the south end of Main joined in. The faerie trees at the end of the switchback began swaying their crowns on the hard beat.

Then there was a pounding on the hilltop, as of something hard on wood. Efran stopped to look back at the hilltop in concern, so those with him stopped, too. But the boys kept clapping because Joshua was clapping.

The gate guards, however, had also stopped, looking toward the stables. And on one last *BOM!* there was a

splintering crash. Kraken, wearing only a halter, ran out of the stables to rear at the gates, which Mohr and Melott threw open for him. He loped down one level and a bend until reaching the flabbergasted party whose Captain had dared leave without his horse.

Joshua left off the war drums to screech in laughter and applaud. Kraken shook his halter violently while Efran regarded him with pursed lips. Then Efran lifted Joshua to set him on Kraken's bare back, holding him there with one hand. "Can you lead him, Minka?"

She opened her mouth momentarily, then went around to Kraken's other side to take hold of the halter with her left hand while holding on to the pouch containing Nakam with her right. Starting off, she said, "My goodness, Kraken! Are you proud of yourself for that?" He nodded, high-stepping beside her. Joshua patted his splayed legs in satisfaction at riding this great big horse all by himself, almost. And their bodyguard followed, smiling.

They made it almost to Delano's without incident. However, Kraken's choice to walk directly beside the sidewalk forced Minka up onto it, which crowded out a few persons who otherwise wanted to pass her on the pedestrian walkway rather than on the street.

One of those people was Trina, who presented a special obstacle over the entire sidewalk because of the volume of brightly patterned fabric gathered around her. As Minka approached helplessly with the horse, he stretched his neck toward the Empress and bared his teeth.

With a light scream, she flew into the street, outside any crosswalk, where she was forced to dodge carts, carriages and horses until landing safely on the other sidewalk—right next to Challinor.

The two women, dressed in identical fabric made into different dresses, stared at each other a moment. Then Challinor broke into ringing laughter. Trina had no choice but to join her, and they laughed as they admired each other's dress.

Efran turned to Minka to remark, "Challinor wins that engagement." She chortled in a high-pitched whine.

At last, they arrived at Delano's. Efran parked the horse outside near the post, advising, "Don't do anything that will get you made into a rug." Kraken snorted as Efran lifted Joshua.

They entered Delano's to wait at the back of the line. When they finally arrived at the counter, Madgwick said, "Hello, Efran, Minka! And you brought the boys today. But I'm here by myself again!"

Minka looked inclined to man the counter for her, but Efran said, "Coish will help you. It will only be for a moment."

"All right," she said.

So Efran and Minka, with Joshua, Nakam and Jehan, stood apart from the line while Madgwick showed Coish what to do. He nodded readily, and as she stepped aside with her visitors, Coish challenged the next person in line: "How many cases do you want?"

One gentleman whom Minka had waited on the first time called from the line, "Lady Minkaea! Hello! We missed you at our soirée, but there's another tonight! Here, hand this card up to the lady," he instructed the man in front of him. Slightly flummoxed, the man took the card and turned around, but Efran was firmly leading her to the back rooms.

Madgwick brought them into the room where the wet nurse had baby Ruth on her shoulder, patting her back. “Oh, my, how much she’s grown!” Minka breathed. “How old is she now?”

“Two months to the day,” Madgwick said. “Thank you, Nyla; let’s see if Lady Minka would like to hold her.”

“Oh, yes.” Thrusting Nakam in his pouch onto Efran, Minka took the baby to hold her lightly. She was awake, docilely looking around. “Oh, her eyes have changed color—they’re a lighter blue instead of the dark blue. More like—what do you think, Jehan?”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said quietly. She put the baby in his arms, and he held her competently. Baby Ruth turned her head to look at him, and he smiled.

Efran said, “I trust you’ve had no more problems with soldiers demanding free ale, Madgwick.”

“Oh, no, Lord Efran, they’ve all been very courteous. They’ll even stop to help us unload when they see our wagon pull up,” she said.

“I’m glad. But you’ll tell me if anything crops up, won’t you?” he said.

“Of course. Hello, Joshua. You’re looking so much like your father,” she said. He looked agreeable.

They made further small talk while Jehan held the baby as long as he dared. Then he almost reluctantly handed her back. “Thank you, Madgwick.”

“You’re welcome, Jehan. Come back any time,” she said.

“I’ll do that,” he said, only a little self-conscious.

When they returned to the outer room, Coish was telling a customer, “Oh, no, for that many people, you need at least two cases. And you’ll want another strictly of lager, because the ladies don’t like to get drunk. You’ll have ladies there, won’t you?”

“Yes, yes, certainly! Three cases, then?” the sweating customer asked dubiously.

“For a successful party,” Coish said indifferently, raising the brows of a connoisseur.

The customer pulled out his pouch in determination. “Two of mild ale and one of lager, then.”

“Here you go.” Coish hefted a case, turning to his partner. “Here, Jehan, take these out to his carriage—the black one, there, with the nice gilding.”

“Yes, sir,” Jehan said, contributing his part to the performance.

He took two cases out while Coish counted royals, then Jehan came back for the third as the customer received his receipt. “There you go, sir. Happy partying,” Coish winked, and the man went out assured of success.

As Madgwick replaced him at the counter, he observed, “You’re out of lagers, Madgwick. Shall I run a few cases up from the back?”

She gasped lightly, looking at the empty corner, then in her cash drawer. “Yes, Coish, thank you.”

“Come help, Stupid,” he addressed his partner, who ran to the back storage area with him.

Madgwick turned to Efran. “May I borrow him for counter work sometime?”

“That’s between him and his captain, which would be Captain Rigdon, on the hilltop,” Efran said, smiling.

The boys brought up two cases each of lager, which they set down in the proper corner. Madgwick put a royal in Coish’s hand. “Ask your Captain when you can come help me again, Coish.”

“Thank you, Madgwick; I’ll do that,” Coish said smugly.

“Out of uniform,” Efran instructed.

“Yes, Captain,” Coish said quickly.

“And I’ll be your stock boy,” Jehan offered. Coish nodded, pocketing the royal as Joshua watched in fascination.

On the way up the switchback with Joshua riding Kraken, Minka noted, “Your men are very versatile, Efran.”

“Alarmingly so,” Efran said, and Jehan and Coish grinned.

That evening, holding Minka in bed, something began bothering Efran again, but he didn’t want to think about it—certainly not when he was with Minka. So he put it out of his mind, but it kept stealing back. So he put it out again. That struggle went on for two days until May 3rd, when he finally gave up, saddled Kraken, and rode down to Barracks A.

Entering, he found only Captain Towner there, going over paperwork. He looked up. “Good morning, Captain. Sorry, the Commander is out looking at defensive formations for different parts of the wall. I think he wants to be prepared when Venegas and Eurus jointly attack,” Towner said dryly.

Efran winced, insisting, “Of which I’ll be held guiltless.” Towner laughed. “At any rate,” Efran said despondently, glancing around, “I don’t need the Commander if I’ve got you cornered.”

“Rescue me,” Towner said, raising sheaves of paper in both hands.

“How is Neale doing?” Efran asked.

Exhaling, Towner dropped his paperwork to the desk. “Surviving. He’s—riding out counting heads of cattle, sheep, goats; checking on progress in the fields; all . . . routine work. But he’s a—shadow, a ghost. I wish I knew what made him side with Wyse like that. It destroyed him.”

“Is he out of the wheelchair? Walking?” Efran asked.

“Like you came out of it? No,” Towner said. “He seems to have adjusted, which would be encouraging if his mental state had adjusted as well, but, he looks to be just--dead inside. Which is understandable if he just got swept up in the push for change, although he never wanted to see you die, or even deposed, I think. But I don’t know what to think. I don’t know where his mind is now. That’s alarming because it’s an unstable condition. I’ve seen men go dead like that when they suffer great defeats, and then something wakes them, and they snap—kill themselves or someone else. Go out with a scream of rage.”

Efran looked aside. “What about his wife? Tisi?” Wives were good for broken men.

Towner nodded. “Something else to tear him down. She divorced him in order to marry a Polonti—Aceto, one of the men who just came from Sasany Fields. Apparently she knew him out there, and he was finally able to follow her here.”

“That alone would kill any man,” Efran muttered, to which Towner silently agreed. Efran went on, “Well, I don’t see what more I can do now, but, send me word if there’s any change with him.”

“Yes, Captain,” Towner said.

Emerging from the barracks, Efran took up Kraken’s reins, then paused to stroke the bridge of his nose. Understanding, Kraken held his head still under Efran’s hand.

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Chapter 13

That same day, May 3rd, the bodyguard that had accompanied Surchatain Baldassare’s carriage to Eurus returned. As was his standard practice, Efran had the four men served an early dinner in the small dining room. Koschat came to hear their report in order to relay it to DeWitt and Estes. (The administrators had their hands full with budget adjustments right now.) Barr’s scribe Numan was also in attendance, to take a report back to Commander Wendt.

Efran let them eat a few minutes in peace before showing up with Minka and Joshua. Corwyn, Coxe, Doudney and Tourse stood to salute, but Efran waved them back down. He did turn to ask Minka, “Do you want anything to eat?”

“No, I’ll wait,” she said, preferring to eat in the dining hall with the children, Ella, Quennel, and whoever else might stop by.

Joshua, however, pointed to demand, “Pie.”

The men laughed, congratulating him, but Efran told him, “You get pie after meat and greens.” Joshua threw himself back in a toddler fit, and Efran added, “If you cry, I will take you back to the nursery.” Joshua stilled, eyeing his father in disgruntlement, because he knew that he’d do it. The men hastily finished their plates.

Looking around the table, Efran said, “All right, who’d like to give me the report, Tourse?”

Again the men laughed. Tourse raised his napkin to daub the corners of his mouth. “Yes, Captain. Well. Since Commander Wendt had the foresight to dress us as noblemen [gesturing to his slightly wrinkled outfit] we were able to deliver the new Surchatain directly to the steps of the palace in Eurus. He was received with warm accolades, and a quite beautiful Surchataine to greet him.”

Tourse avoided looking at Minka, but Corwyn and Coxe were not so guarded. At their glances, Efran asked, “She still looks like Minka?”

Tourse did not immediately reply, so Doudney (one of the 40 who spoke what was uncomfortable), said, “Quite a bit, Captain.” (Yes, Tourse was also one of the Forty, but did not trust his sardonic wit in certain situations.)

Efran’s eyes went glassy; Tourse immediately resumed, “He played the part well as the returning hero, waving to the adoring crowds, accompanied by his adoring wife into the palace. We will have to wait to hear from Lord Justinian as to the subsequent actions and counteractions, but first indications are that it’s a rousing success.”

He paused to take a drink of ale, then resumed, “We took the carriage, driver and footman with us to Lady Marguerite’s, since they’re from Wade’s Carriages for Hire here. Unfortunately, our intrepid Lord Officer was at the palace at that time to receive the new Surchatain, and did not return the next day, or even by the time we left this morning. This was unsettling, but Lady M assured us that this is his *modus operandi*—as long as there is anything to be gleaned, he will persevere through the most punishing soirées until all conceivable intelligence is gathered.”

After light confirming laughter, there followed a few minutes of silence while they cleaned their plates and Efran looked off distractedly. He finally stirred to ask, “All right. Anything else?”

Several shook their heads or said, “No, Captain.”

“Any questions?” Efran looked to Koschat and Numan.

Koschat asked, “Did you see *anything* of their army?”

Coxe replied, “We saw ornamental guards only. Since a good portion of their army had been involuntary conscripts, we believe those went back to their lives, and probably left Eurus.”

This was generally confirmed around the table, then Efran said, “All right, then, thank you. Dismissed.” The men stood to salute, as did Koschat and Numan, then they left.

As Efran, Minka and Joshua were going in to dinner a little while later, Squirt came running up. Efran turned to him immediately. “Yes, Squirt.”

“Yeah, Cap’n—hello Lady Minka,” he interrupted himself.

“Hello, Squirt,” she smiled.

“Yes, sir, well, I only caught You Know Who with one other man talking quiet like, but then he saw the same man being taken down the switchback, and figured out that I was the rat,” Squirt said.

“Where is he?” Efran asked quickly.

“Should be in the stables, still,” the boy said.

Efran turned to whistle lightly, and Eustace ran up, saluting. “Captain?”

“Get you another pair of hands and get Tuffin down to Commander Wendt—if he’s not in the stables, get all the men you need to find him,” Efran instructed.

“Yes, sir.” Eustace saluted and hopped into a run up to the foyer, gesturing to another man.

“Now, go watch from the courtyard; come tell me what you see,” Efran said, patting Squirt’s shoulder.

“Yes, Cap’n.” Squirt ran out as well.

As Efran turned back to the dining hall, Minka asked, “Are you worried?”

“Not now, but I’m glad Squirt saw that he’d been pegged. Otherwise, we could’ve lost the only competent stablehand we’ve got,” he said.

From his arm, Joshua said, “Pie.”

“After dinner,” Efran told him. Joshua fell back on his shoulder in mild exasperation that did not rise to the level of a tantrum.

As they sat at the back table, Efran put Joshua on his leg and picked up a sprig from his plate “Look at this, Joshua. It’s sorrel. Sorrel. If you’re ever lost in the woods and hungry, you can eat this. Taste it. Put it in your mouth. Yes. Sorrel.” Since Father was usually digging things out of Joshua’s mouth, this was an interesting deviation, so Joshua did as he was told. After he had eaten several sprigs, Efran let him have a bite of pie, then they went on to the endive.

The hall got crowded with people coming into dinner. As Ella and Quennel sat to Efran’s left, Minka leaned behind him to ask a question about the new foal she was training. (Cloud was slowly being acclimated to riders, but wasn’t entirely reliable yet.) Ella responded comprehensively, to Quennel’s amused exasperation. She was holding onto Efran’s left shoulder to lean over and not fall off the bench, while Minka had an arm around the right side of his waist. Undisturbed, Efran ate and fed Joshua.

A flash of color caught his eye, and he looked up at Trina being escorted to a table at the front. She wore a brightly colored dress with various attachments. Challinor entered almost directly afterward, on the arm of another man. While different from Trina’s, Challinor’s dress appeared to complement it. (Efran searched out her husband, Captain Stites, who was sitting at a table of Polonti soldiers, all of them oblivious to dresses.)

Efran watched Challinor sit next to Trina to engage in a lively conversation. *Ah. Détente is established*, Efran thought. But then Koschat’s beautiful Polonti wife Felice entered, wearing a simple, elegant dress of polished cotton in peach. She made a point to cross the hall and speak with someone at a table in the middle, upon which almost everyone, including Trina and Challinor, paused to watch her.

But wait! A competing faction arises. Elvey’s, no doubt, Efran thought, watching in amusement. Felice then crossed the hall again to where her husband sat, and he rose to seat her beside him. A very nice performance all the way around, for which Efran was sure Felice was well paid.

But then an unknown Polonti, very handsome, appeared at the door, and the din lessened again as heads turned. He was wearing a sophisticated suit of a vaguely Crescent Hollow cut, his polished silk hat in hand. He scanned the hall, then began walking toward the front tables. *What’s this? A dark horse? Is the Lands’ Clothing Shop entering the fray?* Efran thought.

But the man paused in front of Estes’ table to speak to him, and Estes raised his head to nod toward Efran at the back table. The unknown Polonti turned to regard the Captain, then began walking back to him. Efran, instantly on guard, shifted to alert his wife and his daughter to the fact that he was about to stand. They let go of him, and Minka looked toward the oncoming stranger.

At this time, Squirt approached. “Cap’n.” The stranger paused.

“Yes.” Efran swung around on the bench with Joshua.

With a wry, satisfied set to his lips, Squirt said, “Yes, sir, I was summoned down to the Commander’s office, and the Second Gabriel thanked me for using my eyes, and told me that Tuffin and his two friends are not going to be a problem for anybody anymore. And he told me that Greves is going to get me new stable help tomorrow, and I’m to tell him what to do.”

“Excellent, Squirt. Well done,” Efran said. The boy grinned at Minka, accepting a biscuit from her plate, then went on back to his domain.

Holding Joshua behind the bench, Efran stood, looking back to the stranger who had resumed his approach. Efran watched him warily. Drawing up, the stranger met his eyes, and Efran glimpsed the mental image of great clawed hands reaching toward him to smother his heart, his will, his self-control.

Like the *aina*—children who could command animals—there was a tiny population of Polonti who had mastered the art of commanding fellow Polonti: the *hopui*. They were rare because it was a dark art, forbidden among principled Polonti. But whenever they appeared, they could devastate a whole town before being subdued.

Efran staggered under the assault, but fought back, gasping, “Who are you?”

The stranger smiled. “I am De’Ath, Polonti Lord of Vengeance. You have interfered with my work in Venegas. I had intended to warn you, but now I inform you: I will absorb your Lands into my own.”

“I don’t think so,” Efran breathed, in control of himself again. Minka, Ella, and Quennel were silent on the bench, but Minka was watching incredulously.

“No?” De’Ath said. “I control all your Polonti. They are henceforth mine.”

“What?” Efran screwed up his face in derision.

De’Ath looked at Joshua on his arm, instructing, “Bite him.”

Joshua turned to sink his teeth into Efran’s chest. Efran cried, “Joshua!” The baby let go, crying. As Efran’s hold on him faltered, Minka grabbed him down to her lap.

De’Ath, meanwhile, was looking down at Quennel to instruct, “Stab him.”

Quennel spun on the bench, lurching up with his meat knife to plunge it toward Efran’s side. Efran ducked, ramming him with his shoulder to flip him over the table. He crashed through the men sitting across from them. Fennig, a Southerner, jumped up to restrain him. Since Quennel started fighting him, Serrano reached over to grab Quennel.

The rest of the hall sat in silent shock, watching intently, trying to understand. The intruder looked around the hall to shout, “I am your new Lord, De’Ath!” Everyone in the hall stared at him. To prove it, he commanded, “Throw the old lord into the hydra’s hole.”

Polonti all across the hall, almost eighty, jumped up to surge toward Efran. The Southerners stood against them,

temporarily blocking their way, so a desperate fight broke out, Polonti against Southerners. Efran yanked Minka with Joshua up from the table, breathing, “Run to Ryal’s.” Then he shoved her toward the door.

She fell to her knees, as Joshua was usually too heavy for her to carry. But today she made an exception. She staggered with him through the doorway into the corridor, and he helped by clinging to her neck.

Arne and Ellor, the door guards, were running down the corridor to meet her. Ellor demanded, “Lady Minka! What--?”

“Go help Efran!” she cried, stumbling toward the front doors. They ran around her to rush into the hall.

Exiting the front doors, she paused, seeing the two Polonti gate guards turn to her dubiously. The gates were shut, and they did not look inclined to open them for her. While Joshua began slipping bit by bit from her grasp, she edged away from the courtyard gates to head for the grocers’ gate off the path from the back kitchen door. The Polonti did not pursue her, as they were looking intently toward the open foyer doors.

Minka crept to the obscure gate, then dropped to her knees to shift Joshua to her back. “Hold my neck, Joshua. Can you hold my neck?” she whispered. He lifted his arms to her shoulders, and she reached behind to grasp her hands underneath him. Then she was able to rise, pushing the small grocers’ gate open with her shoulder. From the landing path that ran along the outside of the courtyard fence, she slinked as fast as she dared down the old switchback.

The curving road was dark in the deep twilight, and the toddler very heavy on her back—she had to bend almost double to keep him from sliding off. Meanwhile, she was gasping, “Lord—Dyath? His work in Venegas? Was he responsible for the slavery, then? Oh, Lord God—help me make it down. And—Efran! Oh, help Efran! Where . . . where did this creature come from?”

The closer she got to Main, the more the street lanterns helped illumine the switchback. But as she came to the end, and looked up to the faerie trees, she saw that they were dead—skeletal, even. “No. Oh, no,” she breathed. Glimpsing figures emerge from the fortress into the brightly lit courtyard, she straightened to hoist Joshua higher on her back and run to the notary shop.

Upon reaching the steps, she let him down to the top step to knock on the door. “Help me. Ryal, Giardi, help,” she pleaded quietly, knocking. Joshua turned to pat the door.

Ryal opened it, and they both fell across the threshold. “Minka! What--?” He bent to pick up Joshua. Giardi reached down for Minka, and then closed the door behind her.

The fighting was intense in the dining hall, but the Southerners were no match for the greater number of Polonti. They collected around Efran to lift him over their heads and carry him up to the foyer. DeWitt was on his feet at the head table, shouting. He looked at Estes in consternation, who had his head in his hands. But all the rest of the Polonti flowed out of the hall behind those carrying Efran.

With that, ten Southerners slipped into the kitchen, and from there down the path toward the grocer’s gate and the new switchback. Watching them go, the kitchen crew looked at each other.

Chapter 14

In his office at the lower barracks, Wendt sat listening to Connor's fragmented, breathless, almost incoherent description of the sudden chaos in the dining hall. When he got it all out, Wendt asked, "And all the Polonti were obedient to him right away?"

"Like—trained bears, Commander. All except the Captain, who defied him. So this De'Ath told all the rest of them to throw him into the caverns. And that's when we got up to fight, but we were badly outnumbered," Connor said, wiping blood from his mouth.

"And Minka?" Wendt asked.

"She got Joshua and got out, Commander. I don't know where she went," Connor said.

"Good; she's all right. What are the Polonti down here doing?" Wendt asked generally.

Connor looked to Gabriel, who said, "They're unaccountably sleepy, Commander. Unable to concentrate." Wendt's Polonti Second Barr—a faithful, reliable man—was not to be found right now, nor was Captain Stites, also Polonti.

"All right, Connor; I'll send a few men up to monitor the situation. Now, where are Verlice and his sons?" Wendt asked.

"At Croft's, sir," Gabriel said.

"Get them a carriage for Arturo, horses, and a bodyguard of four Southerners; get them on the road to Eurus now. Quickly," Wendt said.

Gabriel said, "Yes, Commander. Connor, you and your group come give me a hand."

"Yes, sir. Commander," Connor said, saluting.

As the Polonti carried Efran over their heads to the courtyard, Arne, Ellor, and any Southerner who attempted to stem the flood were knocked down and walked over. The whole large group of them carried Efran to the treacherous northwestern hillside. With the dark hole looming before them, most of them broke away, unwilling to crash through weak spots into the snobbles-infested caverns themselves.

Only four were required to hoist the Captain to the edge of the gaping hole and drop him in. He fell about thirty feet to land with a great splash in the water. He broke the surface, treading water to look up at the irregular hole above him, where stars twinkled in the blue-black heavens, surrounded by dark rock. Going by its shape, he oriented himself to face west, knowing that there was a shelf here somewhere. So he swam in that direction until hitting rock.

Here, he reached up as far as he could, sliding south along the rock until he saw the shadowy ledge about six feet over his head. Gripping indentions in the rock, he climbed up the face until he was able to drape his arms over the ledge. He kicked himself up onto it, then sat tentatively, listening. There was chittering above him--they had

detected the meat that had come out of the water. They were communicating to each other that new meat had emerged from the water. This they preferred, for they could not swim.

Above, the Polonti returned to cluster around De'Ath in the dining hall. Madea quietly collected her children, her kitchen help (all Southerners) and Goyne to slip out the back door of the kitchen and trot down the grocer's path to her sister Bari's house in a western plot below.

Toby, watching everything with astute eyes, gathered all the frightened children to go to their quarters--Noah, Ivy, Almund, Beischel, Chorro, Elwell, Hassie, and Jera--and had them pack essentials: their favorite toys and a change of clothes. Then they crept out the little-used western door of the fortress that led to the training pens and stables.

Toby looked into the dark stables, from which Squirt, trembling, came out. "Wh-what's—what's h-happening?" He had seen the Captain being carried out to the hillside.

"Come with us," Toby whispered. Squirt immediately came out to them.

But there was a banging in the stall at the front, and they jumped. "Oh, it's Kraken. He's been locked up in his stall since he broke it," Squirt said.

"We've got to get him out, too," Toby said, handing off his tote bag to Noah.

In the dark, Squirt felt along the wall for a ring of keys. "Here. I'll unlock the hasp on his door. Can you untie the rope on his halter?"

Feeling the knot under Kraken's jaw, Toby whispered, "Yes," and began blindly picking at the rope. The great horse held still for him.

Squirt got the hasp unlocked to open the stall door while Toby unthreaded the rope from the ring on Kraken's halter. He shook his head, emerging from the stall. "Good luck," Toby whispered, patting his neck, and Kraken nodded. He ambled over to the courtyard, snuffling, then up the steps to the foyer, which doors stood open.

Going from door to door, he stopped at one in particular, pushing it open with his nose. But the rooms were empty, so he turned back to the foyer and out the great doors again.

While Kraken was in the fortress, the children warily went to the open gates, unmanned. They had to step over several prostrate men on the ground, and Toby whispered, "Don't look down. Keep your eyes up."

The terrified children followed as he led them down the old switchback onto Main. They ran down the road past the notary's shop and the well to reach the door of Delano's. Here, Toby knocked quietly, persistently, whispering, "Let us in. Please, please, let us in. Please help us." The door opened, light streaming out, and the children rushed inside. Then the door was closed again.

In the dining hall, all the Polonti were gathered around De'Ath, awaiting his instructions. Ella, half-Polonti, was deeply conflicted. Part of her longed to join her husband and her kindred in the security of this irresistible oneness, but another part of her was swimming in fear alone. These two sides were irreconcilable, so she turned out of the dining hall to run up stairs to the vacant third-floor room. Since the key was already in the door, she unlocked it and ran inside, shivering. Sudie was close behind her, so Ella pulled her inside as well.

Almost at once, there was a quiet knocking on the door. Ella froze at first, but the knocking of a trembling hand

continued. She opened the door to see Wyeth's deaf wife Cyr, eyes wide in a waking nightmare. She halfheartedly signed while mouthing, "Can I . . .?" Ella pulled her inside to shut and lock the door again.

Back in the dining hall, Trina and Challinor sat bored and slightly disgruntled. "Well," Trina sighed, "I don't know what they're doing—some Polonti thing—but I don't care to find out."

Hearing, Folliott stopped by their table. "Yes, it looks a little low-brow, doesn't it? Why don't you ladies come have a drink with Father and me?" Reinagle stood slightly apart in tentative hope.

"Why?" Trina half-sneered, partly interested despite herself.

"He and I were discussing investments," Folliott admitted.

Trina glanced at the cut of his suit, which was very well made (by the ladies of The Lands Clothing Shop). As her huge stash of royals suddenly seemed considerably diminished, she shrugged to Challinor, "I don't know. What do you think?"

Eyeballing Folliott, Challinor said, "Sounds interesting." So they got up to leave around the throng of Polonti.

De'Ath walked over to the head table to glance between DeWitt and Estes, whose wives watched in near terror. Holding out his hand to Estes, De'Ath said, "Give me the signet."

Sighing in reluctance, Estes reached into his pocket. DeWitt stood to stop him. "No," he said. "No," he repeated, turning to face De'Ath.

The handsome, elegant Polonti smiled at him. "Go throw him off the top of the fortress." Two of the larger Polonti grabbed DeWitt's arms and began hauling him out of the dining hall. His wife Tera sat frozen.

"Now. The signet," De'Ath repeated, extending his hand to Estes. Unhappily, Estes withdrew it from his pocket and handed it over. De'Ath looked at it, smiling, then turned to begin walking through the hall toward the corridor door. Estes remained glumly sitting. But his wife Kelsey quietly stood, clutching their son Malan.

As the Polonti flowed out of the dining hall behind De'Ath, Kelsey reached over to pull on Tera's arm. She rose blankly to follow her out of the hall to the kitchen, and out the back door to the grocer's gate. From there, Kelsey, with Malan, took Tera to her house in the western section. Once inside, the first thing she did was barricade the doors and windows.

DeWitt calmly allowed the two Polonti to take him up to the pinnacle of the fortress, the bell tower. The faerie tree in front of it was dead, leafless. This they bypassed to take him to the crenelation and hoist him up. Looking down from atop a merlon, DeWitt lunged to the left—where faerie tree branches were climbing the wall. The man on his right lost hold of him, but the one on his left pushed him on over. They looked down, but could see nothing in the darkness. So they went back down the stairs.

DeWitt was left standing in the crook of a dead branch about twenty feet below the rooftop.

Far below, De'Ath was in the library, picking up a book off the floor. He observed, "I, Lord De'Ath, am Judge to enact Trial and Punishment." He tossed the book up to wedge itself into the highest shelf, out of reach, out of sight, out of mind.

His Polonti slaves remained at the corridor door, somehow unwilling to enter the library. Lord De'Ath walked

over to press the scallop and pass into the hidden room. The darkness was no impediment to him at all; it was his natural environment.

In the hidden room, he went straight to the shelf unit on the adjacent wall to press the trigger that revealed the winding staircase. This he ascended to the Treasury door. He admired it sardonically for a moment. "How provincial. No imagination at all." Then he withdrew the signet from his waistcoat pocket to press it to the lock, and the great door yielded with a sigh.

Stepping in to look, De'Ath drooped in disappointment. "Is that all?" he murmured. "I was under the impression that this was a great storehouse. Oh, well." He rummaged among the treasures in the small space. Disdaining any silver as well as the bulky gold, he found golden chains to drape around his neck and shoulders, and golden cuffs for his wrists. He placed a tasteful golden crown on his head, then decided that would do for now.

He withdrew for the door to waft shut behind him. Placing the signet on his finger, he eyed it in dissatisfaction. "If the ring weren't necessary to open this little closet, I'd toss it into the Sea. Such a clichéd design." Then he descended the winding stairs, sighing, "It's such a shame that nothing in creation lives up to its reputation. It's all so--boring. The only fun thing is playing with the *hupo* [idiots]." Here he smiled in brief consolation.

Efran sat on the narrow ledge, water lapping at his legs while he listened to the chattering above him. He dared't rest his back against the wall, which would give them a highway to his skin. As it was, every now and then one dropped onto him from the ceiling somewhere above, which he quickly brushed into the water. If he was fast enough shaking them off, they couldn't sink their teeth into his fingers. But when one or two did chomp down, he found that submerging his hand made them let go at once.

"Water would be better against them than smoke," he murmured. Then he looked up in the deep darkness, almost laughing. "As if it mattered now. As if anything mattered against a *hopui* . . . who turned them all against me." He remembered the old women in his village who terrified him with stories of the *hopui*.

Therese had never encountered any, so had no knowledge of how to deal with them. But when he had run to her with his nightmares, she told him, *Evil can prevail for only so long before God asserts His sovereignty, then "you shall fear evil no more."* [Zeph. 3:15]

Sitting on the shelf, he pulled his boots off, dropping them one at a time into the dark water. They were his favorite boots, with the eelfish-bite holes in the toe. But they dragged him down in the water, and if he had to swim. . . .

Swiping another snobble out of his hair, he mused, "The *hopui* couldn't control me. Why? He tried." Efran remembered the clawed hands reaching into him, and the resistance rising up from somewhere within him. "How . . . ?"

He tried to think about this, but the darkness, and the random dropping snobbles, impeded his ability to concentrate on anything but surviving. Feeling the cold water lap higher on his legs, he realized that the tide was coming in. If it didn't drown him, it would force him up onto the wall . . . where the snobbles waited.

As he considered this, the taunt began running through his mind: *Lord of the snobbles, lord of the gore. Lord of the snobbles, lord of the gore.* And it continued without ceasing.

Trembling, Minka poured out the situation to Ryal and Giardi. "He just walked in and took control of them—all

the Polonti. Even Joshua! He told him to bite Efran, and he did!” she cried. Giardi was holding Joshua, who had dropped off to sleep in exhaustion.

“But he couldn’t control Efran?” Ryal asked.

“No,” she gasped. “No, it—he--”

“What did you say he called himself?” Ryal asked.

“Dyath,” she said, trying to replicate the pronunciation. “It’s something supernatural. Giardi, you must pray for Efran. He’s the key; he’s the only Polonti to defy him,” she said anxiously.

“Of course,” she murmured. “Minka, I know this is distressing, but—this De’Ath can’t hold on to them for long. Wait here; it won’t be long.” Because Giardi seemed very sure about that, Minka agreed, sighing.

In Delano’s, Wystan was getting the children to lie down in a back storage room by candlelight. Scared and exhausted, they huddled together on makeshift bedding on the concrete floor, too dazed to talk and too tense to sleep. But Wystan brought out his mandolin and began to play and sing for them. With that, they relaxed and closed their eyes.

But Toby and Squirt were still up talking with Delano and Madgwick. “This is something unnatural, isn’t it, Toby?” she asked. The grownups were sitting in chairs while Toby sat at her knees. Squirt was beside him, listening.

“Oh, yes ma’am. He’s so creepy, I couldn’t even stand to look at him,” Toby shuddered. “Only the Polonti minded him, for some reason.”

“Are some of the children Polonti?” she asked, looking over him toward the back room where they were bedded down.

“Yes’m, Pia, for one, but she’s not with us now, and Chorro,” Toby said.

“Is he here? How does he seem?” she asked.

“Yes, he is, and—I don’t know; he seems kind of confused. But we all are,” Toby said.

“All right, Toby. The most important thing we need to do now is pray,” Madgwick said.

“Yes’m,” he gasped, laying his head on her knees while she put a hand on him and bowed her head. Watching them, Squirt folded his hands and closed his eyes for the Captain.

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Chapter 15

Efran was now standing on the small ledge while the water lapped at his chest. He was so tired that the movement of the water almost kept knocking him off his feet. Still, snobbles were landing on his head and shoulders with greater frequency, and when he went underwater to make them let go, he had trouble finding his footing on the ledge again. *Lord of the snobbles, lord of the gore. Lord of the snobbles, lord of the gore.*

“God of heaven,” he gasped, blowing water. “Where are You? I’ve been praying and praying—why haven’t You answered? Are You going to let me die down here? God of heaven, I beg You, for the sake of the charter, the children—where are the children? And Joshua? Oh, God, have mercy on us.” *Lord of the snobbles, lord of the gore. Lord of the snobbles, lord of the gore.* His head drooped again, and he almost choked on a mouthful of sea water.

Spitting and coughing, he raised his head again. “If the tide has risen this much, why is it still so dark?” he cried, looking up. There was no hint of light from the hole above him. “Save me,” he whispered, the water lapping his chin. *Lord of the snobbles, lord of the--*

There was an enormous splash that knocked him back against the wall. When it subsided, he was treading water, unable to reach the ledge again. He turned to feel for handholds in the wall, and immediately snobbles swarmed his arm so that he dropped his hand again.

The water was violently rocking over his head when Efran felt something hard come up underneath him. He was pushed upward, flailing, then tossed out of the hole onto the rocky ground of the northwestern hillside. Gasping, he looked over at one of the hydra’s heads clacking its teeth at him: “No swimming.”

Then one after another, his favorite boots came sailing out of the hole, one hitting him in the head. As Efran ducked, raising his hand, the hydra dove back down for breakfast.

Sitting and breathing, Efran yanked his wet boots back on. Then he looked around from his seat on the hillside—and stopped breathing.

Morning was in progress; the sun was rising to his right. But it was as though he were looking at it through a black shroud. He looked north, then, to see sunlight on the trees past the old stone bridge. But there was a dome of darkness over the Abbey Lands. The whole Lands were still under the cover of night. “God of heaven, how can this be? Deliver us from the darkness.”

All over the Lands, people awakened to begin their day in the dark. At first, most of them thought they were just mistaken about what time it was. But then a few people walked out of the wall gates and over the stone bridge to find themselves suddenly in the morning light. From there, they looked back on the Lands to see it all covered in shadow, clear from the roaring Passage on the west to the branch almost out of sight in the east. It was all dark.

In anguish, Efran raised his face. “God of heaven, where are You?” At that, as he was looking up, he saw a pinprick of light in the darkness directly above him. When he looked down at his hand, he could see the light play on his skin while everything around was dark.

His attention was drawn back to the Lands. Right away, he saw a beacon of light bearing down on Delano’s—Madgwick was praying. Just south of the well, right up against the switchback, another spot of light illumined the top of Ryal’s shop. So Giardi was praying. And Minka, perhaps, if she had made it there.

He looked over to the fortress, where a broad beam of light bore down on the foyer—actually on the keep, he was sure. Earnshaw was leading prayers there, no doubt. So Efran called up the one prayer he knew better than any other: “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him. . . .”

Meanwhile, the Southerners under Wendt pulled duty as usual; they stood guard at the gates and gave vague, reassuring answers to Landers who were troubled about the darkness. Verlice and his sons had been escorted north hours ago by a bodyguard; the rest of them waited, keeping an eye on the hilltop.

De'Ath walked up the lower corridor, musing, “How shall I punish them today?” He stopped at the open half-door of the nursery, because there was candlelight in here. The rest of the fortress was dark.

Felice came up to block his view. “Yes?” she asked curtly.

“You have little ones in here?” he asked. A baby in a crib behind her started fussing.

“No, of course not,” she said, scowling. Polonti women were notoriously strong-willed, and she wasn't affected at all by his mind waves that swept the men off their feet.

“Oh,” he said, and passed on.

Felice looked over her shoulder at the cleaning supervisor, Onfroi, also Polonti. Rocking a six-month-old on her arm, she muttered, “Men are such sheep.”

“Yes, well, they'll get their heads back on soon enough, but one of us has got to go out for milk and clean wraps,” Felice said. They had two infants and a toddler to care for, and although the women could resist De'Ath, they were still vulnerable to whatever the *hopui* ordered the men to do to them.

Onfroi said, “Better wait until he goes out back.” Felice nodded in agreement.

Meanwhile, De'Ath was being shadowed by a pair of Southerners. Cyneheard and Henris watched him stop at the open nursery door to be rebuffed by Felice, whereupon he went on up to the foyer. It was apparently empty, but--

De'Ath paused at something uncomfortable. The fortress doors, unmanned, were directly in front of him. To the left of that was the corridor to the west grounds, a small cubicle with a desk, and—De'Ath suddenly bolted out the front doors.

His stalker Cyneheard, seeing what looked like a forcible repulsion of the usurper, looked over to the open door of the keep--where Earnshaw was leading a packed crowd in prayer. He had lanterns burning at the front and the back. “Very interesting,” Cyneheard murmured.

“What?” Henris asked at his back.

“Our new overlord doesn't like the keep, for some reason,” Cyneheard said thoughtfully. “As long as he's out—come,” he ordered his protégé, who followed.

Cyneheard walked back to the nursery, looking in over the half-door. Felice and Onfroi turned to him, and they all studied each other for a moment. He asked, “How are you ladies doing?”

“Well enough,” Felice said, approaching the half-door in cautious interest. “But we need supplies, and can’t risk leaving the little ones. If this De’Ath sees us, and doesn’t like what we’re doing, he’ll order the men to stop us.”

“What do you need?” Cyneheard asked, raising his chin. Henris came to his side to scan the nursery.

“Clean bottles, the milk jug, wraps, all in the cold storage room one door down from the library,” Felice said. “But if any of the men see you, they’ll throw you out, or worse. He’s got them purging the fortress of Southerners.”

“Then we’d best get on it,” Cyneheard said, turning to Henris.

“I know where all that’s kept; I helped put all the shelves back after the snobbles clean-up,” Henris said, gesturing down the dark corridor.

“Here.” Felice handed him two candles in holders.

Cyneheard took them, handing one off to Henris. “We’ll be right back,” Cyneheard told Felice, who smiled. He and Henris stalked to the storage room.

DeWitt was sitting on the faerie-tree branch, half asleep and waiting for morning. He had jammed his arm between the branch and the fortress wall to prevent himself falling, should he drift into unconsciousness. But now he was aching all over from his cramped position. He had to find a way down from here.

Cautiously rising to stand facing outward, he shoved his spectacles up on his nose. Then he looked all around the branch, searching for a way up, down, or around. It was hard to see anything in the darkness, with no moonlight nor starlight. He gingerly brought his right foot over to place it on a smaller branch just above this one—and almost fell when it cracked. Quickly withdrawing his foot, he heard the branch underneath him creak.

It was dead. All these branches were dead, because the faerie tree was dead. None of them would support his weight much longer.

De’Ath strode out onto the sparring grounds, summoning the men with a casual wave. They ran over, clustering around him in silence. It was eerie, coming out to train in what appeared to be the dead of night. But again, De’Ath was most comfortable in the dark, where he could see everything—sweat, tears, fear, and blood.

“Is this not a training ground? Then let us train,” De’Ath said cheerfully. “We shall spar. You—he pointed to a tall, burly Polonti. “Let us pick a good sparring partner for you.” He looked around. “Are there no Southerners? Where are all our curly-haired men?”

One man brought up a new recruit, a young Southerner, small and slender. “He was hiding in a storage closet.”

“Ah! Excellent. Here is your sparring partner.” De’Ath picked him up by the jacket to toss him at the Polonti that towered over him by a foot. “Ready? And--”

“Ah, no.” At the calm objection, De’Ath and his disciples turned to see Arne amble up. “No man worth ’is salt spars with a child. Not when yer have a full-grown man to work on.”

As they all evaluated him, Arne scooted the youngster aside, whispering, “Get down to the notary’s.” The boy,

Dirkes, sank back, seeing the Polonti fixed on this new challenge. Then he ran into the darkness around the western side of the fortress.

But then Dirkes paused at the western door, conflicted. He did not want to leave; he wanted to see this through like a man. So he entered the door to tiptoe up the dark corridor, trembling. There was light ahead, in the foyer. Peeking out of the corridor, Dirkes slid along the foyer wall to look into the room where light shone—and then ran inside.

Back on the training grounds, Arne sized up his opponent: “So let’s see what yer can do.” Already bruised from trying to get the Captain out of De’Ath’s reach yesterday, Arne drew up to the hulking Polonti that was still a good three inches taller than himself.

“Excellent. Go,” De’Ath said. Arne put all his weight into the fight, but by the time the bigger man was done with him, he lay still on his back, face covered in blood.

Turning away, De’Ath breathed, “Oh, that felt good. It feels so good, to crush them, break them, destroy them.”

But a few of the men were blinking. Arne had been a good friend to many of them, and fatherly toward the young Polonti who came to join the legendary Captain’s Red Regiment. As a matter of fact, young Salk remembered just weeks ago accompanying the Captain, the Lady, and Arne down the switchback, clapping to his whistling--

The Captain! Salk’s head jerked up. What had they done to the Captain? While their new lord was leading the men elsewhere, Salk slipped off to look for him.

Efran was hard to find after being tossed by the hydra out of the hole. With the darkness, no one had spotted him on the northwestern hillside yet. So he stood with the intention of walking away. But with the first step he took, his foot broke a hole in the unstable ground—or appeared to, so that he fell back. He paused. It made no sense for his foot to break through here, where the hydra had thrown him. Was it a real hole?

Efran stepped again in the same spot, and found the ground holding firm beneath him. So he took another step, and his foot shot down up to his knee.

Withdrawing, he cast about for some way to determine the true stability of the ground underneath him. He was about five feet to the west of the hydra’s hole, whose nest was about ten feet south of the hole, higher up on the hilltop. Wasn’t it?

Efran looked around. Was it night? He could no longer see the sun. Or the fortress. Or anything on the Lands. There was nothing but blackness all around him.

Sitting cautiously, he looked at the ground underneath him. *What if I just rolled? Jonguitud goes up and down the hillside from his nest and doesn’t break through the ground.*

Lying down, Efran tried to shove himself into a roll, but didn’t move. He must not be on an incline, then, but he couldn’t tell because he couldn’t see anything for the blackness.

It strongly reminded him of being trapped in the cavern after kicking out the floor of Doddridge’s underground room. Could anyone see him? He started to call out, but then remembered why he was here in the first place, and shut his mouth.

Looking to the unseen heavens above, he did the only thing he knew to do: he prayed. He began praying earnestly for himself, for Minka, Joshua, the children, his men, the Lands—but almost immediately, he began to see things, like dreams or visions.

First, he saw Minka, wearing full makeup, hair slathered with pomade, wearing the revealing dress Adele had made. She was flirting with the men standing around, especially Lord De'Ath. He took her into their bedroom, and began—Efran turned his head, shutting his eyes to the scene, refusing to see it. But it wouldn't go away; it played on it his unwilling inner eye until he became convinced that it was really happening. His Minka had been seduced by the *hopui*.

Or had she? He resisted the idea without knowing what was happening. But outside his dome of darkness, something else *was* happening.

First, the darkness started dissipating on the Lands. As regular daylight appeared, people carried on with their regular activities. Shops opened, construction resumed, Trina and Challinor came out to be seen in new dresses. Delano's brewery opened, and Wystan walked down to the notary shop to tell him they had all the children.

Almost all of the Southerners, including the doctor and his wife, had abandoned the Abbey, taking Ellor and Routh with them, who had been badly beaten defending the Captain. However, Earnshaw and a several hard-core Christians refused to surrender the keep. The Polonti would not enter it, but a few lingered outside at De'Ath's command, to catch any Southerners trying to leave. So Earnshaw's group stayed, shared Scripture, and prayed, though it became more dangerous by the hour to step out when they had to get food or drink.

Finally, when the foyer was momentarily empty, they made the decision to take the Holy Canon and leave in a group. From the switchback, they went down to Delano's. But they made forays back to the fortress to surveil. Dirkes was one of the volunteers for this assignment.

Also, Ella, Sudie and Cyr remained in the third-floor room. But after the first night, Cyr refused to stay cooped up in ignorance; she must go see what was happening. So she, Ella and her maid sneaked down to the south window on the second floor, where they could look out over the back grounds.

Meanwhile, Cyneheard and Henris remained in the nursery, which seemed impervious to De'Ath's influence. The two men ranged out to the kitchen to get victuals for themselves and the women, as well as to the storage room for all kinds of supplies. They even put on washer women dresses to take stinky wraps out to the abandoned laundry house.

At that time, De'Ath was putting the Polonti through grueling calisthenics. Even though they were only a few hundred feet away from the laundry house, none of them glanced at the bumbling washer women.

De'Ath, however, was looking around in boredom. So he waved his hand, ordering, "You must pick up anyone who falters in the jumps and toss them over the fence into the Sea." This command turned out to be . . . a step too far.

As Coish was carrying his exhausted partner Jehan to the back fence, his heart rebelled, and Coish woke from the *hopui*'s influence. Glancing back warily at De'Ath, he lay Jehan behind a peach tree instead. Then his eyes met Stites', who was carrying Enon—the young recipient of the Meritorious Cross. Stites set him down against a nearby tree, and Coish whispered, "How do we take him down?"

Stites said, "Wait until a few more come out of it."

By this time, more men began lifting their eyes to wonder, *What am I doing?* De'Ath wandered off in his boredom, and no one got thrown over the fence.

Meanwhile, Efran lay in unrelieved darkness, with no knowledge of Time or anything beyond the dome of shadow that covered him. But he was continually tormented by visions that seemed so real, he reacted viscerally as though they were.

He saw the crowd of Polonti bring Joshua out and throw him into the hydra's hole. Hearing his screams, Efran began scrabbling over the ground to go after him. *I've got to get back down there. If he's not eaten alive, he'll drown.*

He crawled all over trying to find the hole again, all the while listening to his son scream. After a long and futile search, he realized that what he was hearing was illusory—Joshua couldn't be screaming for that long. As Efran laid his head back down in the dirt, he heard, *Lord of the darkness, lord of the mad. Lord of the darkness, lord of the mad.* And that went on and on, unending, while he half-slept.

By the second day after he had been thrown into the hole—May 5th—he was beginning to get very hungry and thirsty. This prompted him, again, to cast around for a way out.

He knew, generally, where he lay, but couldn't perceive directions. The courtyard was not far to the east, and the hillside stabilized the closer one got to it. But he couldn't tell which way was east, and it would do him no good to go west.

By a supreme effort, he rose to his knees. There, he was able to determine that the downward incline—north--was right in front of him. So he began crawling to his right. After only a few yards, his arm plunged into a hole. He stopped his fall only by throwing himself backward.

But now he was deeply confused. Was the hole real, or only in his imagination? He couldn't safely test that, so had to assume it was real. If so, was he to the west of Jongitud's hole after all? But at least he knew which way was north, so if he could roll or crawl down to the road, he'd be seen. *Lord of the darkness, lord of the mad.*

Gathering himself for another strenuous effort, he began dragging himself forward by his arms while pushing with his knees. Yes, he could feel the incline; yes, this was the right direction. Doggedly, he continued to push, even sliding a bit as he went. Yes, this would work. But when would he ever come out of this shadow?

He saw the brambles only an instant before shoving into them face first. He pulled back with a yelp, then cautiously reached out to feel how large a bush it was. He dragged himself to the right to try to feel his way around it. *I won't be stopped by a stupid bramble bush,* he vowed.

And another voice laughed, *Yes, you will. Lord of the darkness, lord of the dead. Lord of the darkness, lord of the dead.* So Efran lay down in defeat.

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Chapter 16

Ever since Toby and Squirt had freed Kraken from his stall, he had been sniffing around for his human. Kraken already knew that he was not inside the big doors that latched, so he trotted down the old switchback clear to the north end of Main, where he began sniffing at the wall gates, the barracks, and the shops and doors along the road. Carts and passersby made way for him, knowing that he was the Captain's horse. They didn't know what had happened, but it didn't look good.

Polonti came out from the lower barracks to look, then walk away. The Southerners were incensed that the Polonti in their ranks suddenly stopped pulling duty—any duty. Whatever had enshrouded the hilltop deeply affected them.

A few men with Earnshaw's group reported to Wendt. He listened to everything they had to say, then released them to return to concealment closer to the fortress. As for the men stationed in the lower barracks, he had them carry on with their duties down here, knowing that a resolution could only come from the fortress.

Earnshaw also stopped into Ryal's shop to make a report. Minka listened anxiously, asking, "What of Efran?"

"We don't know. No one's seen him yet, Lady Minka," he said. "Keep praying."

Giardi replied, "We will." Minka slowly nodded.

As he left, she looked out the window of the notary shop to see Kraken searching, snuffling at all the doorways he passed. This encouraged her, in that he must know Efran was still alive. So she cuddled Joshua, and he held onto her arms to hoist himself up on shaky legs.

The following day, May 6th, was the third day after Efran had been dropped into the hydra's hole. Jonguitud, covered in darkness as well, continued to hunt snobbles in the cavern until the sun would come out for him to bask.

That morning, Kraken rose from the backside of Croft's stables to shake himself, drink, and eat a bit of hay. Then he resumed his quest. After having worked his way all the way north and all the way south back to the main east-west road, he went west, raising his nose high to sniff. And then he stilled. Yes, his human was up there, on the hill, under that black cloud.

For while the darkness had lifted from the Lands, there was still a deep shadow over the northwestern hillside. Everyone saw it; the Southerners knew it had been covering the Captain. As it was still there, didn't it mean that he was still alive? A few of the braver men struck out toward the darkness to look for him, but the closer they got, the deeper the foreboding that fell on them. It was a snarling, gripping fear, a promise of painful failure and death. So for now, they pulled back.

Horses, however, are immune to *hopui* mind games. Kraken studied the hillside, then began picking his way up toward the shadow. It was treacherous, but experienced equine travelers know how to find the most secure ground for their feet.

With horse training suspended, Tess had plenty of time for other matters, such as ragging on her husband. "Loriot, who is this man? How can he just walk in and take control like that?"

He looked depressed. “He is a supernatural, very powerful, able to gather the Polonti in his net like fish.”

“But you’re not affected! Except that you won’t do anything!” Tess cried.

“Yes,” he admitted. “Those who are not bound are still held back.”

“Loriot, since you know this, why can’t you fight it?” she pleaded.

He considered that. Being the oldest, the largest, and the highest ranked of Master Crowe’s former lieutenants, he was deeply familiar with mental warfare. “I should,” he decided.

“Then do it! Fight him! Reach out to the other men. And find Efran,” she added in a low voice. “Is he still alive?”

“Barely,” Loriot said.

“Then why aren’t you helping him?” she asked in pained bewilderment.

He regarded her, then raised his face to begin probing. “Some of the men are waking in dissatisfaction. There’s no order, only chaos, pointless cruelty, waste, and, divisions among them.” So he sent out summonses: *Stites, what are you doing? Chee, look up here! Melchior, where are you? Barr—wake up!*

Then he paused, cocking his head. “Pia and her Polonti are also not affected. But, they’re waiting for a legal indictment.”

“Wha--?” Tess mouthed. He shook his head, smiling grimly. That was encouraging, she decided.

But those whom Loriot had called heard him. Stites sent to Koschat, Martyn, and Conte; Chee spoke to Mathurin, Dango and Heus; Melchior reached out to Goss, Krall, Jehan and Coish; Barr contacted Nee, Tiras and Tomer. And all those who heard began to stir, reaching out to others.

Meanwhile, a large and growing group of soldiers in the lower barracks—Southerners and Polonti—decided they’d waited long enough for their hilltop brothers to take back control of the situation (whatever that was). So they began climbing the switchback, armed. Tera, feeling claustrophobic locked up in Kelsey’s house, saw this movement and ran to join them. When they arrived to throng into the fortress, she ran up to the second floor, where she and DeWitt had their quarters. And she saw Cyr, Sudie and Ella watching something on the back grounds from the window. They turned to wave her forward.

At that time, the Steward Estes was in the second-floor workroom, alone. He was idly fingering the pages of an open ledger in pained indecision. Occasionally, he glanced at the dead faerie tree in the middle of the table. Then he looked over at Nakham sitting in the chair Efran usually occupied. With one foot propped up on the opposite knee, Nakham studied him. “You have to get to work, Steward.”

“Yes, I know,” Estes said tentatively.

“You need to hurry,” Nakham said.

The imperative seemed to clear some of the mist from Estes’ mind. He turned to look dubiously at the shelves behind him. “Isn’t what I need in the library?”

“No. Third shelf up from the floor right behind you,” Nakham said. “Hurry, Estes.”

The Steward reached over to pull out an old book written in Polonti and flip it open.

Nakham then turned to scrutinize the dry, brown, leafless faerie tree. “What are you doing, you spindly little cowardly bush? How can you imagine you’re descended from the Great Tree when you roll over and die at the appearance of a blowhard godling? What are you good for, anyway?”

Something deep inside the trunk began trembling in indignation. Nakham went on, “Yeah, and the Administrator of this Fortress is clinging to your dead branches on the walls, about to fall sixty feet to his death. What are you going to do about it?”

There was a burst from within the trunk that surged upward so forcefully, it produced a crack in the ceiling. After a moment, a finishing faerie timidly appeared from the ceiling to smooth over the crack.

DeWitt, sweating, had his back against the wall of the fortress as he looked out over the glorious expanse of the Sea. The sudden appearance of light was nice, but--A fissure in the dead wood under his feet gave way, causing him to drop six inches while he scrambled for another foothold. Branches breaking in his hands, he whispered, “Take care of Tera, and the baby.” His wife was due in three or four months.

A sinewy green snake dropped down beside him so suddenly that he lost his hold on the last intact branch and began falling. The green thing snatched him from the air and hoisted him rapidly upward while he grasped curling tendrils. He saw blurry movement around him, then a profusion of small white nutmeg-scented flowers.

Abruptly, he was deposited beside the rooftop faerie tree, burgeoning with new life. Shakily rising, he stumbled away from roots that shot out from the base of the tree to pour themselves over the crenelation, knocking dead wood off the walls as they went.

“Why—thank you,” he gasped, taking off his glasses to wipe sweat and wood dust from the lenses. He leaned against the crenelation to breathe for a minute, then turned to run down the stairs.

Coish looked into the hilltop barracks. Seeing that it was empty, he began to leave again, then paused, listening. With a sigh, he went over to open a locker. There he found Jehan scrunched in the bottom, hugging his knees, sobbing. “C’mon out,” Coish whispered.

Jehan shook his head, covering his ears with his hands. “We killed him. We killed the Captain,” he cried.

“No, come out,” Coish repeated. “Martyn says Kraken may have found him.”

Jehan went still, then fell out of the locker with a thud and scrambled to his feet.

Estes walked out of the fortress and down the steps to the back grounds. There, he saw De’Ath standing in the midst of grappling men. De’Ath shouted, “You who subdue your opponent must throw him over the fence to the Sea!”

Despite the fierce eye of the *hopui*, the men stopped wrestling. Some were down, but those who were still on

their feet turned to him. “No,” said Conte. Then Goss, Koschat, Quennel, and Krall stepped forward, uttering, “No.” The others began gathering around De'Ath to say, “No.” “No.” No.” Meanwhile, Lorient was walking over from the stables.

De'Ath raised hands that spurted flames wherever he pointed. “You would defy me? Come, then.” That’s when he spotted Estes, and the men swiveled to look at the newcomer.

As the purported Polonti Lord of Vengeance turned his flaming hands toward Estes, Lorient walked up to simply grab them, stifling the flames with his own larger hands. De'Ath stared up at him.

Meanwhile, Estes raised both hands high, palms out, and shouted, “*Ei, Puku Estes, kahea De'Ath ka pono mala Ka Mea!*”--which translated, “I, Steward Estes, call De'Ath to justice under the Maker of All.” (The rest of Estes’ pronouncement was also in the Polonti language.)

This was a legal challenge, binding upon any Polonti, supernatural or otherwise. And all the men shouted in agreement: “*Kolo!*”--trial. “*Ka pono!*”--justice. Or, “*Nopo!*”--judgment. In the face of their uprising, De'Ath was suddenly powerless.

“You, De'Ath, have falsely claimed the title and rôle of Judge, which is forbidden of the Ancient Race!” Estes shouted. The men roared again, raising their fists.

Hearing all this, the soldiers from the lower barracks began pouring onto the back grounds, then stopped to watch. Cyr, Ella, Studie and Tera were looking out the second-floor window of the fortress. Shortly, DeWitt joined them. Tera gripped her husband with a gasp, and he shushed her.

Tess had already followed Lorient out of the stables to watch. Felice, Cyneheard, and Henris were looking on from the back steps, grimly smiling in vindication. Arne, face bruised and puffy, limped out around them to look; Felice patted his back and Cyneheard put a brotherly arm on his vast shoulders. The kitchen workers Loghry and Durgin, having skulked through the kitchen gate, were peering around the southeast corner of the fortress. A number from Earnshaw’s group, including Dirkes, collected around them to look as well.

Estes continued his indictment: “You, De'Ath, have tried to murder and supplant a Polonti Lord, which is forbidden of the Ancient Race.” The men De'Ath had enslaved added their cries to the accusation, as they did after every charge that Estes brought:

“You, De'Ath, have stolen authority and wealth from an entitled Polonti, which is forbidden of the Ancient Race.

“You, De'Ath, have obstructed the solemn duty bequeathed by legal charter to a Polonti, which is forbidden of the Ancient Race.

“You, De'Ath, have enslaved and harmed innocent Polonti, which is forbidden of the Ancient Race.

“You, De'Ath, have fomented discord, disloyalty and dishonor among Polonti warriors, which is forbidden of the Ancient Race.

“For these crimes against Ka Mea, I, Steward Estes of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, call upon the Mogridge to judge you, as they are empowered by Ka Mea to effect discipline of the Ancient Race in all realms,” Estes concluded, and the men broke out into the war drums. What would happen now is, if the Mogridge determined that Estes’ complaint had any merit, they would enact the appropriate discipline on the accused.

Suddenly they all heard Pia singing in the woods, and the men fell away from the stunned De'Ath. Only, it was not her usual sweet song to the animals—this was a cry of wrath, of retribution, of payment due for grievous wrongs. It was not a summons, as the Mogridge were above summonses. It was more like an amicus brief.

A cold wind brushed the hilltop. With a yelp, De'Ath wrenched the Abbey signet off his finger and threw it at Estes. It rolled right to his feet, but he did not put it on; he returned it to his pocket. De'Ath, trembling as though he were on fire, wrenched off the crown, the chains, and the cuffs, revealing raw, burned flesh. The stolen gold was swept to Estes on another cold burst of air.

Then there were indistinct shapes forming around the godling. They ebbed and flowed like water, or the light of a lantern that is set rocking. The shapes of their faces wobbled like jelly as their eyes seemed to travel around their heads, seeing everything. There was a terrible odor as they opened gaping mouths filled with snobbles-like teeth. Dangling from long, sticklike fingers, there appeared thorny black cords that wound themselves around De'Ath's neck, wrists, and ankles. He opened his mouth as if to scream, but nothing was heard.

Then one wavering face whispered, "Bite him." A thorny cord jerked De'Ath's arm up for him to bite down hard on it, soundlessly screaming as he did.

The Mogridge murmured, "Good, good," and another whispered, "Stab him."

A knife appeared in De'Ath's hand. Staring at it, he watched the cord on his wrist draw the knife toward his chest. It struck at him, but missed. "Correct," a Mogridge said clearly. At this escape, De'Ath shakily exhaled.

Then a third commanded in a hollow, airless voice, "Throw him to the snobbles."

De'Ath went rigid as the cords on his arms and legs raised him upward into a swarm of chittering creatures that apparently issued from a judge's mouth. De'Ath was swallowed by the cloud of teeth, while bloodied, severed cords were drawn back up to the hands of the Mogridge. Then they all slowly faded into another realm, De'Ath with them. Judgment had been rendered.

In the sudden stillness, the onlookers hardly dared to move. The indictment and judgment had completely freed the Polonti of the oppression. Except—the past few days were shadowy, indistinct in their minds. They knew something bad had happened—that they themselves might have done something dishonorable, something shameful. But they couldn't quite remember, and didn't know what to do now--

Except Estes, who bent to gather the stolen gold at his feet. Rather than bother with the Treasury, he took it all to the workroom, where he sat to get some work done before DeWitt and Efran got back.

Then they heard the courtyard alarm bell clanging, and everyone else surged toward the gates.

About the time that Estes had come out of the fortress to present his indictment, Jehan and Coish were running through the hilltop woods toward the hydra's hole. Confronted with the darkness, however, they looked over at the group of Polonti watching something from the second-highest western bend of the old switchback. So the two altered their course toward them.

They joined Martyn, Mathurin, Salk, and Telo in gazing at the dark cloud which Kraken was approaching from below, snuffling. "He smells the Captain," Martyn whispered.

Tensely, they watched Kraken circle the cloud, then poke his nose into it. His body disappeared farther into the

darkness, then they watched him jerk back again and again, without effect. "He can't get hold of him. We have to help," Telo whispered.

They were all frozen for a moment. Then, startled by Pia's screeching cry, Jehan bolted forward to run toward the darkness. The rest of them followed at a wild run as well.

Plunging into the cloud, they saw the problem at once: the Captain was unconscious on his face, so Kraken was trying to grab his shirt with his teeth to pull him, but it kept ripping. They went around Kraken to assist: with two of them taking the Captain's arms, two his belt, and two his legs, they hustled him quickly out of the darkness toward the upper bend of the switchback. Kraken followed, swishing his tail.

Delivered from the cloud, Efran began coming around. Telo and Coish let down his legs so that he could bring himself to a stand. As they hovered around him, they all stared at his hair. But now that he was on his feet, he began slowly walking the rest of the way to the gates. Salk ran before them to begin ringing the alarm bell.

And the last of the darkness dissipated.

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Chapter 17

Efran was working his mouth, trying to summon moisture to speak, but the boys knew what was needed. They walked him through the foyer and sat him at the back bench of the dining hall. Mathurin said, "We'll get you something to eat and drink, Captain." He nodded slowly, but Jehan, Coish and Martyn were already in the deserted kitchen. Kraken had followed them into the hall to stand behind the bench on which his human sat.

Efran looked at his ripped shirt, then reached back to stroke Kraken's nose.

Jehan brought him a mild ale which Efran opened to begin drinking in slow, measured gulps. People began pouring into the dining hall, then, but they all stopped in shock upon seeing him. Nudging them aside, Coish brought him a plate of ham, bread and greens, and he began slowly eating.

The crowd made way for Estes and DeWitt to sit on the bench opposite him. DeWitt said wryly, "Good to see you, Efran." He glanced up at the Administrator with a bare nod, eating.

Estes told him, "I brought charges against De'Ath according to the Polonti *Code of Justice*. The Mogridge came and took him away." Efran considered that, raising his face briefly, then continued eating.

The men, his men, who had dragged him out, stared at him in mild horror. There was a pall of guilt over them; they vaguely knew they had done something terrible.

A few at a time, then more and more, approached him to bow from the waist, each crossing his arms over his chest. This was the posture of a condemned prisoner begging mercy. "Kala, Captain," they whispered. "Kala." Without looking up, he nodded, signaling blanket pardon. They stepped back, eyes downcast.

There was a further hubbub from the corridor. Everyone except Kraken made way for Minka to come slip onto the bench beside Efran, with Eymor carrying Joshua. While she studied her husband with large blue eyes, he

barely glanced at her. Eymor attempted to lower Joshua to his lap, but the toddler clutched the young soldier, screaming.

Stricken, Efran turned away, but Minka whispered, "He doesn't recognize you, Efran." He glanced at her again, mutely questioning, so she turned around to Ella behind her. "Will you go get your hand mirror, please?"

Nodding, with an unconscious pat to Kraken's neck, Ella moved away. Efran ate half the plate, then had to stop for a minute. It had been three days since he'd eaten or drunk anything. Minka leaned on his arm, looking at the dried blood on his shirt and skin from Joshua's bite. The teeth marks were red and oozing.

"We need to get that cleaned up," she whispered shakily, to which he said nothing. Meanwhile, Toby and the rest of the children had quietly slipped in to stare at him. Turning to Eymor, Minka said, "Put him on my lap, please." Eymor settled Joshua on her lap, and she added, "If you speak to him, he'll know you, Efran."

Again he looked at her silently, and Ella came up to give Minka the hand mirror. This she handed to Efran. He eyed her for a moment, then raised the mirror. At first he didn't recognize himself. The grim Polonti face looking back at him was topped with longish white hair. His black hair had turned completely white. Gabriel, at the rear of the group, was watching as Efran shrugged and set aside the mirror. Then he looked away from all the eyes.

DeWitt stood. "All right, everyone, back to your duties." In silence, the crowd melted away. Efran got up to go to his quarters, taking his unfinished plate and ale. Kraken followed, which Efran allowed.

Minka told Eymor, "Please take Joshua to the nursery; stay with him until one of the attendants comes back." She did not know that Felice was already there.

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said.

Then she looked back to Telo to say, "Please find Wallace or Leese and send them to our quarters." He nodded to run off.

Jehan paused beside Minka to whisper, "Lady Minka, what happened to him?"

She shook her head. "More heartbreak," she said shakily, then went to their quarters herself. Kraken was standing outside the door. She stopped to pet him. "You found him," she quietly acknowledged. Then she went in.

In the bedroom, she saw Efran pulling out fresh clothes. "Shall I have you a tub filled?" she asked.

"No," he said, turning to the door.

She partially blocked him. "Wallace is coming to treat your—your—" She indicated the bite marks on his chest.

He looked down, then picked up the half-full bottle of ale to pour a little on his chest. He whistled softly at the sting, then drank a bit more and walked on out.

She sank down to the bed. This was bad.

When he returned from the men's bath house outside, he dropped his ripped, dirty clothes in the laundry pile and lay down in bed. Minka lay down beside him without touching him. He said nothing as he stared up at the ceiling, then he closed his eyes and dropped into a deep sleep, with no taunts, no visions, no fear.

Early the following morning, May 7th, Minka woke at a persistent knock on the outer door. She struggled up, finding herself still in her day clothes, even her shoes. She'd fallen asleep at the same time Efran had late yesterday afternoon. Nonetheless, someone was knocking on the corridor door.

Opening it, she blinked at Hawk. "Good morning, Lady Minka. I—don't know if you knew that the Captain has just ridden out alone with a lot of gear on his saddle. Did he tell you--?"

Minka was running out the front doors. "Get me a horse!" she cried at the gates. Efran, on Kraken, had just departed the old switchback to lope up Main.

She turned as Squirt ran a mare up for her. "Saddled her as soon I see the Cap'n gettin' out Kraken," he said.

"Thank you, Squirt." Kicking her skirt out of the way to mount, she urged the dun mare to lope down the switchback. Riding as hard as she dared up Main, dodging anyone so foolish as to step into a crosswalk in her path, she kept her eyes on Efran while he had to wait for the gate guards to open the wall gates. He was easy to spot anywhere, with that shock of white hair.

When the gates were half-open, he was off, loping Kraken up the northbound road. Fortunately, the guards kept the gates open for her to follow him.

Once over the old stone bridge, she called, "Efran!" He had to have heard, but kept going. "Efran!" she cried, louder.

At that, she saw Kraken ease up, and Efran look down to insistently kick him. *Nope*, said Kraken. He drew to a stop, turning around to face her.

"Efran." Heart pounding, she pulled up to him. "Where are you going?"

He looked at her for a moment, then nudged Kraken to pull up to her mare, nose to tail. She saw tears in his eyes as he smiled at her. "I can't do it anymore," he said wretchedly. "I'm resigning the charter."

"What? Efran—*why*?" she cried.

"All it took was one *hopui* to come sweep everything away. My own men--*Polonti*--almost killed me. My own men, *again*. I'm empty, all poured out," he said, choked. He was still smiling at the absurdity of it all.

"No, Efran—Estes got rid of him," she protested, trembling.

"But the men who threw me over are still there—and it was *all of them*," he said.

"They didn't know what they were doing. Oh, Efran, please—just—please--" she wept, incoherent.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "The heart's gone." He turned Kraken again to ride north. She sat on the mare until he vanished and the hoofbeats faded in the distance. Then she turned to walk the mare back to the gates.

The guards stood at the still-open gates, watching in dismay as she turned aside at Barracks A. Entering, she glanced around at Gabriel and Barr standing over the Commander, seated at his desk. Captains Towner and Stites were at the second desk. And they were all looking at her.

“Excuse me,” she whispered. “Commander, may I speak with you alone?”

“Of course, Minka,” he said, standing. “I think I know my way to the back room.” He turned to the door behind him to open it.

“Thank you,” she said, following him into the room.

He closed the door, then walked three steps to the table and pulled out a chair for her. “Here you are, Minka.”

“Thank you,” she said again, sitting mechanically.

He sat in his customary chair at the head of the table and waited. When she couldn’t articulate her problem, he asked, “Did Efran ride out?”

“Yes. He said—he can’t do it anymore. He’s resigning his charter.” She could hardly get the words out.

“Uh huh,” Wendt said skeptically.

“Oh, Commander, he was just—broken,” she said, tears pouring.

He grunted, settling back in his chair. “Did I never tell you how many times he resigned his captaincy?”

“What?” she said, blinking.

“Efran gets very emotional over setbacks, especially those involving his men. He takes personally anything they do wrong—or less than perfectly. So, after any botched assignment, he’d come back throwing his insigne at me, even if it wasn’t strictly his fault. So, no. I understand it was stressful—I hear he’s got my hair now. But he’ll be back. I’d give him a week or less,” Wendt said.

“You really think so?” she breathed.

“Oh, yes,” he smiled. “And if you want to make sure he never does that again, you should start interviewing prospective husbands.”

She gasped out a laugh. “Oh, Commander, I love you!”

“No, no, not me,” he said with a dismissive shake of his head. “Efran would want to fight me, and it wouldn’t be fair. Remember what I did to Rowe?”

Minka almost fell onto the table laughing. (Gabriel and Stites, listening outside the door, grinned.) “Oh, I’m so glad I came to talk to you. You’re never wrong,” she sighed.

“Yikes,” he breathed.

“About Efran,” she clarified. “Thank you, Commander. All right, I have to go strategize.” Standing abruptly, she opened the door so that several men had to quickly do something elsewhere. “As you were,” she said as she left, and they studied each other.

From there, she rode her mare placidly up the street to turn in at Ryal’s shop. Upon entering, she had to wait for him to approve one customer’s plot extension. As Ryal gave him his documents and he turned away, glancing at

her, she went straight to the counter to thoughtlessly spill out, “Ryal, Efran left. He said he’s resigning his charter.” Only then did the departing customer quietly close the door.

“You didn’t believe him, did you?” Ryal asked absently, making notations on the form before putting it aside to be filed. Giardi came out from the back room with a questioning face.

“That’s what Commander Wendt said!” she exhaled in hope. “Hello, Giardi. Do you think he was emoting as well?” she asked Ryal.

“Efran? Never,” Ryal said sardonically.

“Ryal!” Minka cried. “Tell me straight up what you think.”

“He takes everything to heart, Minka, which invites disappointment for a man in command. No, I think I’d hold off filing for divorce, were I you,” he said, sliding back into mild sarcasm.

“Then I suppose I will,” she said thoughtfully. “But I need to think on what to do when he does come back. I don’t want to punish him, but . . . I want him to have second thoughts about doing it again.”

“Now that I agree with. Good luck, Minka,” he said, smiling. Giardi shook her head at him, rolling her eyes. Upon leaving his shop, Minka paused, thinking, then rode the mare over to Imelda’s Beauty Potions to make a few purchases.

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Chapter 18

When Minka arrived back at the fortress, the gate guards were quick to note that, although the Captain wasn’t with her, she looked calm and thoughtful. She gave up the mare cheerfully and took her bag from Imelda’s inside. For now, she put it in her and Efran’s quarters. Then she went up to the vacant third-floor room to look it over.

It was mildly disordered, so she left it unlocked, taking the key, and asked a maid to clean it. Then she went down to the second-floor workroom.

Both DeWitt and Estes were here, catching up on the backlog of work from the minor disruption of a Polonti godling taking over the fortress for a couple of days. They both looked up at her entrance, and DeWitt asked, “What happened, Minka? Did Efran leave?”

“Yes. He told me he couldn’t do it anymore, and he was resigning his charter,” she said tentatively, testing.

Estes shook his head and DeWitt rolled his eyes, groaning, “The drama.” He didn’t mention his own little drama, having mostly forgotten about it.

“It was very stressful. It turned his hair white,” she protested in defense of Efran’s histrionics.

Estes replied, “Minka, don’t lose sleep over it. As soon as he remembers he left you here alone, he’ll come straight back.”

“You think so, too? Thank you. That’s good to know. Then I need to get ready,” she mused.

“Is she wearing her devious face?” DeWitt asked Estes.

Glancing at her, Estes said, “Yes.”

“This will be fun to watch, then,” DeWitt said in satisfaction.

“Thank you for the sympathy,” she said dryly. They smiled. Then she paused. “Estes, I heard only bits and pieces about your indictment of De’Ath. Please tell me what happened.”

“Certainly,” he said, laying down his quill. And he gave her a thorough recounting of De’Ath’s trial and judgment. She listened wide-eyed as Estes finished, “And then they took him away. Oh, I still have what he stole from the Treasury up here.”

DeWitt asked, “Is it locked up?”

“Oh, yes,” Estes assured him, then looked back down at his ledger.

Blinking, Minka said, “Well, then. I’ll . . . go get ready.” They nodded as she left the room in a daze.

Before anything else, she went out back to check on Joshua. She found him in the cart with Nakam riding along as Javier pulled them around the grounds. The toddler was happy and laughing, waving at everyone. This she was glad to see, but her heart hurt for Efran to come home to play with him.

He will, she reminded herself. Everyone who knows him best says he will.

Ella’s husband Quennel approached to bow to her, beginning uncertainly, “Lady Minka--”

“‘Minka,’ Quennel. Why are you relapsing?” she asked sternly.

But he didn’t laugh. “Minka. Did the Captain ride off?” he asked, looking even more miserable than Polonti usually looked.

“For a while. He’s out scouting because no one will recognize him with white hair. Commander Wendt expects him back in a few days,” she said boldly.

He raised up in tentative hope. “Scouting? But—he didn’t take anyone with him.”

“Well, no; that would defeat the purpose of his disguise,” she argued.

He studied her dubiously, but she was clearly untroubled. “I . . . tried to stab him. Could have killed him,” he said, repeating the relentless self-condemnation running through his mind.

She waved. “Oh, he knows that wasn’t you. He’s probably forgotten about it. He certainly will forget when he gets back” *and sees what I do.*

“Are you sure?” he asked anxiously. “He—doesn’t seem like the type of man to forget.”

“About small things, yes. Quennel, you’re the one he wanted to marry his daughter. He’s not going to hold grudges against you,” she insisted.

He looked off, mildly encouraged, then bowed to her again. “Permit me, Minka. In gratitude.”

“Go on, then,” she said, smiling, and he went back to the archery line with new heart.

Watching him, she began adding other details to her homecoming drama. “This will be fun,” she murmured.

Minka worked very hard the rest of that day preparing for Efran’s homecoming. First, she had all her possessions removed from her and Efran’s first-floor quarters and taken up to the vacant third-floor room. Then she had the first-floor quarters thoroughly cleaned, while leaving Efran’s things intact.

Then she took her purchases back to Imelda’s to request tutoring under a beautician for how to apply everything. As she was being primped, she visualized meeting Efran in the foyer when he walked in. She would be wearing the beautifully embroidered dress that the Featheringham ladies had made, and perhaps even a crown from the Treasury. And she would be wearing makeup—a full face of it. Efran would see it, and stop dead. She would say, *You left, so this is what I choose for me*. And then she’d see how he could argue with that.

She returned to the fortress from Imelda’s in time for dinner, where she sat cheerfully on the back bench in their usual spot. For tonight, she drafted Quennel to hold Joshua and feed him bites as Efran always did.

When Toby and the children came asking about him, she quietly told them that he had taken advantage of his new white hair to go scouting incognito. As she was so calm about it all, they accepted this explanation. And this entirely reasonable scenario was repeated as fact all down the ranks, because it comforted the men who couldn’t bear to think that the Captain would abandon his charter because of what they had done.

While the men were resuming their duties and Minka was plotting her reception for Efran, the senior Polonti were meeting over an unresolved question. Quietly, Estes, Loriot, Conte, Goss, Koschat, Krall, Melchior, Chee, Barr, and Stites met in an obscure third-floor room. Estes opened, “Thank you for coming, gentlemen. Here is the issue: I want to know where this De’Ath came from, and how many others there are like him. I want to know how to head off any further attacks from *hopui*. Loriot, is this the kind of thing Master Crowe did?”

Loriot considered this. “Not really. Crowe’s power stemmed from the illusion he created around himself. His method of control was much more subtle than De’Ath’s. We had no sense of being forced to do anything. Because of De’Ath’s heavy-handedness, he began losing his grip on the men by the time you brought the indictment. But by then, he’d already done a great deal of damage. So, yes, we want to find out how to stop it before another like him comes against us.”

Estes looked around. “Have any of you encountered anything like this before?”

The others shook their heads. But Melchior asked, “How did you know to bring charges against him, Estes?”

“Because I actually have a copy of the Polonti *Code of Justice*, which I had forgotten about. But this morning I read it from cover to cover, and there’s nothing further to help us there,” Estes said.

“Well, then, you need to reread your charter.”

Estes looked up quickly to see who had offered that guidance, but the men were variously looking off in thought or vague concern.

“Read your charter again, Estes.” This time he looked toward the opposite wall, which Nakham was leaning against. Nodding, he said for the third time, “Read your charter.”

“I suppose I need to reread the charter, then,” Estes said, and the others looked at him. He stood. “Thank you for coming; I’ll keep you apprised.”

The men left, and Estes went back down to the second-floor workroom. DeWitt looked up at his entrance to say, “I just thought to check on Ploense. Of course, he’s been working undisturbed this whole time.”

Going over to the shelves, Estes paused. “He has incredible focus.”

“Yes, it’s almost supernatural,” DeWitt said wryly. He hadn’t said anything to anyone about his deliverance from plunging sixty feet to his death. He told Tera that he merely held on to dead branches until new ones grew out, which was mostly true.

Thinking, Estes pulled out the folder with the Abbey’s charter. He sat to open it and read the one-page document carefully. Then he read it again, and a third time. But there was nothing he didn’t already know. It was a simple statement. And the brief paragraph that referenced Efran’s title merely said, “The man named above the notary’s seal and signature is henceforth Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. If a woman holds the charter, or the Lord Sovereign has a wife, she is henceforth Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

Sighing, Estes sat back. “I don’t understand--” Then he looked again: *Sovereign*. The part of the title that Efran could never get used to.

Standing, Estes replaced the charter in the folder, which he put back on the shelf where it belonged. Then he said, “I have to check a point with Ryal.”

DeWitt glanced up from his worksheets. “All right.”

In deep concentration, Estes walked down the old switchback to turn off at the notary shop. As he entered, Ryal looked up in mild surprise. “Hello, Estes. I don’t see you down here often.”

“That’s because I usually send Efran,” Estes noted.

Ryal eyed him. “You expect him back, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” Estes said. “That doesn’t worry me. But—I have a question about his title. It’s explicit on the charter: ‘Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.’ Ryal, can you tell me what ‘Sovereign’ means here?”

Ryal said, “The supreme authority on the Lands.”

“Yes,” Estes said. “But what does that mean in the context of, say, an attack? An invasion? Is there anything beyond the mere word that it conveys?”

Ryal said slowly, “As in, power to repel an entity that attacks the Abbey Fortress and Lands?”

“Exactly,” Estes said. “We were debating how to prevent another De’Ath from sweeping in and taking over, and Nakham told me three times to reread the charter.”

Ryal stared at him. “We keep seeing attacks turned aside by almost supernatural means--”

“Because the power is in the charter, in that one word, *Sovereign*,” Estes whispered. “If that means what I think it means, then Efran need do nothing but stand on the charter to repel invaders.”

Ryal looked at him tensely. “We need to explain this to Efran. He’d better get back soon.”

“But even if he doesn’t, and we’re attacked,” Estes said, “there is a *Lady Sovereign* of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

“Who should wield the same power,” Ryal said.

“Bestowed by the same charter,” Estes said.

They looked at each other, then Ryal said, “You need to talk to Minka.”

“Yes,” Estes said, turning out.

As Estes entered the fortress foyer from the courtyard, he met Minka coming out of her and Efran’s quarters. “Estes! Hello. Oh, I’m having fun getting things ready for Efran to come home.”

“Which I hope is soon,” Estes began.

“Me too,” she said, suddenly drooping. “You and DeWitt and Ryal and Commander Wendt all said the same thing, but now I’m having trouble believing it. I think he could come back at some point, but . . . he was so hurt, Estes; he was—devastated. He said his heart was gone, and, I’m afraid I believe him.”

“I hope you’re wrong, Minka, but, we need to talk. Come up to the workroom, please,” Estes said.

“All right,” she said, studying him.

While Minka was being tutored by Estes and DeWitt on her newly discovered powers of authority, lines of men began appearing in the courtyard. They were well dressed, some bearing flowers or boxes. They came on foot, on horseback, and even in carriages. After the first three or four were admitted into the courtyard, the guards shut the gates, leaving upwards of twenty-five or thirty strung along the switchback.

At that point, one door guard came up to the workroom to salute. “Steward, Administrator, Lady Minka,” Eustace said. “There’s a large number of men requesting audience with the Lady.”

Minka blinked at him, but Estes and DeWitt exchanged glances. She said, “What? Men wanting an audience with me? What for?”

Eustace looked depressed. “I understand they wish to court you, Lady Minka, as the Captain has resigned his charter.”

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Chapter 19

“No,” Minka gasped. “No, he hasn’t. Order them to leave; I’m not seeing anyone.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Eustace said, stepping out.

Wide-eyed, she looked back at Estes and DeWitt. He said, “As Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, your word is equal to Efran’s. Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t,” she said, looking dazed.

Minka stayed in the workroom until Eustace returned about a half hour later to give her the all-clear. He did not tell her that it had taken almost all of Captain Chee’s Regiment, #2, to clear both switchbacks.

At dinner, Minka was cheerful as always, telling everyone who asked that Efran was on a special solo scouting mission and would return when he was done. Again, she had Quennel on her left, holding Joshua on his lap to feed him bites as Efran did. Ella was sitting to Quennel’s left, which suited him fine, but she kept looking past him to Minka as though wanting to talk.

For one thing, she wanted to know the real story on her father’s absence. But also, Minka was wearing just a little bit of eyeliner and lip rouge. It looked very nice, and Ella was burning to know why she was wearing it all of a sudden. Also, she wanted Minka to show her how she applied it.

All things considered, it was a successful day, but when Minka locked herself alone in the third-floor room, she stretched out on the small bed to cry very quietly. And that was without her even remembering that today, May 7th, was her birthday.

The following day, and the day after that, Minka kept up a solid façade in the presence of everyone else, but the longer Efran was gone, the less she believed that he was coming back. She continued to experiment with makeup, and just the tiniest amount of pomade in her hair. Also, she was wearing nicer clothes, and working less in the coops. She hadn’t worn her chickening clothes for a week now. She could hardly bear to be reminded of the handsome Polonti captain she’d found lying damp in her henhouse.

By the third day of Efran’s absence, she stopped believing he would ever come back. By this time, whether he had gone to Venegas, Eurus, Crescent Hollow, or anywhere in between, he would have had plenty of time to ride back. So the only explanation was that he had gone farther, or had found a place he wanted to stay . . . without her. (Meanwhile, the guards never told her that they were continually having to expel would-be suitors from the switchbacks.)

Dead inside, she carried on pretending to be Lady Sovereign. She paid attention to the children, admiring their projects and laughing at their games; she doted on Joshua, pulling him in the cart with Nakam and holding him on the bench under the walnut tree. But with each passing day, he looked more and more like Efran, which tore her heart in two every time she saw him.

But since she still had so little to do, she concentrated on her personal makeover, as Minka had died. She considered changing her name, even reverting back to Sybil. But when she asked Estes to check the charter again, she saw (as she knew she would) that she had signed it “Minka,” so she was stuck with the name as long as she was here.

By the fourth day that Efran was gone, Estes and DeWitt quietly suggested that she begin looking around for an acceptable partner if Efran did not return within a month—which was the minimal time frame to file for divorce on the basis of desertion. She couldn't bring herself to do that yet, but she did rearrange her wardrobe, and even looked at jewelry.

Everything in the Treasury was so very costly that she couldn't imagine wearing anything from there. But she had noted lovely earrings for pierced ears at Imelda's, which fascinated her. All the fashionable ladies wore them, but she had always been too timid. How much would it hurt to pierce her ears? But the last time she had been to Imelda's, she noticed that they did the piercing for anyone who bought earrings.

Efran was gone. So she decided to get her ears pierced.

Having to ask no one for permission, she went to the courtyard to request a horse and two bodyguards. "Where do you need to go, Lady Minka?" the gate guard Hawk asked, sweating. The other guard, Graeme, looked on tensely. No one had told her they were still turning away prospective suitors.

"Imelda's," she said. "Right down there off Main. I need to get out of the fortress for a little while. I haven't been out since--"

Yes, they knew: she hadn't left the fortress since Efran had left. But now she was going out.

Hawk turned to give instructions, and soon the dun mare was brought for her, as well as four bodyguards. She murmured, "Four?" But they all looked set on coming, so she acquiesced.

A great many people stopped what they were doing to watch her ride down Main, which made her uncomfortable—not to mention her bodyguard. But she and they turned off onto the side street which housed Imelda's, and Minka went in to discuss the latest earring trends (lightweight but shiny and dangly). Then she steeled herself while Imelda poked a hole in each ear, followed by tiny gold hoops. Imelda told her to keep the hoops in her ears for a week, and clean them daily.

Emerging from the shop after this new and unprecedented step of courage, she was feeling her ears when a sudden tumult of shouting and stamping of hooves fell on them. A mass of men had suddenly collected from all down Main to converge on her. They were drawing swords against her bodyguard while one man, evidently the leader, loomed before her, reaching toward her.

"Stop it!" she shouted, enraged, and there was a sudden lull. "*How dare you?* I am Minka, and as Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I order you out! Get out!"

They looked momentarily stunned, and then a rush of wind almost flattened them. "Ino!" cried the Polonti around her as the renegades' panicky horses stampeded toward the wall gates. The only one on foot, the leader, was chased out by every man on Main, and barely made it to the gates before they could throttle him.

After the renegades had departed in wild flight, everyone turned to look at Lady Minka. Seeing all the eyes on her, she whispered, "Efran is coming home." The men who had rushed out of the lower barracks to defend her ran back in to apprise the Commander of the new defensive strategy. And Minka's bodyguard of four, rattled but determined, got her on her horse and encompassed her tightly to bring her back into the fortress.

If Efran was coming, he didn't make it that day. However, as word of Minka's stand spread through the fortress, the residents looked at each other and said, Why do we keep evacuating at every small thing? This is our *safe*

place. If the Lady of the Abbey Fortress can defend it, why are we running?

After that day, no one evacuated again.

The following day, the fifth day since Efran had left, Minka found herself unable to rise from bed. Her heart had gone; she couldn't pretend to keep on living. Several people knocked; she said leave the tray at the door, please, but she couldn't get up to go open the door and get the tray. She longed to go out and work in the garden, but only if Efran were there to see the little pumpkins. She longed to go play with the children, but only if Efran were there to lift three of them on one arm.

How many times had he told her, *I will love you forever*? Every time they thought he was going to die, that was his promise to her. That was what sustained her through every absence, every threat, every fear. How could she go on when that promise proved false?

Finally, there was a knocking on the door, and Toby's voice said, "Minka? Minka? Are you all right?"

Immediately she got up to go to the door. "Yes, Toby. I was just all worn out from the excitement yesterday. Oh, look at all this food! I can't eat all this. Will you help me?"

"Sure," he said. Since the tray was too heavy for him to reliably handle, they took the plates and cups and jam pots to the small table one by one. Then they sat together and finished off a very satisfactory breakfast.

While he took the empty dishes downstairs, she washed up and put on a work dress like she used to wear when she was interested in living. She forwent the makeup since no one here was afflicted by it. But she cleaned her newly pierced ears carefully. Then she went downstairs and out to the back grounds with Toby, Nakam and Joshua (carried by Enon) to see what mid-May flowers had sprung up while she was wishing to die.

She chatted with Tourjee, Cyr, and the gardening crew, and looked with satisfaction on the fuzzy baby peaches loading all the branches that remained after pruning. She went over to the pens to watch Enon walk Joshua around on Soup while Ella led him. The toddler laughed and chortled, and Minka thought the pain would kill her where she stood.

Hours later, when they were called in for dinner, she held hands with Toby on one side and Alcmund on the other to walk up the corridor to the dining hall. With the foyer doors open, they heard the faint clanging of the wall gates alarm bell. Immediately, the courtyard alarm bell echoed it. Then Minka looked up in mild wonder as the bells on the fortress rooftop pealed in joy. When was the last time she'd heard the rooftop bells? She couldn't remember. But they were ringing as though they would burst.

She passed the dining hall without seeing it, and looked into the foyer at a weary, wind-blown man with white hair entering in the midst of eager soldiers clustered around him. He was saying, "It looks as if Surchatain Auber has been assassinated--" Then he looked up to see her.

Watching, Minka wondered who that was who made her heart beat so hard. He was looking at her with lips parted, then he strode toward her so quickly she had no time to get out of his way. He swept her up to crush her in his arms, and in the silence of the foyer, all anyone could hear was his gasping.

Finally, he let her down to her feet, reaching into his jacket pocket. He swiped at the tears on his face before handing her a small wooden box. "I went to Crescent Hollow to get you a birthday present," he said.

"Birthday present." She repeated the foreign words blankly.

“Yes. Your birthday was May seventh. You’re eighteen now,” he told her, making another effort to wipe his face. “Open it.”

She looked down at the unknown thing in her hands, and took off something that closed over the top. From among wood shavings, she lifted out a smooth copper bracelet on which was engraved, *I will love you forever*.

She almost collapsed to the floor. He caught her, laughing, “Don’t you like it?”

“Efran.” She held his neck and cried.

He removed one small hand from around his neck to put the copper band on it. “Eh, I got the smallest one I could find, but it’s still too big. You’ll have to wear it on your upper arm,” he grouched.

“Efran, the Commander is always right,” she wept.

“I know,” he said in disgust. “Is dinner on?” he asked hopefully, looking to the dining hall.

They were mobbed by a happy throng as they entered the dining hall. Efran paused at the back tables when Felice brought Joshua over to him. The toddler looked at him dubiously, but Efran bent eye to eye with him. “Joshua. Papa. Papapa. I’m back.”

“Papapa,” Joshua agreed, reaching out to him. Efran took him on his left arm and sat with Minka on his right. Then he looked up as Madea’s two oldest children brought over plates and ales for the Captain and his Lady.

“Thank you, Wardly,” Efran said in satisfaction. “And your name is--?” He looked at the girl, slightly shorter than her brother.

Wardly opened his mouth, but she said, “Ricci, Captain.”

“Ricci. Very good. Thank you,” Efran said with his beautiful smile. Underneath the white hair, he looked angelic. She smiled hazily; Wardly dragged her away as everyone began eating.

Efran looked with satisfaction at Ella beside him, and Quennel on her other side. Staring, she said, “I’m so glad you’re back, Father.” Mouth full, he merely smiled. Then she spilled out, “I love your hair.”

He ducked his head, pressing the back of his hand against his mouth to keep it shut as everyone laughed. She looked around, protesting, “It’s pretty.”

Her husband put a supportive arm around her. “Yes, it is. And if I’m blessed to be afflicted enough, or we’re married long enough, I’ll turn white, too.” He couldn’t bring himself to look at Efran, because he remembered what he had done, or tried to do.

Quennel’s assurance caused Ella to squint uncertainly at him, but he appeared to be perfectly sincere. Efran looked back at Minka. Pausing to swallow, he drew her hair back with one finger to study the small gold hoop in her earlobe. “Huh,” he said. He could hardly object to modest jewelry, as he had just given her such. “Well, at least you’re not wearing makeup.”

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Chapter 20

Efran didn't notice Minka's sudden wary look, for DeWitt and Estes had just come up behind the diners across from him. DeWitt said, "Welcome home, Efran. Did you say something about Surchatain Auber being assassinated?"

Efran took a swig of ale. "Possibly, though he's certainly dead. When I arrived in Crescent Hollow, he was on his sickbed. His favorite to succeed him, his nephew Sughrue, was attending him when it was suddenly announced that he had died. Some councilors immediately accused Sughrue of murder; he denied it and the physician couldn't verify it one way or another. So the city went into lockdown and I couldn't get out for a while." He turned to Minka as he said this, and she just drank him in.

"All right, we won't press for more tonight. But have you heard how your wife used her title to turn away a group of kidnappers?" DeWitt asked smiling, brows raised.

Efran stopped eating. "What."

Estes urged, "Tell him about it, Minka."

Efran swung to her. But she just looked at him, unable to focus on anything other than his presence right now. Captain Rigdon, who was sitting across from her, had been one of her bodyguard at the time. So he wiped his mouth and said, "The lady wanted to go down to a shop, so four of us took her down. The moment she came out, this band collected from all down Main. We were outnumbered right away.

"But when the first man tried to grab her, she ordered him off. And they ran as though pursued by the devil himself. Some of the men said Ino was in the wind that blew them away, but—they ran," Rigdon said.

As Efran stared at him, Estes said, "That's what happened, as we understand it, but we believe that the wording Minka used was important, Efran. She invoked her title as 'Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.' Ryal believes—and I do, too—that the power of the charter rests in the title bestowed on the Lord and Lady *Sovereign*."

Efran concentrated on this. "In the word?" he asked, frowning.

"In what the word represents," Estes clarified. "Why have there been so many attempted usurpations of your charter? Not just for the Treasury, we believe, but for the power invested in the title."

"You mean—all my strategies, and wall building, and weapons gathering are—unnecessary? That all we have to do is stand and speak these words?" Efran asked, bewildered.

"No, I don't see that," DeWitt said. "Nothing precludes preparation, and the largest part of your responsibility under the charter is to defend the Fortress *to the best of your ability*. It's just that when your best efforts fail, your backup is in place."

Still trying to understand this, Efran turned to Minka again. "Then you don't need me to protect you after all."

"Ha," she uttered, tears coming again. "I don't need you? I could hardly get out of bed this morning. I didn't care if I never woke up unless I knew you were coming home."

“Minka.” He draped his arm around her. While he was preoccupied with her on his right, Joshua pointed to Ella’s custard, and she gave him a bite. Efran was protesting, “I told you I’d be right back.”

“What?” Minka screeched. “When?”

“When I was--” Efran stopped to think. “Didn’t I?”

Minka fell on him with a guttural cry, and their dinner companions laughed or groaned. Finally, she sighed, “Anyway, you’re here.”

“And we’ll talk more with you tomorrow, Efran,” Estes said as he and DeWitt went back to the head tables to rejoin their wives.

The tail end of dinner was quiet, as Efran was exhausted and Minka mostly played with her new copper bracelet. But the children all came over to hug Efran’s neck and tell him how glad they were to have him back home.

When he and Minka walked Joshua down to the nursery for Efran to hand over the sleepy toddler, he said, “At least I know I can count on you, Felice.”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” she said in vindication. “Yes, you can.”

He took Minka’s hand to lead her down the corridor to their quarters, groaning, “It will be so nice to sleep in a real bed tonight. Oh, but I need to bathe.” He looked down at her dress with obvious intentions.

“Come up to the waterfall, then,” she invited, detouring him to the stairs. He did, and felt much better for it.

The following morning, May 13th, Efran and Minka met with DeWitt and Estes in the workroom to more fully discuss what they’d learned from this latest debacle. Estes told Efran about the indictment, adding, “I was so—affected myself that Nakham had to remind me to get out the Polonti *Code of Justice*. And it was rather incredible to watch the proceedings. But since we’re all agreed we want to prevent further disruptions like that, Nakham had to remind me again to check the charter. I can’t believe it’s been almost two years, and we still don’t understand how all this works.”

Tentatively, Efran said, “But you believe our defensive measures—the walls, the barricade, the weapons—are still necessary.”

“Oh, yes,” DeWitt said. “The power in the charter may be supernatural, but it’s not magic. It’s not a substitute for common sense and best practices.”

Efran was silent, then he looked at Minka with troubled eyes. “I didn’t tell you I’d be coming back?”

“No,” she whispered. “You said you weren’t.” He looked away in distress, and she added, “That’s when Wendt told me about your flinging your insigne at him after every botched assignment.”

Efran winced. “I did,” he muttered. Estes snorted confirmation.

DeWitt sat back. “Efran, what . . . caused you such grief that turned your hair white?”

Efran put a tentative hand to his head. “The . . . darkness. The continual taunting. The unreality—I never knew whether the terrible things I was hearing and seeing were real. Just the—hopelessness. I’ve never felt so abandoned. Anything I tried to pray was held up and mocked. I’ve never. . . .” He shook his head.

He turned to Minka. “And when I left you, I still hadn’t shaken off that darkness. I got to Crescent Hollow, and just roamed, since I couldn’t leave, given the lockdown. But when I came to the coppersmith’s stall, and saw the bracelet--” He broke off to smile at her. “It was already engraved. I only had to buy it. And that drew me back here, because I had to give it to you. So I got around their barricades and rode home.”

She looked at him to murmur, “And that was my prayer being answered.”

After a moment, Estes said, “But you know, Efran, the timing was right, I think. We needed to understand the power that was available to us, which we wouldn’t have known about until Minka used it—which she had no cause to do if you were here.”

Efran was still looking at Minka. DeWitt observed, “The dark night of the soul is real. . . . ‘My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?’”

Efran turned to him, almost laughing. “That was the first thing that came out of my mouth.”

DeWitt said, “Then you were in good company.” Efran lowered his head. DeWitt still said nothing about his own trial and deliverance.

Restless, Efran said, “I still need to clear my mind. Let’s go walk out back.” He extended his hand to her; she got up to take it.

A few minutes after they had left, Martyn came reeling to the workroom door, breathless. Neglecting to even salute, he said, “Administrator, please come to the roof. Koschat is about to throw himself down.”

Estes looked at him in astonished dismay, but DeWitt quickly rose. “Let’s go.”

He and Martyn ran up all the stairs until coming to the bell tower. Thrusting aside the bulky faerie tree branches, DeWitt pushed to the place where he had been thrown over by two Polonti. There was Koschat, wrestling with the faerie tree roots that had prevented his leaping from the wall. Three other Polonti had arrived, but couldn’t reach him for the roots.

“Koschat, get down from there!” DeWitt barked.

But he looked back, tears streaming down his face. “I remember now. I was one of them. I was one who threw you off the roof.”

“No, you weren’t! Get down!” DeWitt roared.

“But I remember!” Koschat cried.

“That’s just a leftover deception. Don’t you think *I* remember?” DeWitt demanded.

With that assertion, bewildered doubt crossed Koschat’s face, and the other Polonti were able to pull him down around the roots. Tomer asked, “Who were they, Administrator? Who were the ones who threw you down?”

All of them looked tensely at him, waiting. DeWitt scanned their faces, then said, “No one up here. Now I’m ordering you all to get back to work. Koschat, you’re to report to Ploense to assist him.”

“Yes, Administrator.” Koschat saluted unsteadily. The others saluted as well, and they began filing back down the stairs.

When DeWitt arrived back in the workroom, Estes looked up. “Is he all right?”

“Yes, the idiot,” DeWitt groused, sitting before his worksheets.

“Why was he going to jump?” Estes asked.

“Eh, he thought he was one of the men who threw me off the roof,” DeWitt muttered, adjusting his glasses to look at the sheets.

“The roof?” Estes breathed, not having heard about this. “Was he?”

“No, of course not,” DeWitt said. He took up his quill to begin on another column of numbers. Estes paused, having the distinct impression that his old friend was lying. But DeWitt shut himself in his worksheets, so Estes returned to his ledgers.

At this time, Efran and Minka had emerged onto the back grounds. Joshua was already there, being pulled in the cart by Elowen. He paused upon seeing the Captain, but Efran cordially waved him down. As long as Joshua was happy, Efran didn’t need to pull him around himself. There was a brisk jostling among the men for the honor of warding the Captain’s son.

The Southerners greeted Efran as if personally vindicated. But seeing the Polonti’s hesitant, deferential manner, Minka said, “Efran, the men are deeply distressed over what they see as their betrayal of you. Quennel came to me just—wretched, wondering how angry you would be with him. But at the time, they couldn’t help it. They only found the strength to stand up to it later.”

She was anxious to make him understand so that he wouldn’t crush their tentative efforts to return to duty. Many of those out here today were not even in the dining hall almost a week ago, when he had given blanket forgiveness.

“Oh, no fear,” he snorted. “I had plenty of time to think about all the times I hurt you when I did know better and could have helped it.” She exhaled in relief.

When he looked up, Quennel was standing in front of him with a large, ugly knife. Minka drew a quick breath, but Efran looked merely glum. Head down in shame, Quennel was holding the blade, extending the handle. It was both a confession and invitation to judgment: having attempted to stab his Captain, his father-in-law, he was presenting himself for Efran to do likewise.

Efran took the knife, flipping it to grasp the blade, then flung it to sink the blade into the ground between Quennel’s feet. Admirably, Quennel didn’t flinch, though Minka jumped. “Go to your duty,” Efran muttered, turning away. While it looked harsh, it was the Polonti equivalent of a pat on the head.

Quennel exhaled, “Yes, Captain,” saluting. He reached down to withdraw the knife and return it to its sheath. Then he walked back to the archery line, gesturing the next man up.

By this time, Efran was watching Arne amble down the steps from the back door to limp over with a salute. “Cap’n, messengers from Surchatain Sewell are at the gates thinking that yer need to come out and talk to them right away,” he said, mildly sardonic.

Efran stared at him, then asked in low voice, “What happened to you?” Arne’s face was still bruised and his nose newly rebroken. Several Polonti paused fearfully nearby.

Arne looked off indifferently. “Eh, I thought to ride a horse that wasn’t quite broke yet. Not to slight the trainers, Cap’n—I was warned, but didn’t listen,” he embroidered.

“You’re lying,” Efran breathed. “Who beat you? And how many?” The Polonti looked at each other tensely.

“Eh, I don’t rightly remember, Cap’n. I may have been drunk,” he said almost proudly—whereas Efran knew that it would take a half-case of hard ale to make Arne drunk. Behind Efran, Minka was smiling warmly at the liar.

Efran exhaled, glancing at the nervous Polonti who lowered their heads. Then he reached up to shake Arne’s large shoulder. “Arne, I don’t know that I could run this army without you. I will go see what Sewell’s little messengers want to tell me, but you will go up to Wallace right now.”

“Yes, Cap’n,” Arne said reluctantly. (He did, and Wallace put a hard bandage over his nose.)

At the back door, Efran turned to summon the first five Polonti he saw: “Chilcott, Jehan, Coish, Heus, Salk, come with us.” Since he was grimly smiling, they ran up with tentatively expectant salutes. He and Minka led them up the corridor to the foyer.

Emerging into the courtyard, Efran looked down at the four liveried messengers waiting far down Main outside the wall gates. He said lazily, “I don’t see why we should mount up just to keep them from waiting. Perhaps they should wait. So let’s just walk down.”

He paused to peer at the bruises on the face of the gate guard, Ellor—a Southerner, one of the 40. Seeing his scrutiny, Ellor said quickly, “I fell down the stairs running, Captain. I should have known better, because you do warn us.”

At Efran’s expression of derisive unbelief, the Polonti behind him looked at each other. Untroubled, Ellor opened the gate. But there was an angry bang followed by the sound of splintering wood, and everyone looked over to the stables where Kraken trotted out in his halter.

“Welp, most of us will walk down,” Efran amended. When Kraken drew up, snorting, Efran lifted Minka to sit with both legs to one side on his bare back.

With her holding onto Kraken’s mane, Efran said, “Now we can proceed.” So Efran walked on Kraken’s left, Heus (the eldest among youngsters) on Kraken’s right, and the rest of the bodyguard following behind as they leisurely descended the switchback.

The Venegasans at the gates were watching this procession in frustrated impatience. But Lands residents looked on in humorous admiration, especially as Kraken stopped for occupied crosswalks, or crosswalks that were about to be occupied. Trina also stopped dead seeing it, struck by the inspiration. She saw herself riding sidesaddle down the middle of Main for her next dress showing.

Finally drawing up to the gates, Efran looked up to the riders and instructed, "Dismount to give your message."

They looked hesitant, then the one in front said, "We were charged to speak to Captain Efran." They were all studying his white hair. But then the three behind the lead messenger looked at the Abbey Lady with windblown curls, riding like a *Moiwahine* on the black horse, and they hardly heard what was said after that.

"I am Efran, Hews, and if you don't dismount immediately to give your message, I won't hear it," he said placidly.

They quickly dismounted. Hews said, "Surchatain Sewell has returned to see the destruction left by your visit, Captain, and requires an explanation."

"That's reasonable," Efran said. "We engaged the *hopui* De'Ath, who had convinced you to break the Law of Roman with your use of slave labor. After we routed him in Venegas, he followed to attack us here and disable me before my Steward charged him with crimes under the Polonti *Code of Justice*. The Mogridge judged him guilty and took him away. Now, I will entertain further questions only from Sewell, here. Until he comes and assures me that he will not continue to kidnap my messengers and emissaries to use as slaves, I may have to reconsider our alliance with Venegas."

The messengers studied him and Efran looked around to say, "Let's visit the Commander." His men saluted amiably, and while they walked the short distance to Barracks A, Hews gestured his companions to their saddles for them to ride off in haste.

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Chapter 21

At the barracks steps, Efran lifted Minka down from Kraken's back and told him, "You can get your own water; the trough's right over there. Just don't wander away." Kraken snorted, shaking his halter, so that Efran retorted, "Oh, you're so abused; getting to prance down Main with the Lady on your back and no saddle or bridle."

"But he's such a smooth ride, Efran," Minka protested, and Kraken spread his lips in grating laughter at his human.

"Don't encourage him," Efran muttered, hand at her back as they began up the steps. Then he stopped so suddenly that half the men following almost plowed into him. He was looking off in sudden astonishment, or displeasure.

"Efran?" she whispered.

He looked down at her, pained. "My deepest pledge to you has become such a stock phrase that the coppersmith had it pre-engraved on a number of bracelets. I just had to pick the smallest."

While his men stood bewildered, Minka said, "What does that matter? You didn't get it from a bracelet; it came from your heart long before then."

Exhaling, Efran resumed walking her up the steps to open the door. "That's why I need you," he whispered.

Drawing up to the desk at which Wendt was seated, Efran saluted. "Captain Efran reporting with the Lady Minka and a bunch of men, if the Commander can accommodate us into his schedule."

Sternly not smiling, Wendt said, "I always have time for Minka, but what can I do for your and your men, Efran?" Barr, standing beside the Commander, looked off in requisite blankness while Viglian glanced up from his transcriptions at Towner's desk.

"Permission to sit, Commander," Efran muttered.

"Certainly," Wendt said.

"May I sit beside you, Commander?" Minka asked.

"Of course, Minka," Wendt said. Efran flattened his lips as Barr drew up a chair for her, then Efran sat on her other side. His men stood back, not presuming to appropriate the permission to themselves. Wendt repeated, "What can I do for you?"

"Have we heard from Verlice? Did he get his sons back safely?" Efran asked.

"I'm expecting a message shortly," Wendt said.

"All right." Efran glanced around, then said, "Oh. Auber of Crescent Hollow is dead; some of his councilors think that his nephew Sughrue is responsible, but there's no proof."

Wendt nodded placidly. "Yes, I heard. That's unfortunate; I hope Sughrue rules well."

Efran nodded, leaning his elbows on his knees, then looked up to remark to Minka, "It's good we got to the Crescent Hollow Faire when we did, then"--a little over six months ago. She quietly agreed.

Crossing his arms, Efran sat back in his chair, looking off blankly. A moment later, one of the many men attending the wall gates entered, saluting. "Pardon, Commander. Captain. Letter from Lord Justinian to the Lady Minka." As Efran had instructed his men to give her any letters addressed to her, the gate guard did so.

"Thank you," she said, taking the letter while Efran looked pointedly at it.

"Yes, Lady." The man saluted and the Commander dismissed him.

Efran suddenly sat up to ask Wendt, "How did you know--?" He fell silent.

"Yes?" Wendt asked with a half-smile. Efran looked conflicted but Wendt added, "I got a heads-up from a scout that the messenger was on the road."

"Of course," Efran said, sinking back.

"If it's all right with you, I'll read it," Minka said wryly. She broke the seal and opened the letter to observe, "It was written May twelfth—yesterday." Then she began reading:

"Dear Minka"--which was a euphemism, as Efran knew, but he refrained from grabbing the letter right under Wendt, who would chastise him for it.

“To our great joy and disbelief, Lord Verlice and his sons arrived safely to our Marguerite’s six days ago, pausing to refresh themselves with her unmatched hospitality before resuming the last short leg of their trip to Wirrin Valley. (As I can hear your Gargoyle quibbling that Wirrin Valley is slightly closer to you than Featherstone, I must hasten to explain that there is only rudimentary medical care in the Valley, and Lord Verlice wished Marguerite’s personal physician to have a look at Arturo first.) Nonetheless, our dear Lady M sent messengers on ahead to alert the anxious wife and mother that her husband was successful beyond all hopes, thanks to the efforts of your—husband,” she ad libbed.

“He says, ‘Gargoyle,’” Efran corrected her without looking.

“Gargoyle,” she admitted. “Now be quiet.” She resumed, “‘Due to the rough carriage ride, Lady M’s physician was concerned about Arturo’s break, but believes it’s not misaligned to the point of having to rebreak and reset it.’ Oh, I’m glad for that,” she murmured.

Again she resumed, “‘On other fronts, the palace at Eurus is functioning at peak efficiency, but some councilors are expressing private concerns about Surchatain Baldassare’s habitually blank expression and ready acquiescence to anything his lovely wife and co-ruler, Surchataine Solace, suggests. Also, some councilors, having learned of his shocking detainment as a slave in Venegas, are demanding punitive reparations from the Abbey Lands.’”

She paused in surprise, without regard for Wendt’s quiet chuckle. “‘As your sweet—as your face is no doubt displaying genteel ladylike shock, the councilors in question are justifying their demands on the strength of two points: One, the Gargoyle’s being Polonti Lord means that he is responsible for the actions of the Polonti town nearby, and two, the Abbey Lands certainly has greater wealth to support reparations than Venegas.

“‘Given that Baldassare was successfully rescued by your Gar—Lord, Surchataine Solace has summarily denied the proposed demand for reparations. This has earned the ire of the councilors whom she will not sleep with, which are all of them. Now how she may be dispatched so that they are free to pursue their claim of reparations as well as replace the somnolent Baldassare is entirely up in the air.

“‘Finally, Verlice did confess to his mother that you quickly perceived his true identity. When she asked how, he told her that not only did you observe some slight physical resemblances, but her habit of petting certain of the Gargoyle’s men in like fashion as she did her son alerted you, being uncannily perceptive, to the relationship. Therefore I must ask: what was the habit and on which men did she bestow this mark of favor?

“‘Hoping to—see you again,

“‘Justinian,’” she finished, then handed the letter to Efran so that he could confirm his suspicions about what phrases Justinian had actually used, about which Efran was entirely correct.

During this brief interlude, Wendt observed, “So Lord Verlice is Lady Marguerite’s son.”

“Yes,” Efran said without thinking, then quickly looked up to meet Minka’s wide eyes.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “I read all that aloud without remembering that I promised him we wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“We won’t tell anyone either. Will we?” Wendt said, and the other seven men in the room murmured assurances that they wouldn’t.

Efran refolded the letter to put it in his pocket, then looked up at her. "Yes?"

"Pardon?" she said.

"Who did Marguerite pet and how?" Efran asked.

Looking aside with innocent arched brows, Minka said, "Wellll. . . ."

Efran and Wendt were both smiling. "Wellll?" Efran repeated.

"Yeeess," Minka hedged.

"And?" Efran laughed.

She drew a contemplative breath, then said, "I don't think I remember."

Wendt and Viglian laughed outright; Efran groan-laughed, and the men behind him had to grin quietly. "No, no," Efran chided. "You have to tell us."

She considered that, then stood. "I'll demonstrate it." Turning to look at the men, she said, "Jehan, take off your hat." He did this with lightning speed, grinning. "Come over here," she summoned, and he presented himself. Efran was watching warily.

"This is what she did," Minka said. "Now, Jehan, you have to imagine that I'm Marguerite."

He looked dubious, but said obediently, "Yes, Lady Minka."

"And you are the man who reminds me of my son," Minka said.

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said breathlessly.

"So," Minka began. "There, now, what is your name? Oh, Jehan? Of course, I should have remembered that. Weren't you here before? When? Now, did you try the suckling pig? Whatever you want for dinner, you let me know and I'll tell Hartshough, all right?"

Meanwhile, she was stroking his hair back from his temples with one hand, then both hands. Also, she paid particular attention to smoothing down the crown of his head, in case there were an errant cowlick asserting itself. And if that were not enough, she loosened strands of his longish hair from the standing collar of his uniform jacket. Meanwhile, Jehan silently received these expressions of affection with a hazy smile.

"There. That's it," she said, sitting. "Thank you, Jehan." He continued to stand there as if hoping she wasn't quite done.

Efran said, "So, she played with their hair?"

Minka agreed, but hedged, "In a special kind of way. It wasn't as demonstrative as I made it look; it was far more subtle."

"Ah. Who?" he asked.

“Pardon?” she returned, all innocence.

“Which of our men did she pet like that?” Efran asked.

She hesitated, then said, “You should have noticed.”

He paused while Wendt was trying to keep his laughter confined. Efran asked her, “Why—don’t you want to tell me?”

“Because,” she said, “I don’t want them teased. Marguerite wouldn’t mind being made to look silly, but it’s cruel to do that to a man. It wasn’t deliberate on her part and it’s nothing that should reflect on them.”

The men were quiet in respect, and Wendt said, “Minka, I’m thinking of naming you Lieutenant Commander.”

She quickly turned to him. “Really? Oh, how fun! Can I have a uniform and everything? I love the hats.”

Efran fell back in his chair to cover his eyes.

In the midst of this, Towner entered from the back room to salute, glancing around at the tableau. “Captain Towner reporting, Commander Wendt. We’re ready for the Captains’ briefing, whenever you’re free,” he said tentatively.

Wendt stood. “Yes, I’m on my way.” Viglian stood as well, gathering his notes.

As Barr led Wendt out from behind his desk, Efran stood to salute. “Thank you for your time, Commander,” he said sullenly. Minka beamed, but in respect of Efran’s bruised feelings, did not kiss the Commander.

Outside, Efran lifted her onto Kraken’s back, and they turned south down Main toward the old switchback. The western residents on the Lands continued to use the original switchback, but the families and businesses in the eastern section made use of the new one. Efran was pleased to note that construction on the new, larger chapel was nearly complete, and that of the new inn well underway. It was quite large, sprawling over six plots now.

On the trek up the switchback, they heard Cudmore, on courtyard gate duty, whistling “Whoopsie Daisy”—a song that only old-timers from Westford would know. Hearing it for the first time in years, Efran was both comforted and saddened, for it called to mind men who had been friends and tutors to him, now long gone. *They played such a large part in shaping me*, he mused.

And Therese whispered, *In Your book were written the days that were formed for me, every one of them, when as yet there was none of them.* [Ps. 139:16] Raising his face to the white fortress above, he realized, *I am a character in a story. How good a character I am depends on my faithfulness to the rôle the Author wrote for me.*

He lowered his eyes to the road in front of him to think about this.

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Chapter 22

Arriving in the courtyard, Efran lifted Minka down from Kraken's back and thanked his men for their company. As he slapped Kraken's haunches, he said, "You can go put yourself back in your stall, now that you've destroyed the door."

Minka said, "I want to go around back and check on Joshua."

"Yes," he agreed, taking her hand to walk her around the western side of the fortress. Kraken complacently followed.

On the back grounds, they spotted Joshua rolling in the dirt with Nakam under the care of Tourle and Willis, who considered it good clean fun. "Oh, dear. He needs a bath before we can even take him in," Minka murmured.

Efran snorted, "Women," adding, "If you'll go fetch him clean wraps, I'll bathe him out here." He nodded to the men's bath house. "Oh—take Justinian's letter up to DeWitt and Estes, if you would." He retrieved it from his pocket to hand it over.

"Of course," she said, taking it. (Neither of them remembered that they weren't supposed to share it with anyone else.) She had started to move off when the fight instructors, with their men behind them, approached Efran to salute. Efran turned to them and Minka paused to watch.

"Lieutenants Wyeth and Nyland reporting for discipline, Captain," Wyeth said.

Efran glanced over the men—all those behind the lieutenants were Polonti. "I haven't ordered anyone disciplined."

Stiffly, Wyeth said, "We betrayed you and almost killed you, Captain. We submit ourselves for punishment." He kept his eyes off *Moiwahine* Minka, though the knowledge of her presence made his eyes water.

Efran looked off, exhaling, "If you are due punishment, then I am as well--I fell under De'Ath's influence just as you did. We do not punish men beaten in battle, and we do not kill our wounded. Dismissed."

Glancing at Minka, he resumed walking over to Joshua. She headed for the back door, looking over her shoulder at the fight instructors with their ranks. The leaders exchanged a few words, then gestured the men to the sparring grounds.

As Wyeth took up his position at the head of his group, he looked at Minka far across the grounds at the back door. She smiled in relief, then went in to find Joshua some clean clothes. Kraken went over to drink out of the gardeners' large water bucket.

After bathing Joshua, Efran was redressing him in the clothes Minka had brought when a large, rough Polonti appeared on the back grounds, looking around. He was a warrior cut of ancient cloth, seeming to have stepped onto the hilltop from a thousand years ago.

Work was suspended as everyone stared at him; the sparring groups and archery practice came to a dead halt with the men standing at attention. The warrior saw them all, but his gaze passed over them to fix on the Polonti with white hair. Before Efran had seen him, he began stalking over to him.

Kraken, nostrils flared, thundered over to rear up before the mighty man in warning. Efran's head jerked up and he threw an arm in front of Minka. The foreign Polonti spoke to Kraken in the Old Tongue and the horse stilled, trembling slightly.

Stepping around him, the warrior saluted Efran. "Kirill is sent from Sasany Fields, Captain Efran. The prisoner Wyse receives corrective training and has done ten days."

Efran absorbed this. "Wyse has been at Sasany Fields ten days now?"

"That is yes, Captain Efran," Kirill said.

"Is he alive?" Efran asked hesitantly.

"That is yes, Captain," Kirill said.

"Ah. Very good. I want you to give this report to my administrators; they may have questions," Efran said.

He looked over to whistle to the nearest Polonti, who ran over to salute. "Ley reporting, Captain."

Efran said, "Ley, this is Kirill from Sasany Fields. Take him up to DeWitt and Estes, please."

"Yes, Captain." Ley saluted again, then turned to the ancient prototype before him. "Follow me, if you will." Kirill replied by gesturing with a massive hand.

The moment they were on their way, Conte approached to salute Efran. "Captain, with your permission, I would like to question this man about practices at the Fields, to see what may be useful to us here."

"Yes, of course. Catch him after DeWitt and Estes are done with him," Efran said.

"Thank you, Captain." Conte turned to stalk the relic.

Efran looked after him, Kirill and Ley now entering the back door of the fortress. Bouncing Joshua lightly on his arm, he raised his brows at Minka. She observed, "You people are scary."

He laughed. "There you have the difference between domesticated Polonti and those in the wild. They're like a different species. I don't know that I'd survive what Wyse is going through right now."

After a moment, she said, "That may be the first time I've heard you call him 'Wyse' instead of 'Lyte.'"

He let down, sighing. "It's been hard to let go. I still can't understand why he did it. He must have really thought that with enough money, he could take the fortress. All our enemies—the human ones, anyway—have all believed that gold was the answer to everything."

Minka began, "Yes, and De'Ath even stole--" She stopped, gasping, "Oh, Efran! He had to have done something to the Librarian to get into the Treasury! Oh, I need to go check on him."

She turned as if to run to the back door, but he said, "All right; hold up; we'll go together." Efran hoisted Joshua to rest his heavy head on his father's shoulder, then walked with her to the lower corridor.

They entered the library, looking around in dismay at the darkness. The books were all here, in order, but the

lanterns on the wall were unlit and there was no sign of the Librarian. “Oh, how could I have not known that he was gone?” she wailed.

“If De'Ath hadn't disrupted Law lessons, you'd have known at once. I'll check to see if Soames can start them up again,” Efran said.

“But what happened to him, Efran?” she cried. He shook his head, and she turned toward the shelves, crying, “Oh, dear Librarian, where are you?”

Hearing a faint scuffling, she went silent and they both looked around. “Librarian?” she asked, and again there was a rustling above their heads. They looked up at a book barely inching out on a crowded shelf. “Efran!” she gasped.

“Wait, let me get the ladder,” he said. After placing Joshua on the floor, he brought over the rolling ladder. This he climbed almost to the top in order to reach a book on the highest shelf. It was a heavy book that he had to work free with both hands, but he got it out to bring it down the ladder. Although the lanterns were unlit, there was light from an upper window, as well as the corridor.

She came to his side to look at the title embossed on the leather cover: *Trial and Punishment*. While Efran held the book, she opened it to begin turning pages. About halfway through, there was an illustration of a prison cell—and in it was the Librarian, looking dolefully through the bars.

He was an old man again in a wrinkled suit. The caption below the illustration read, “Life Imprisonment as Decreed by Lord De'Ath.”

“No,” Minka gasped. “Oh, no! Librarian, how do we get you out?”

He barely shook his head, and they faintly heard, “I regret that passing through the doorway is irreversible, Lady Minka.”

“No,” she said firmly. “I will not accept that. There must be a way to free you.” She stepped back to look at the books surrounding them. “Among all these valuable books, there *must* be the knowledge we need. There *must* be.”

“We'll find it,” Efran said. He placed the open book on the small table and picked up Joshua from the floor, where he had fallen asleep. “I'll be right back,” he said, turning out.

Minka sat at the table to keep the Librarian company, and Efran did return only a few minutes later. He had brought a candle, with which he lit the lanterns. “I left Joshua in the nursery and summoned Ryal. Now—didn't you make a list of books and subjects here?”

“Yes,” she said, pointing. “It's in that large folder lying crossways on the bottom shelf.”

So while they waited on Ryal, Efran got out the folder with the list of books to begin scanning it. Every now and then, he went to a shelf to pull out a book and flip through it, then replace it.

When Ryal finally came to the door to look around in bemusement, Minka fell on him to tell him the problem, and Efran showed him the open book of *Trial and Punishment* which imprisoned the Librarian. She pleaded, “Ryal, there *must* be a way to get him out; in all these wonderful books, there *must* be an answer for us.”

“Here’s the list of books and topics that Minka and the Librarian made,” Efran said, showing him the folder.

Taking the folder, Ryal sat at the small table with Minka and the Librarian, bound in the book. They were quiet as Ryal studied the inventory line by line. Minka watched anxiously while Efran sent a message up to Estes and DeWitt to tell them what had happened.

Finally, Ryal laid the sheets aside. “I don’t see anything that will help us here.” Minka was opening her mouth to protest when he asked, “Does this list include the books in the hidden library?” He nodded toward the secret door.

“No,” Minka said. “We—the Librarian and I—talked about bringing those books out, but we never did. And most of the time, it’s too dark back there to inventory them.”

“Well, it’s time to bring them out, then,” Ryal said. He stood to push the scallop on the revolving shelf unit while Efran went to the outer door to whistle.

Three men appeared at once, and Efran said, “Ryal will show you what to do.”

Looking back from the open door, Ryal said, “Yes, I need all the books in this secret room brought out.” Though the secret room was no longer much of a secret.

“Yes, Lord Ryal,” Teschner said as he, Pleyel and Leneghan darted into the room to bring out armloads of books which they left in short stacks on the floor of the outer library.

“That’s it, Captain,” Pleyel said, saluting.

“Thank you. Dismissed,” Efran said, and they departed with salutes.

Ryal spent the next hour skimming those books, smiling in remembrance at one or two passages. But when he had gotten through them all without exclaiming, “*Aha!*” Minka looked sick with despair. He proposed, “Let us clear these away from the middle of the floor,” and the three of them moved the piles to stand temporarily against the bookshelves.

Ryal was thinking all the while, however, looking back at the hidden library once or twice. Finally, he said, “Efran, I need a few more lights.”

Efran stepped back into the corridor again to whistle and give another order. Shortly, two lanterns, both lit, appeared at the door. Efran walked one over to Ryal while hanging on to the other. “Show me,” he said.

“Close the door to the corridor,” Ryal instructed. Efran did, then Ryal said, “Come.” Efran went with him into the hidden library and Minka jumped up to follow.

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Chapter 23

Raising his lantern in the dense darkness, Ryal said, “We may need the ladder.” Efran went out to roll it one-handed into the dark room.

Then Ryal just walked around the room, looking. He pressed one or two random scallops along the shelves, which did nothing. Then he looked up to the ceiling. Mounting the ladder, he raised the lantern to look at the white ceiling. It was a dome, like the foyer ceiling, but there was a geometric design painted on this one.

The outline of a gold square encompassed the recessed center of the dome. In the center of the square, at the highest point of the dome, was a golden ball about eight inches in diameter. On the outside of each corner of the square were four smaller squares. In the center of each of these was a golden ball about four inches in diameter.

Ryal murmured, “Unusual design, isn’t it, Efran? You don’t see anything else like it in the fortress, do you?”

“No,” Efran said. “What does it mean?”

“That something unique is here,” Ryal said. “I’m remembering many years ago, when I was about Minka’s age, old Father Widdicombe took me on a tour of this fortress to show me many of its features. That’s when I learned of the Treasury and this hidden library, by the way,” he noted, glancing down at Efran. “This—aspect of the room was on the tail end of our tour, however, so he just pointed out the design as we were leaving. And he said, ‘That’s the draw down’--or something to that effect.

“I wasn’t clear on what he meant, but rather than ask him right then, I decided to check with him about it later—it had been a comprehensive tour, and he was tired. So I didn’t detain him with another question. He died that night,” Ryal said wryly. Both Efran and Minka were looking up at him on the ladder. The wavering lantern light played over his wrinkled face, and less distinctly over the golden geometric elements.

“So, over sixty years passed before I even remembered this feature,” Ryal said, studying the designs again. “‘That’s the draw down.’ Something you draw down.”

Setting the lantern on the top of the ladder, he reached up to the center ball to pull with both hands. It didn’t budge. “That will not simply be drawn down, else it could accidentally fall over time. So there must be more to it.” With that, he tried turning the center ball clockwise.

It turned. Ryal continued to rotate it, but there was no downward movement. He stopped, reconsidered, then tried rotating it counterclockwise. It rotated freely in that direction as well. But again, no matter how long he turned, there was no lateral movement of the ball. Silently, he studied the design.

He handed the lantern down to Efran and said, “You see the four corner balls, which must be accounted for. They must serve a purpose in the draw down.”

While Efran stood underneath the design, angling the lantern up to illumine it, Ryal reached over to one corner ball. This sat about eight inches lower than the center ball, and on a common plane with the other three corner balls. Experimentally, he pulled on it. “No, simply pulling on one corner ball makes no sense; whatever is done with one must be likewise done with the other three,” Ryal said.

Again experimenting, he attempted to rotate the ball clockwise. It held firm, so he tried rotating it counterclockwise. It turned, and Minka caught her breath: it was not merely spinning as the center ball had. Ryal

continued to rotate the ball until it detached from an inner mechanism without falling off its center pin. “What have we here?” he murmured. “Let us try the other three.”

Efran rolled the ladder for Ryal to reach the other three corner balls. Rotating these counterclockwise disengaged them as well. “Now,” Ryal murmured, “we have done something with all four corners. But what?”

At this point he descended the ladder. “Efran, I’m going to let you try the next step, as it may require more arm strength than I can produce. Also, you may fall off the ladder.”

“I’ll risk it,” Efran said, climbing. “Should I try drawing down on the center ball?”

“That’s what I’m thinking,” Ryal said, stepping away. “Take care: it may be both heavy and hard to draw down.”

“All right.” Gauging his distance from the center ball and the corners, Efran reached up both hands to get a good grip on the large ball. He pulled down, and the whole section delineated by the gold lines separated from the ceiling. This included the corner squares with the smaller gold balls, which now looked like feet on a tower that was mostly recessed in the ceiling. About ten inches of the structure was now visible below the opening.

“Books,” Efran said. “I’m looking at a—square tower of books. They’re on each side of the tower, spines facing out.” When he put his hands on the tower, he almost fell off the ladder. Minka gasped, reaching for him. But he caught himself, adding, “And it rotates.”

Since he was right up against the partially drawn tower, he pushed back on the ladder, rolling away to be able to draw the tower down farther, which exposed more books. They were lined up on short shelves, each no more than ten inches long on one side, or forty inches all around one level. Pulling one more time brought the corner balls down to where Ryal could reach them. When the tower was fully lowered, it locked into place with the corner balls resting on the floor, and Efran climbed down the ladder.

Ryal and Minka began examining the books by lantern light. The highest shelf was at Efran’s eye level. “Ah,” Ryal said. “Here are the extremely rare and valuable volumes.” He slowly turned the tower, which soundlessly rotated so that he could view all spines without walking around it.

“Yes, many important works of theology and philosophy. And here—aha,” he said.

“You found something. What?” Minka asked, leaning over to look.

Ryal pulled out a small volume and held it up for her to see the title: *The Rôle of the Librarian*. “Let us take this over to the table and have a look.”

The three of them went back into the main library. They brought the two lanterns, as the outer door remained shut. Since the high window allowed in waning daylight, four lanterns were sufficiently bright for reading.

Efran stood by while Ryal and Minka sat at the small table. She looked down in the open book to tell the Librarian, “We found a hidden tower of books, and one of them is on *The Rôle of the Librarian*.”

“Really, Lady Minka? It has been a very long time since I last saw that book,” he replied in a stronger voice.

“We’ll see what Ryal finds,” she said intently.

Efran went to the door to speak to someone outside, then closed it and returned to stand by the table. After a bit

of searching, Ryal sat up and read aloud: ““The Librarian has the power to open the book of his choice as a doorway to the realm embodied therein. One who enters such a doorway may not exit again unless the doors are broken. Breaking the doors releases anyone who has entered a book.””

He read for a little longer, then looked up to ask, “Who all else has been confined to a book?”

“Alberon,” Minka said, looking up to Efran.

The Librarian replied, “And the three who attempted to rob the Treasury during the insurrection, Lady Minka.”

“Four, besides the Librarian,” Ryal said. Looking back to Efran, he asked, “In order to free the Librarian, are you willing to release these criminals?”

Efran thought about that, then said, “One moment.” He went out into the corridor, shutting the door behind him.

He was gone for a long time, so that Minka became agitated. “He will. Of course he will!” she insisted—mostly to herself, apparently. So when Efran finally came back in, closing the door behind him, she jumped up. “Well?” she cried.

He looked at her in vague surprise, then told Ryal, “Go ahead and release them.”

“Yes,” she exhaled victoriously, sitting again.

Ryal said, “First, we need to pull out the other books that were doorways.”

Both Minka and Efran looked up to the shelves. “Alberon is in Book Three of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*,” Efran said, scanning rows of books.

Looking at the inventory, Minka said, “Third row from the top, second section.”

Efran reached up for that volume and put it on the floor. “What book are the other three in? Did they all go in the same book, or different ones?”

Minka looked down to the Librarian, who replied, “The three entered *Treasures of Ancient Civilizations* together, Lord Efran. That is in the fifth row from the top, first section.”

She looked up to Efran at the shelves, who said, “Got it. Now what, Ryal?” He put that book on the floor by the other, and Minka moved the Librarian’s book to the floor as well.

Ryal closed his book. “Well, it appears to be fairly simple. But you’ll have four criminals on your hands immediately, Efran.”

“All right,” Efran said, smiling.

“Then here goes.” Ryal sat up to instruct, “*Aperire fores.*”

Three books simultaneously exploded in the room. Alberon was ejected out of one, DePew’s professional robbers Protch, Rugg, and Owsin fell out of another, and the Librarian stepped out of the third. While the humans (and semi-human) were dazed, the Librarian was spreading to his full form and power. Minka cried, “Oh, Librarian, I’m so glad to see you!”

“Thank you, Lady Minka,” he said, bowing. “And I am deeply grateful to you, Lord Efran, and you, Lord Ryal, for your most gracious help.”

“You earned it,” Efran said, glancing at him. But his attention was on the other four struggling up from the floor.

Alberon looked around, blinking. “I’m back in the library,” he whispered. “It was all a dream. A nightmare. But I’m back.” He looked at Efran to repeat vindictively, “I’m *back*.”

The three treasure hunters got to their feet, gazing around. Rugg said softly, “We’re out, too.” Spotting the Librarian, he sneered, “Your little razzmatazz didn’t work so well, did it? But now it’s us four against three white-haired old men and—a pretty young girl.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Efran said, opening the door. “Your transport team is here.”

“Oh?” Rugg jeered.

“Yes.” Efran stepped out to gesture, and Kirill appeared in the doorway, filling it. As he looked at the suddenly slack-faced men, Efran pointed out, “Those three, and the almost human faerie there.”

Sweating, Rugg whispered to his buddies, “He’s big, but there’s only one.”

As Kirill entered the room, two more just like him came in, one at a time. One of them spoke to Kirill in Polonti, and he pointed out the four that they were to take. So this man walked over to grasp Alberon and Rugg by their collars, and the other Polonti took hold of Protch and Owsin. All four were as limp as overcooked pasta.

“Our team readies to leave, Captain,” Kirill said.

Ryal said, “Now? It’s very late in the day to start out.”

“We trek long, Lord Ryal,” Kirill said.

Reluctantly, Efran added, “One more thing. I’m afraid you can’t use them for slave labor, Kirill. Our Law forbids it.” As the captives were choking on their own collars, the great Polonti relaxed their hold on them.

“No slaves, Captain. We pay good for work,” Kirill said.

“Oh, you do,” Rugg said, bordering on a sneer. Breathing again, he now had hopes that these apelike Polonti who couldn’t even talk right should be easy marks.

“Yes, one royal each *pule*,” Kirill said.

The three treasure robbers looked at each other, shrugging. “A royal a day. Not half bad,” Owsin admitted.

“You stupid fools; a *pule* is a week!” Alberon hissed, stroking his tender throat.

“Work is easy. You work for women,” Kirill said.

“We’d be working for the women?” Protch asked, wetting his lips. They’d all seen Felice and Tisi at one time or another, and—well, Polonti women were mighty fine looking.

“That is yes. Easy work. And only swatches,” Kirill said.

The treasure robbers glanced at each other. “Sounds all right,” Rugg admitted, trying not to look eager.

Alberon bared his teeth. “Lord Kirill, I am pleased to offer myself as overseer for these ignorant Southerners. They have no idea what you’re talking about, but I do, and I can make them work.” Alberon winked.

Kirill faintly smiled, and the other two Polonti almost grinned. Kirill said, “Women with swatches make them work. Stings like bees. And women are strong.” He flexed his massive bicep in illustration. “But no fear, Captain—swatches leave no marks. So, no torture! All good.” He bared his teeth in a smile that looked just like Melchior’s imitation of Efran’s heart-fluttering smile. So Minka almost fell off her chair laughing.

“I’m convinced,” Efran said. Seeing that the Polonti were watching her in delight, Efran was ready to get them gone. “*Mahalo*, Kirill. Gorst, Hoen,” he said. They saluted him and dragged out their prisoners.

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Chapter 24

The following morning, after falling over Kraken on the floor beside the bed, Efran helped Minka bring down everything of hers from the third-floor room--although she transported the makeup secretly, unwilling to throw it away but more unwilling for him to see it. She wore the copper bracelet constantly after discovering that bunching her sleeve up under it made it stay on her arm. Previous to that, there were moments of blind panic when she lost it on the back grounds. All the children had to help her look for it, and Alcmund found it camouflaged in the cast-off leaves on the orchard floor.

She and the Librarian began the task of cataloging and shelving the books from the hidden library in the main room (which took days to complete). However, he thought it best to keep the tower books where they were. Minka listed these as well, leaving that inventory in the hidden room. None of the titles was familiar to her, and some not even comprehensible. “They must be very deep,” she murmured.

“Some are, yes, Lady Minka. But some are simply not for casual eyes,” the Librarian said. She accepted that, and after she had left the library that day, he returned to the tower to extract three small books, finely bound, by Lord Showalter. When the Librarian incinerated these three and two other books that he found to be of a darkly esoteric nature, the air in the hidden library smelled cleaner, fresher. No one knew that the destruction of these five books shut the door by which De'Ath had entered the fortress. And their presence on the inventory was erased.

But the Librarian kept in his pocket the book on *The Rôle of the Librarian* until he had memorized every line in it. Thus he discovered that with tedious effort, the broken doors could be repaired and used again. In the event that Lord Efran required them again, this is what the Librarian set himself to do, in his spare time.

Meanwhile, the tower of books remained lowered and accessible in the hidden library. This also meant that the opening in the ceiling above the tower remained. After the Librarian had left, and the hidden room was all dark again, a long nose inquisitively sniffed down around the gap in the ceiling.

While Minka was out back with Joshua, Nakam, and the children, Efran was in the workroom with DeWitt and Estes, talking over recent events. DeWitt said, “Well, we just got another report from Crescent Hollow—Sughrue has been proclaimed Surchatain, and already appears to be mobilizing.”

“With an eye east, no doubt,” Efran said—toward the Abbey Lands.

“Yes,” DeWitt admitted. “But, here’s one thing we discovered, Efran: we—at least, I—have always been too quick to order evacuations when we were attacked from within. But it appears that each time, we’ve discovered that our greatest strength is here, and we need to fight from here.”

Efran looked over to Estes, who agreed. “I found the Polonti *Code of Justice* right behind me here—after Nakham told me to get it. He told me to study that, and the charter, both of which are right here. We have ever had what we needed in the Fortress.”

Efran flashed back, again, to the keep, where he had found strengthening time after time:

*For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from Him.
He only is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.*

He murmured, “So unless He tells us to go elsewhere, this is where we take our stand.”

DeWitt said, “I believe so, Efran.”

He stood pensively. “I need to go find Minka, then.” His administrators nodded, returning to their work.

At that time, Minka was watching the children from the bench under the walnut tree. Joshua had been designated home base in a game of tag, so had nothing more to do but sit in the grass to be the center of attention. While Mathurin and Tomer stood over him to ensue that home base did not become a battleground, Garrett, the head gardener, approached Minka.

She looked up at him, smiling. “You look a bit self-satisfied, Garrett,” she said teasingly.

“I am, and I’d like for you to come see why, Lady Minka,” he said, also smiling.

“I can hardly wait,” she said, standing.

“This way,” he gestured.

Pausing to wave at Joshua’s guardians (so they would know where she was going) she accompanied Garrett to a door in the glass wall of the conservatory. She stopped at once. “This is new.”

“Yes, it is,” he said, pleased. “The gardeners were unhappy with the long trek to get into the conservatory by the the door off the western corridor. So Gerard figured out how to stabilize the panes so as to create a door out of two of them here. With that, we’ve added some plants. Come see.”

He opened the glass door for her, and she entered on a floor of sand. She looked around at the orange, lemon, lime, and avocado trees, then down at pineapple plants, and-- "What is that?" she asked, pointing.

"Plantains, Lady Minka. A wonderful dessert fruit," Garrett said. "But we have some new plants I wanted you to see as well." Leading down a narrow corridor between lush greenery, he said, "Here."

Turning, she gasped at bright red plates with yellow spikes, and near them a large shrub with clusters of white, star-shaped flowers that smelled like heaven itself. Climbing a sturdy trellis was a vine with a profusion of deep pink flowers. Then there was a modest clump of gray-green leaves from which emerged a striking blue, orange and red flower that looked like a bird perching in the midst of the bush.

When she went over to this last one in a trance, Garrett introduced her to it: "Bird of paradise, one of our newest."

"This is amazing," she breathed. "As if God were playing around, just to show off."

"I can see that," Garrett agreed.

Efran then came in through the new glass door, glancing around. "Very nice, Garrett. I'm going to have a stern talk with the Destroyer and Symphorien before they come visit us again."

"I'd appreciate that, Lord Efran. Now please excuse me; I've got more in the works," Garrett said.

Assessing the tropicals, Efran muttered to him, "Careful; you're close to overdoing it." Garrett laughed in satisfaction as he left.

Minka lifted her arms to Efran's neck, but he looked first at her bunched-up sleeve. "Oh, good, you found a way to keep it on. I need to have Whately cut it down." This was the Abbey Lands jeweler.

"And mar the finish?" she said, offended. "I'll find other ways to wear it."

He gathered her up, breathing in the mingled scents of paradise around them. "Auber's nephew has succeeded him as Surchatain, and he's apparently looking this way," he murmured.

"Good luck to him," she said sardonically.

He drew back, laughing. "My, we're feisty. Garrett goes bananas with the plants, so you feel we can defy all odds."

"No, plantains," she said, pointing. "But haven't we? Look at all we've overcome. If God is for us, who is against us?"

Neither death, nor life, nor principalities, nor time, nor unknown dimensions can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. [Rom. 8-38-39]

"I know, Therese," he whispered. "I'm finding out. I know."

As she snuggled him, inhaling contentment, he observed, "You don't play with my hair anymore."

She looked up in surprise. He was just looking at her from under the longish hair that used to be glossy black, but wasn't anymore. Tentatively, she reached up to stroke his hair back from his forehead. "It doesn't feel any different," she murmured. "Now it's just glossy white . . . except, instead of blue undertones, it has silver. Not gray—silver."

She continued stroking it back from his face (as she had done Jehan's earlier), and he tossed his head lightly. "It still grows fast. I need to cut it."

"Not quite yet," she said, wincing, then took his fingers to lead him out of the conservatory by the door in the western corridor and through the foyer to their quarters. Behind her, he was smiling.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on May 14th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

NOTES:

"*Marie Antoinette syndrome* designates the condition in which scalp hair suddenly turns white. The name alludes to the unhappy Queen Marie Antoinette of France (1755-1793), whose hair allegedly turned white the night before her last walk to the guillotine during the French Revolution. She was 38 years old when she died. Although the actual incidence is rare, this stigmatizing phenomenon, which has captured storytellers' imagination like few other afflictions, occurs to protagonists as a sign of grave sorrow in religious texts as early as the Talmud. History also records that the hair of the English martyr Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) turned white overnight in the Tower of London before his execution. More modern accounts refer to the turning white of hair in survivors of bomb attacks during World War II." ["Marie Antoinette Syndrome"](#) in JAMA Dermatology

[Columbia University](#) researchers have discovered that with the removal of stress, it's possible for the hair to regain pigmentation.

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and De'Ath* (Book 20)

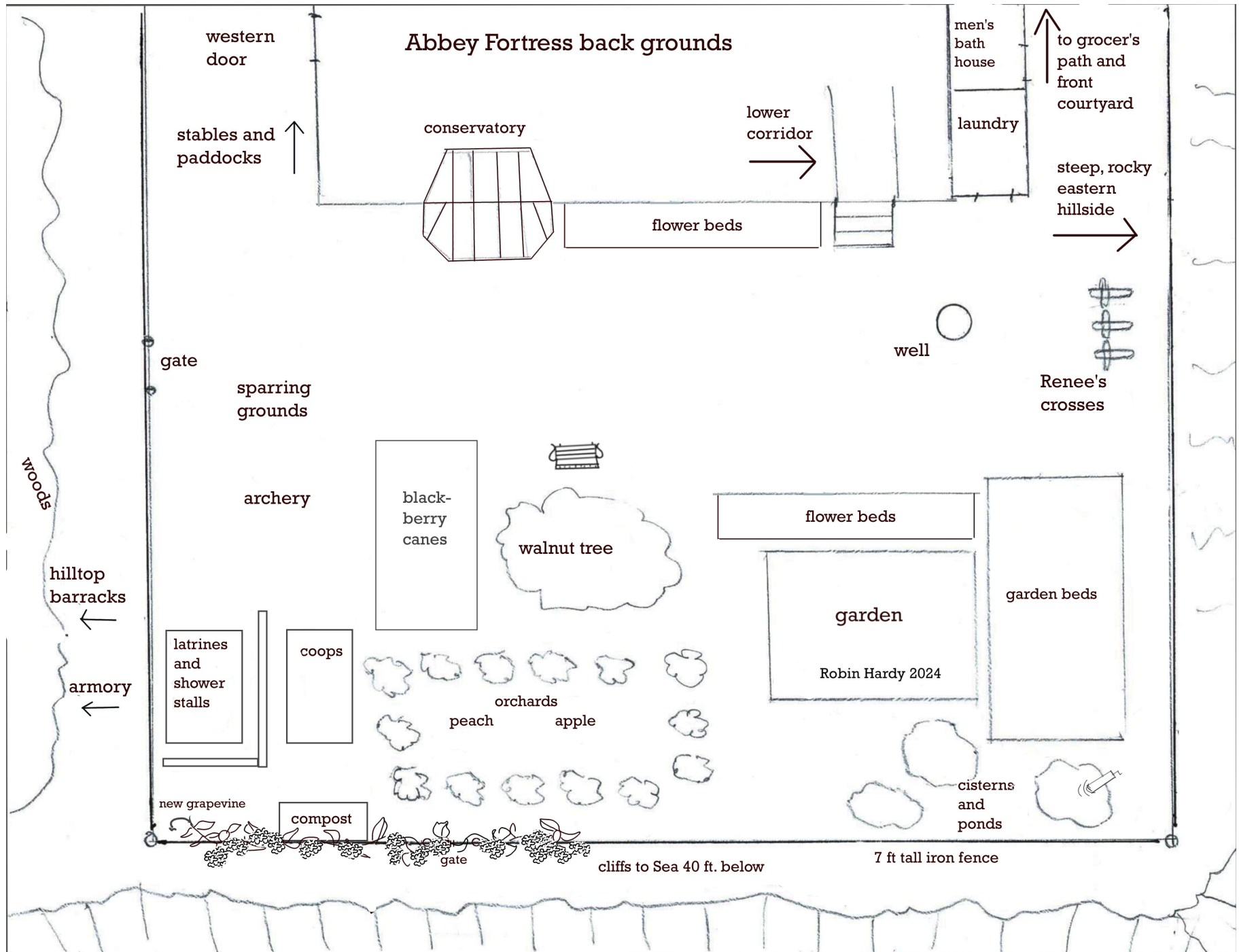
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Aceto—ah SEE tow	incognito—in kog NEE toh
Adele—ah DELL	Inglese—ENG lees
<i>aina</i> —AY nah	Ino—EE no
Alberon—AL ber on	insigne—en SIN yeh
<i>aperire fores</i> —ah PEER ee ray FORE es	Jasque—JAS kee
Arne—arn	Javier—JAY vee er
Auber—aw BER	Jehan—JAY han
Baldassare—BALL de sar	Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
Beischel—BESH ull	Justinian--jus TIN ee un
Bortniansky—bort nee AN ski	<i>kahea</i> —kah HAY ah (call)
Capur—KAH pir	<i>kala</i> —KAH lah (mercy)
Cennick—SIN ick (cynic)	<i>Ka Mea</i> —kah MAY ah (Maker of all, God)
Challinor—CHAL en or	<i>ka pono</i> —kah POH noh (justice)
Chataine—sha TANE	Kele—kay lay
Clonmel—KLON mell	Kelsey—KELL see
Clough—chloh	Kirill—KEER ill
connoisseur—kah neh SUR	<i>kolo</i> —KOH loh (trial)
Conte--cahnt	Koschat—KOS chat
Cyneheard—SIGN herd	Kraken—KRAY ken
Cyr--sear	Leneghan—LEN eh gan
D'Achille—dah CHILL	Ley—lay
De'Ath—dyath	Loghry—LOW gree
Delano—deh LAN oh	Loizeaux--lwah ZOH
détente—day TAHNT (cessation of hostilities)	Loseby—LOWS bee
Doane—rhymes with <i>own</i>	Madea—mah DAY ah
Dobell—DOH bull	<i>mahalo</i> —mah HAY loh (thank you)
Durgin—DUR gen (hard g)	Marguerite—mar ger EET
Efran—EFF run	Mathurin—mah THUR in
<i>Ei</i> —ee YIE (I)	Melchior—MEL key or
Elowen—EL oh win	Melott—meh LOT
Enon—EE nun	Milo—ME low
equine—EE kwine	Minka—MINK ah
Estes—ESS tis	<i>modus operandi</i> —MOH dis ah puh RAN dee
Eurus--YOUR us	Mogridge—MOH gridg
Eurusian--your uh SEE un	<i>moiwahine</i> —mo wa HEE nee (queen)
Eustace—YOUS tis	Molyneux—MOL eh new
Eymor—EE more	Mounoussamy—mawn AH sam ee
Felice—feh LEESE	Nighy—NIGH gee (hard g)
Folliott—FOH lee uht	<i>nopo</i> —NO poh (judgment)
Geibel—GUY bull	Onfroi—ON froy
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)	Peloponnesian—pell uh puh NEE zhuhn
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)	Pia—PEE ah
Goss—gahs	Pleyel—PLAY el
Graeme—GRAY em	Ploense--plonse
Hartshough—HART soh	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Heus—rhymes with the noun <i>use</i>	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Heye—HAY yuh	protégé—PROH teh zhay
Hoen—hone	<i>Puku</i> —POO koo (Steward)
<i>hopui</i> —HOPE we	<i>pule</i> —PYOO lay (a week)
<i>hupo</i> —HOO poh (idiot)	Quilicus—QUIL eh cus

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and De' Ath* (Book 20)

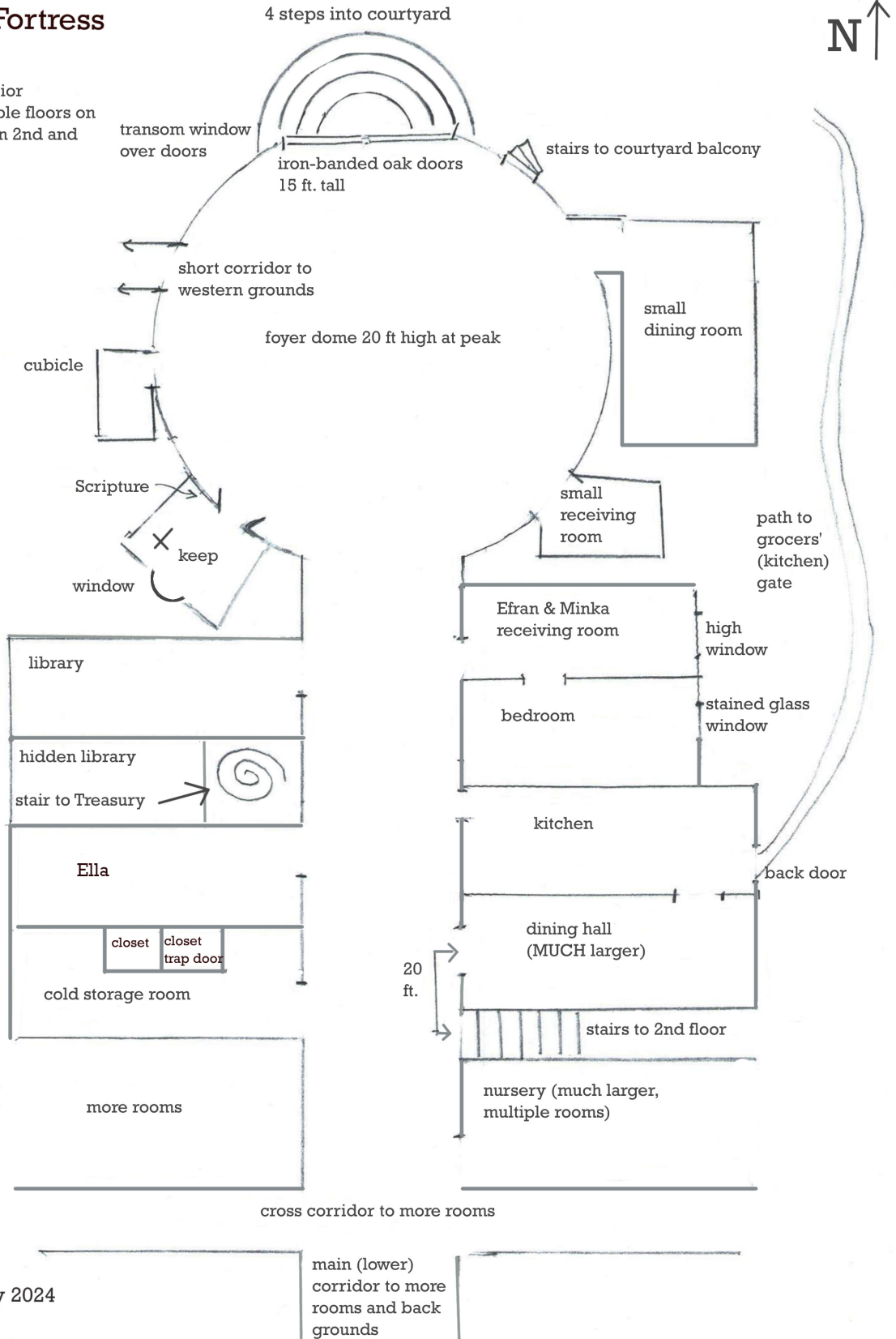
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Reinagle—REN ah gull
Ricci—REE chee
Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
Rowbotham—roh BOT uhm
Rowe—rhymes with *how*
Sasany—SASS an ee
Serrano—suh RAHN oh
soirée—SWAH ray
Stites--stights
Sughrue—SUE grew
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Sybil—SEH bull
Symphorien—sim FOR ee in
Takoda—teh KOH da
Telo—TEE low
Tera—TEE rah
Teschner—TESH nur
Theodulph—THE oh dulf
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Tiras—TEER us
Tisi—TEE see
Tomer—TOH mur
Tourjee—TUR jee
Trina—TREE nah
Vanidestine—van eh DES teen
Venegas--VEN eh gus
Venegasan--ven eh GAS un
Verlice—ver LEESE
Verrin—VAIR en
victuals—VIH tuhls
Viglian—VIG lee en
Vychan—VI kan
Whately—WOT lee
Wirrin—WEER en
Wyse—rhymes with *vice*
Wystan—WIS tan



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



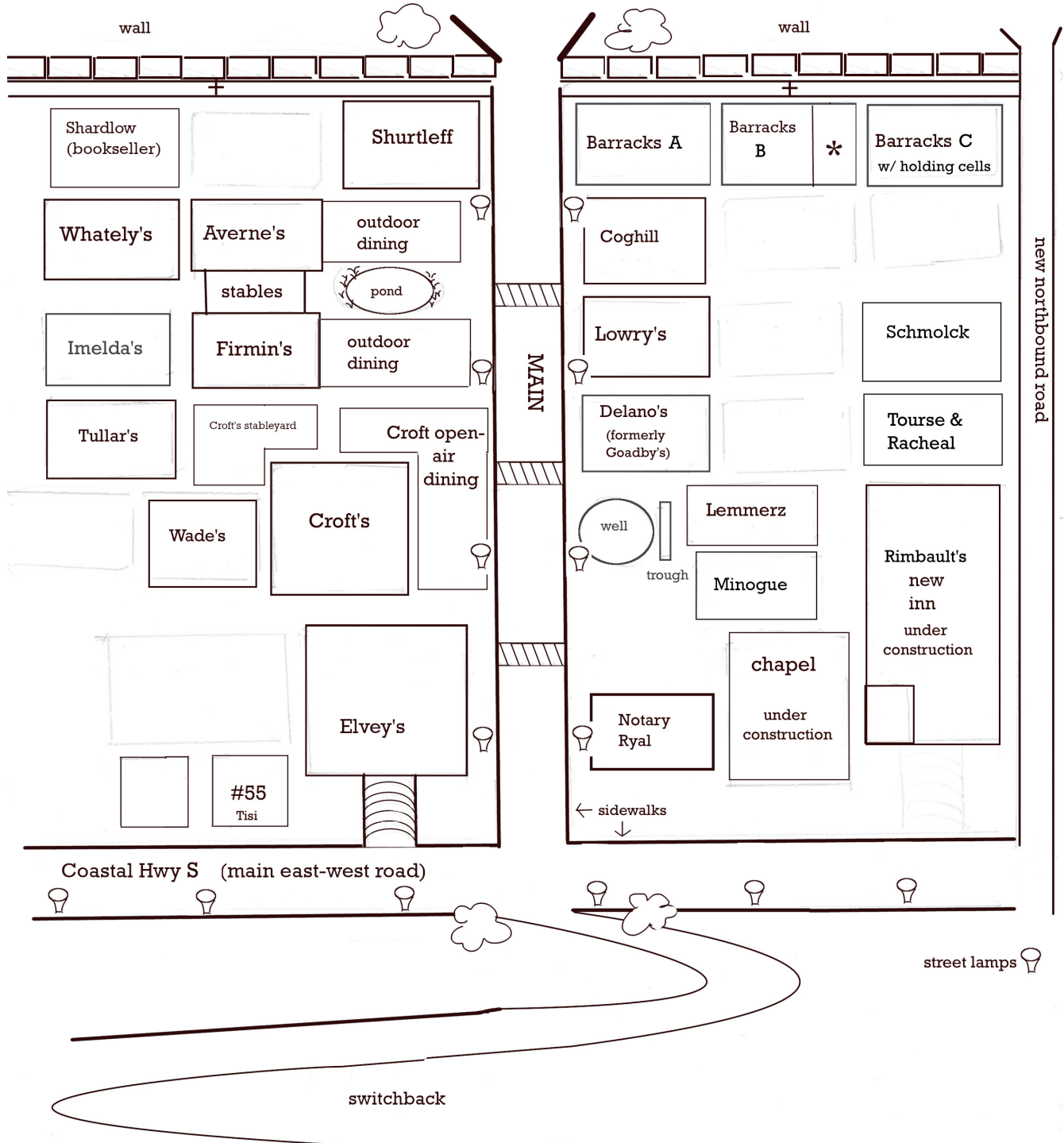
NOT TO SCALE

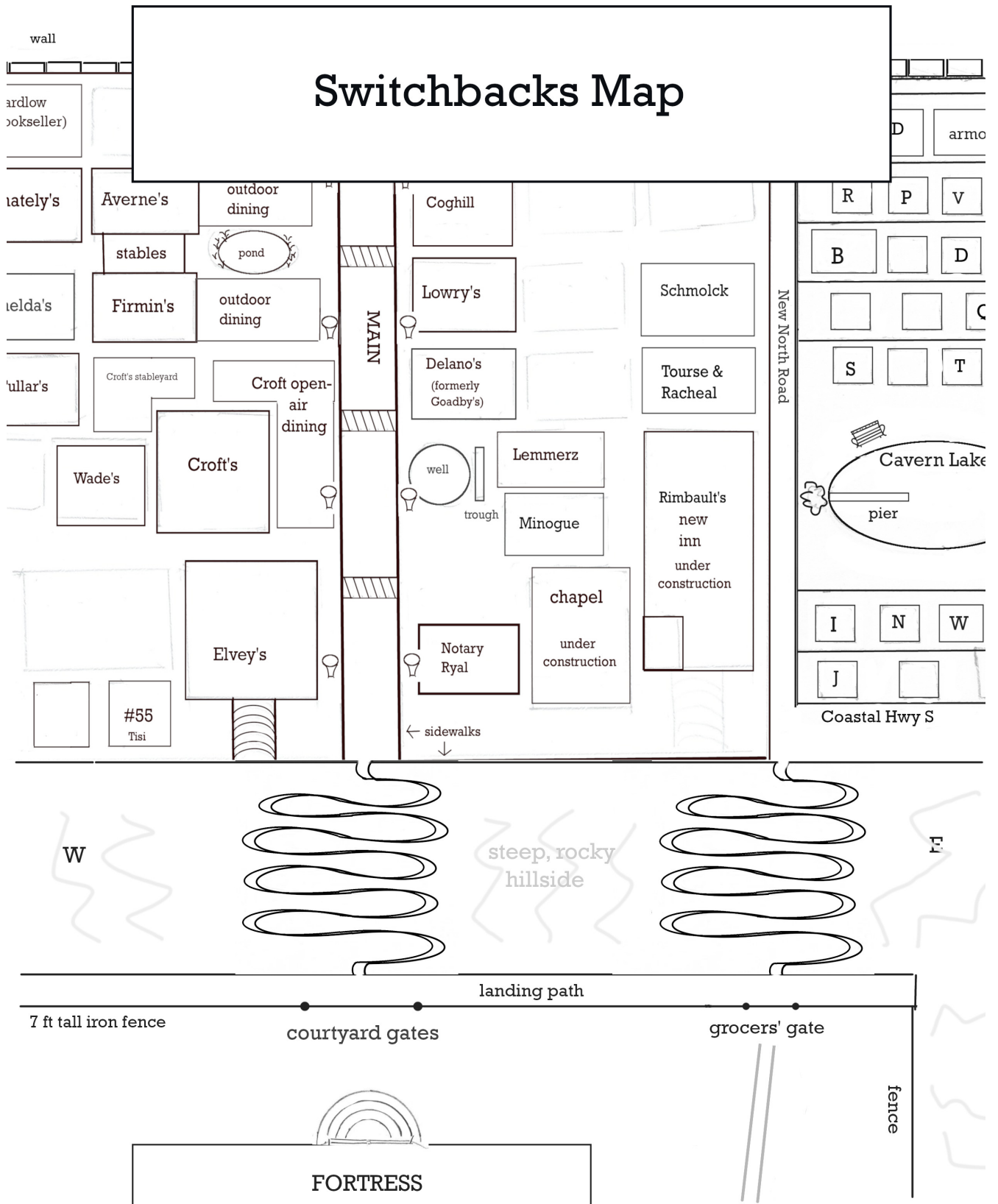
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Abbey Lands Main Road

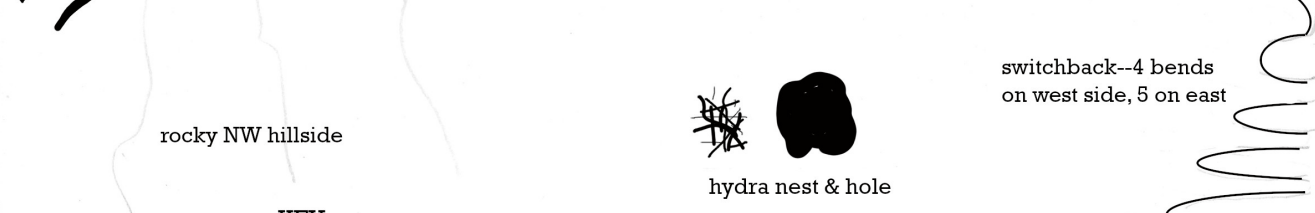
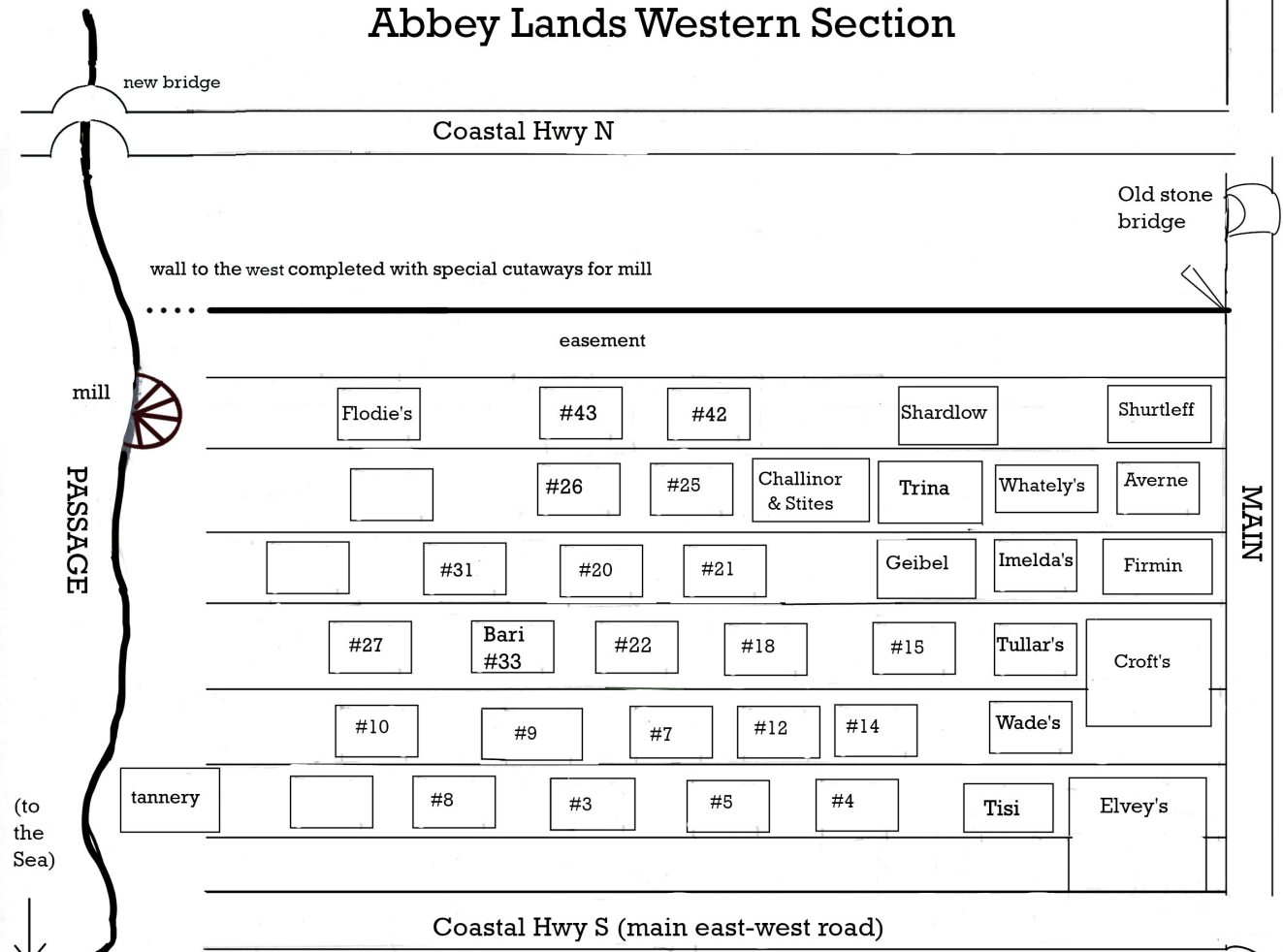
* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements



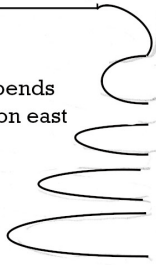
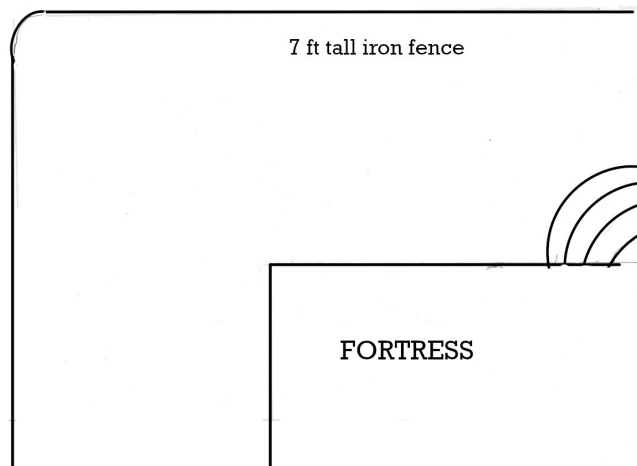


Abbey Lands Western Section



KEY

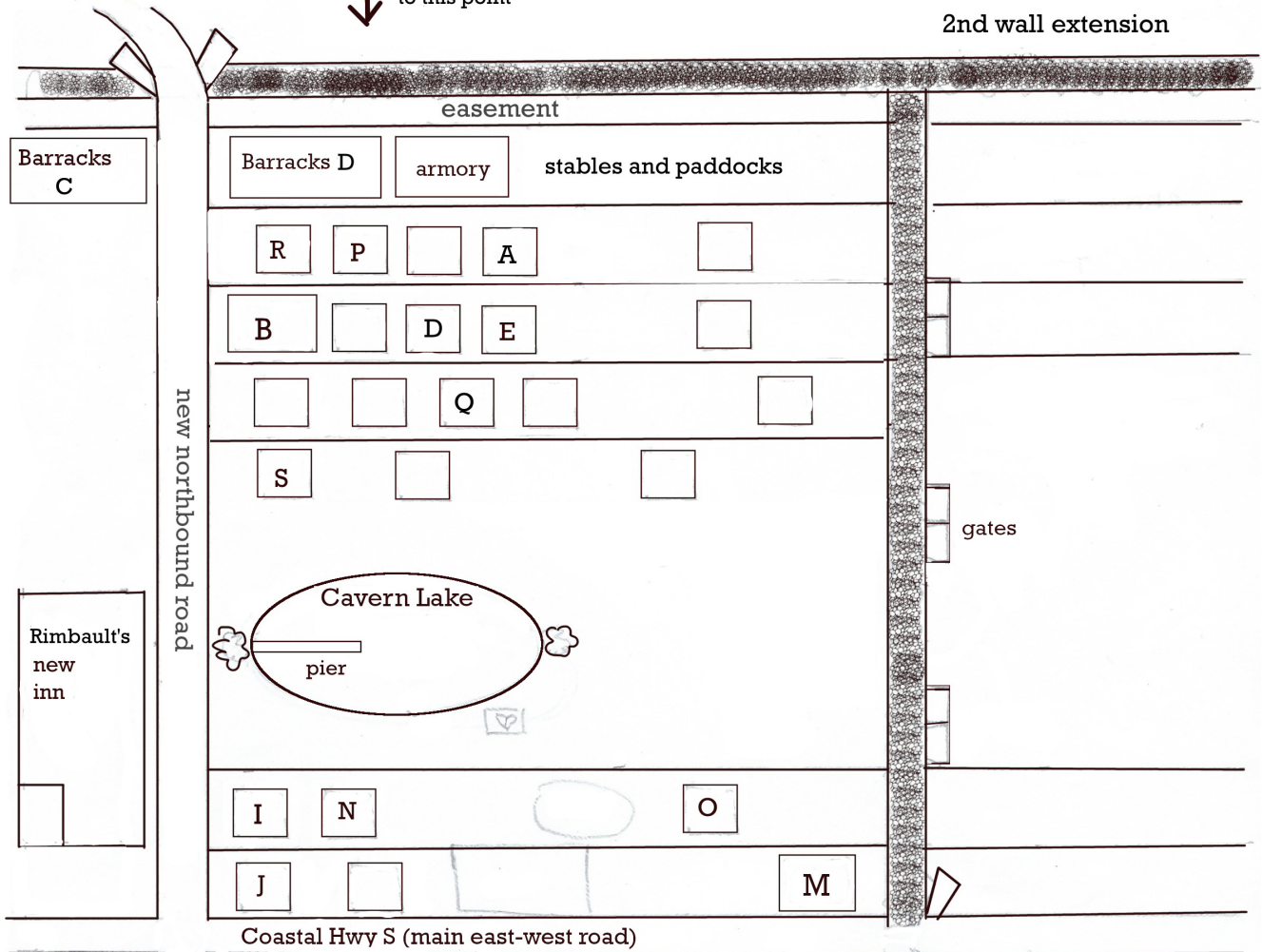
- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
- 43 - Dallarosa & Enon



road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

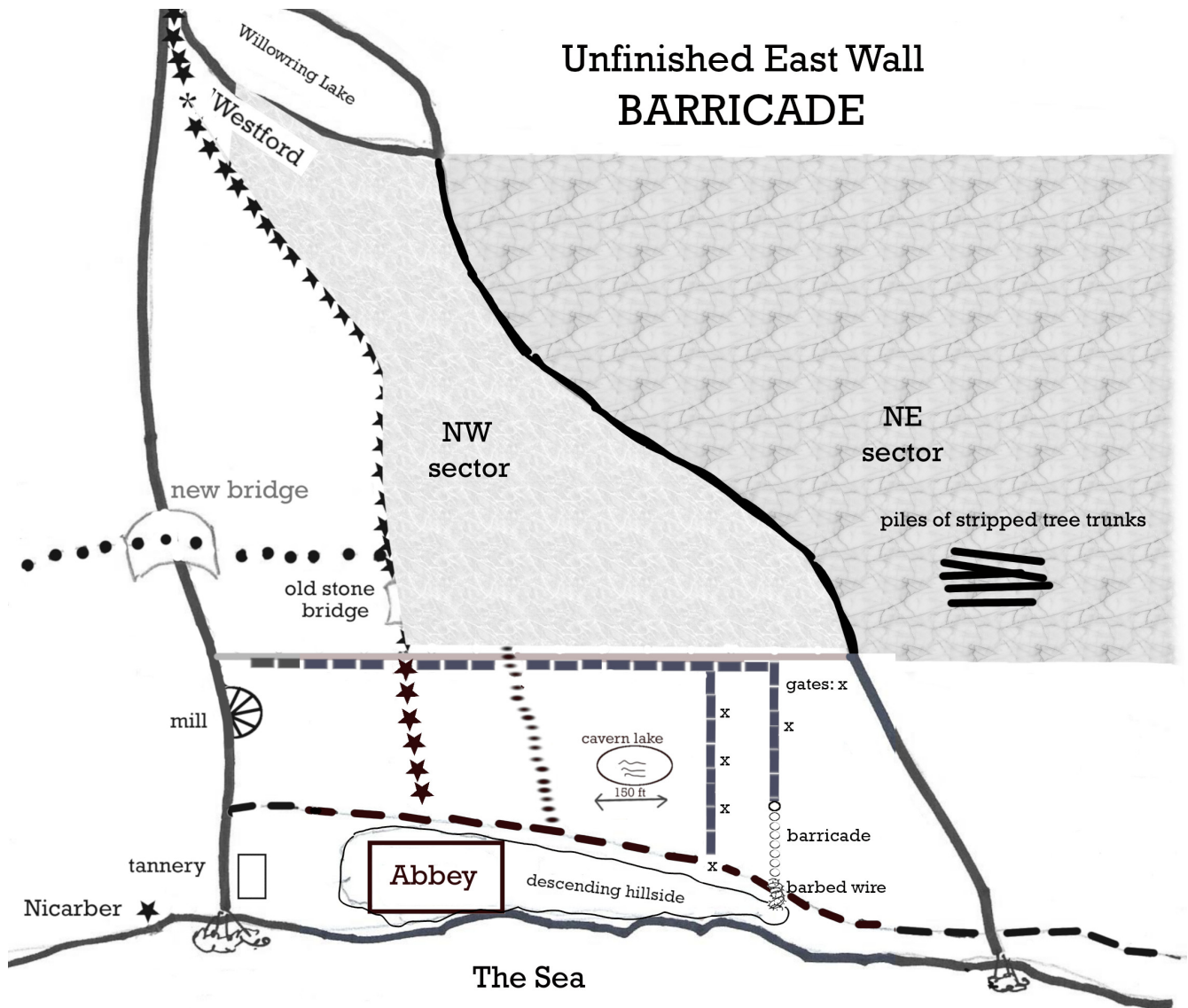
East Central Abbey Lands

↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point



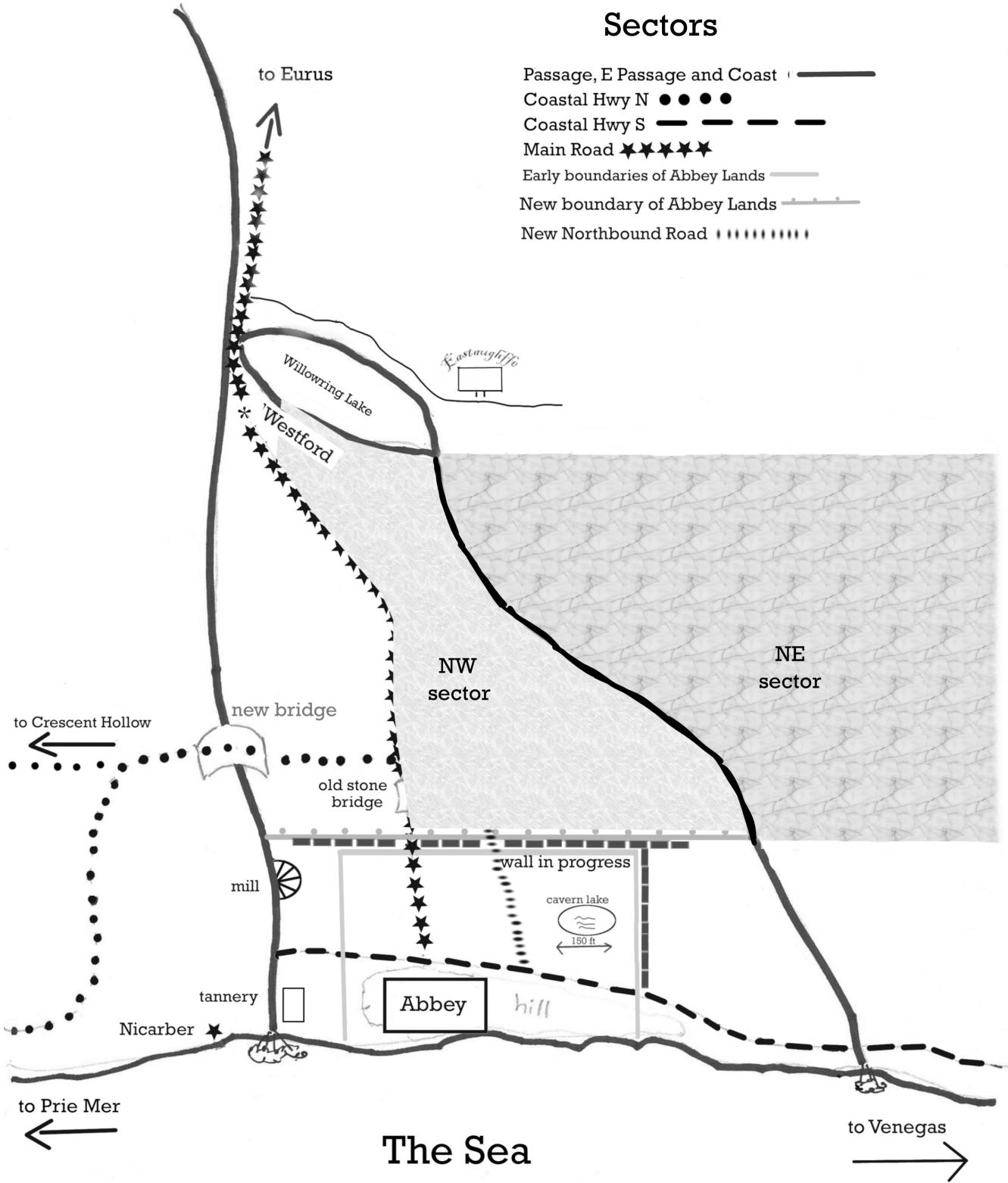
new switchback
to courtyard gates

- 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



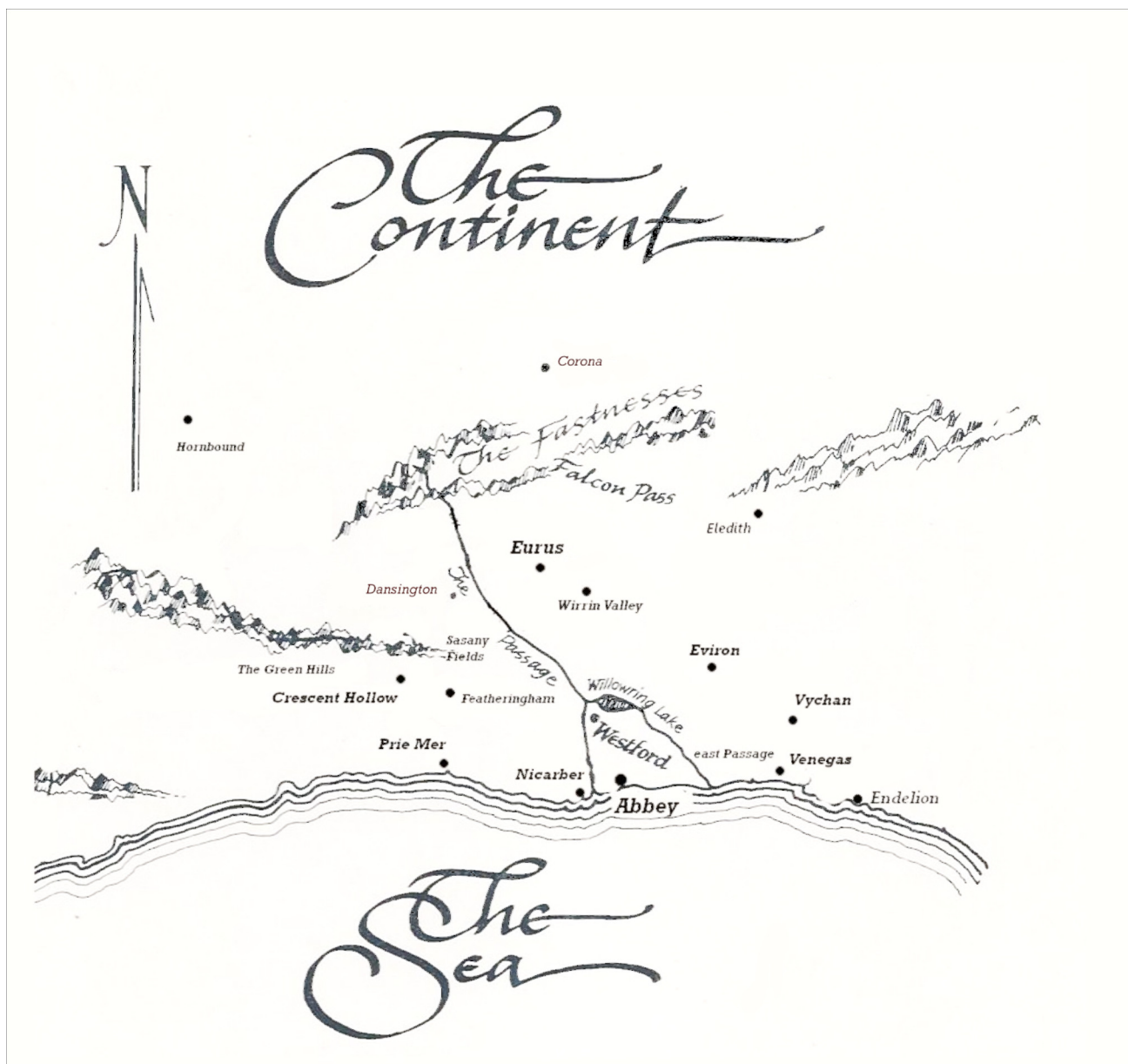
Sectors

- Passage, E Passage and Coast —————
- Coastal Hwy N ●●●●
- Coastal Hwy S - - - - -
- Main Road ★★★★★★
- Early boundaries of Abbey Lands ————
- New boundary of Abbey Lands ————
- New Northbound Road | | | | |



NOT TO SCALE

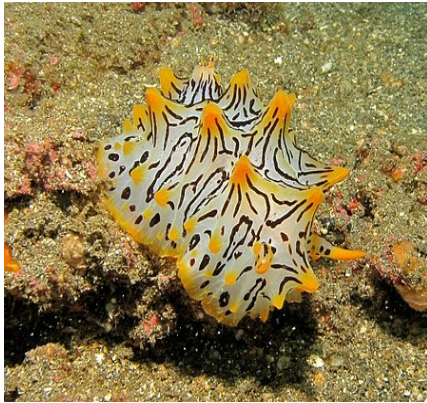
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The Mogridge (Book 20:
Lord Efran and De'Ath)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



Alrighty. Because I couldn't draw what I had envisioned for these creatures, I had to go online for images again, this time looking for blobs. And because I didn't want to draw from a [horror movie](#), I looked to nature. And fell in love with [sea slugs](#) like these:



But nothing I found looked anything like my Mogridge—until I ran across the Nudibranchia [here](#),¹ [here](#),² and [here](#).³ So I set out to make them work.

Their clawlike hands were actually from [EasyPeasyAI](#), which was a surprise.⁴ The handsome De'Ath was courtesy of [Pexels](#),⁵ and Estes came from [Freerange Photos](#).⁶ The shark teeth were supplied by mrpenguin on [Pixabay](#).⁷ The grove of trees was from a field near my apartment, and Estes' Polonti *Code of Justice* came from my library (titled something different, but never mind).

Robin Hardy
May 20, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on my illustration.

1. Photo by NOAA/Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute on Wikimedia Commons; cleaned up by [J J Messerly](#), which I very much appreciate.
2. Photo also by NOAA/Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute on Wikimedia Commons; also cleaned up by [J J Messerly](#)
3. Ditto the information above
4. It was a premade illustration that I did not create.
5. Photographed by [Balljinder Singh](#). I apologize for hacking off his mustache, but, Polonti.
6. Photographed by [Matt Bango](#)
7. [Lee Titone](#)