



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

*Book 28*

*Lord Efran and*  
*the Strawmen*

*Robin Hardy*

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

Book 28

## Lord Efran and the Strawmen

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## Chapter 1

“Here you are, sir—have a seat here on the middle section, and see how that suits you. Is it angled right?” Patting the center third of the stone bench, the Abbey Lands stonemason Ernst looked to Escarra for his opinion. The bench had been recut into sections to be transported down from the hilltop to the southeastern edge of Cavern Lake, where they now sat.

Escarra eased down without leaning back on the bronze plaque which read, “In memory of Escarra’s son Ashe, who gave his life to save a fellow scout on the 27th of October in the year 8155 from the creation of the world. ‘There is no greater love than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends.’” That had happened merely 11 days ago.

Looking around, Escarra said, “Yes, this is good—not too close to the water, or the metal tree, or the faerie tree, but I can see much of the Lands, and the new inn, and New North Road, and even the gates in the north wall there. Best, I can look over the trees across the Passage way over there to watch the sunset. Yes, this will work well. Thank you.”

He stood and moved aside so that Ernst’s laborers could unload the other two bench sections off their heavy-duty carts and roll them on logs to align them with the center piece. This required quite a bit of positioning and repositioning, but Ernst knew what he was doing, and gave directions to the laborers accordingly.

Meanwhile, fishermen around the lake looked over in easygoing curiosity. A few bystanders gathered to watch the work, even offering to help. Ernst declined politely, because the last thing he needed was inexperienced laborers dropping several hundred pounds of stone on someone’s foot.

Escarra’s young Eurasian friend Tambling came over with her father Gavitt to see the bench reconstruction in progress. She declared, “Oh, this is nice, Escarra, and our house is almost right behind you here! The nice man Rimbault gave us one of the best houses they have.” It was a gratifying gesture on Rimbault’s part, but the Fortress paid for it.

“Yes, he did, Tambling, and I’m most grateful for your taking me in,” Escarra told her and her father.

Gavitt said, “Now, Escarra, we’re the grateful ones—grateful and amazed to find you here with our Tambling, and the Abbey Lands’ lord so graciously giving us a house. But we came to tell you that the diggers from the plant shop are here, and they need to know where you want your garden. They’re going to turn the soil for you.”

Escarra peered at him. “They’re going to turn the soil for *my* garden? But—how—?”

“That’s something else the Fortress people are taking care of. Someone up there on the hill heard about your garden at home in Eurus, so they’re having the shop—ah, Dix’s Plant Shop—get you started on another,” Gavitt laughed in vague helplessness.

“Well I’ll—yes, I will come show them,” Escarra said, blinking. He, Gavitt, and Tambling then turned back to their house, which sat on the first street south of Cavern Lake.

Seeing a woman approaching from Chapel Road, however, Escarra paused. He told Gavitt, “There’s someone I



need to talk to, so, please tell the diggers to turn up soil anywhere along the back fence, to leave room for the children to play.”

“Very well,” Gavitt said, looking off distractedly at Tambling running ahead.

Meanwhile, Escarra walked back to catch Madgwick on Chapel Road. She drew up to say, “Hello, Escarra! Wystan gave me your message. I hope you’re well?”

“Yes, Madgwick; thank you. I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate your talking with me about Ashe—it’s been a great comfort to me. And, I wanted to ask you—when Delano had prayed over him as he lay dying, Ashe said—practically the last thing he said, was, ‘I see him.’ And I wondered if you had any idea who Ashe could have seen. It must have been someone special,” Escarra broached.

Taking his arm, she said, “Come walk with me around the lake and we’ll talk about that, Escarra.” So they two went on, and Ernst continued overseeing the bench reconstruction.

Shortly, the group of laborers and bystanders—as well as the fishermen at the lake—became aware of a woman’s strident voice shouting from thirty yards away: “There! There you are! Bullara! Where have you been?”

Upon the ominous approach of the Voice, the very large Bullara, who had been positioning the bench parts, dropped down behind the center section to compress himself so as to hide completely behind it. The other workers looked down in wonder at the contortions he achieved to make himself invisible. Incidentally, because the sage dye had begun to fade from his pink hair, he’d had it shaved down to spikes. But she apparently recognized him anyway.

Her substantial chest heaving from the exertion, Barrueta drew up to the gaping, motionless group of men. “Where did Bullara go?” she demanded. Eyes flicked furtively here or there, but no one answered right away.

So she grabbed the arm of the nearest man to shake him thoroughly as she repeated, “WHERE DID HE GO?”

When the man unwillingly glanced toward the center bench section, Ernst blurted, “I do believe he went back to the aqueduct digging.”

Barrueta turned to bore into him with her beady eyes. “Where is that?”

Immediately he and two other men pointed in widely divergent directions. “Basically all over, starting from behind the barracks and working east,” Ernst said, sweating. She squinted at him, but turned toward the most recent area of digging. She’d not seen Bullara there, only several trolls who called and waved to her.

However, another man, Ure, was approaching the group, carrying a message from Commander Wendt to Ernst regarding some stone work they needed done around the barracks. Seeing her, however, Ure stopped dead. He was the one that Barrueta originally latched onto at Lady Marguerite’s dinner a little over two months ago. And he did not wish to prompt her recall.

So Ure snatched at the jacket of young Tomer passing by, and gave him the message. Tomer obediently ran to Ernst to relay the Commander’s request while the great Ure, killer of four trolls who ambushed him alone on the road, hid behind a parked wagon to watch.

Meanwhile, in the fortress atop the hill, Efran had walked into the second-floor workroom to sit at his customary

chair and lean back to gaze up at the faerie tree with dull eyes. Estes and DeWitt immediately put down their quills. Estes asked, “How is Joshua?”

Efran turned his head slightly. “Still feverish. Wallace has him quarantined on the third floor. Minka is taking care of him, because she wouldn’t let anyone else do it.”

“She hasn’t caught the fever, has she?” DeWitt asked.

“Not that I know of, but they won’t let me in the room. I can only call to her. She sounds all right so far, just tired,” Efran said. He straightened a little to add, “They don’t know how he caught it, or even if it’s the same fever that went around Westford. Wallace doesn’t know anything right now. None of the other children are sick.”

Estes told him, “We sent down to Madgwick, asking her to pray for him.”

“Thank you,” Efran exhaled, closing his eyes. (Much later, they discovered that a young fortress maid whose father worked construction in Westford had stayed off work for two days with a bad headache. She was never sick, as far as anyone knew, but she’d given Joshua a drink of the fresh milk she’d been sipping. Wallace had quarantined him directly upon his first flush of fever. Minka, of course, had already had it. Efran had, too, for that matter.)

DeWitt took off his spectacles to clean them on his shirt, glancing a question to Estes, who reluctantly nodded. Then DeWitt said, “This may be a bad time, Efran, but—you know that we’ve been hearing about the rebuilding in Westford. It’s been phenomenal. Bortniansky has completed the new inn; I hear it’s very nice. They’ve named it ‘Lissa’s Palace.’”

Efran turned blank eyes to DeWitt, and he half-laughed, “Yes, ah, Lord Thurlow and Lady Lissa were the primary financiers for that as well as other projects in Westford. Her family had been Westfordians for hundreds of years before the Goulven crisis cleared everyone out. They’re determined to start over, and, want to form an alliance with us. Thurlow and Lissa should be down some time today.”

Efran abruptly got up and walked out. DeWitt winced, looking at Estes. “Did he and Lissa have a history?”

“In a way,” Estes groaned. “They never slept together, but, after Efran finally reconciled himself to the fact that Leila would never marry him, he fell hard for Lissa. She was kind of a precursor to Minka; they’re very similar in some respects—outgoing, charming, attractive without being wildly beautiful. Considerate and levelheaded. Yes, much like Minka. Only, Lissa was closer to Efran’s age, about a year younger than he. But her parents, being very wealthy, just nipped that right in the bud; froze Efran out completely, particularly her mother. Lissa didn’t defy them. They chose Thurlow for her, and, she apparently accepted him cheerfully.”

DeWitt sat back, exhaling. “We can’t snub them. We want their cooperation.”

“I’m afraid that’s going to fall to you, especially with Joshua’s illness,” Estes said.

“Were you acquainted with her?” DeWitt asked in vague hope.

“Just—secondhand,” Estes said uneasily. “Her family has the EurAsian mindset toward Polonti, which Thurlow must share. If we want an alliance with them, we need to put forward our Southerners,” he said frankly. DeWitt silently acquiesced, and they returned to their work.

However, in a rare oversight, Estes misconstrued Efran’s reaction. After leaving the workroom, the first thing

Efran did was send down to Commander Wendt to ask that scouts be sent north to apprise them of the lord and lady's movements. Then he drafted ten handsome and competent men—five Polonti and five Southerners—to gear up in their dress uniforms as an honor guard.

Following, he sent a man to reserve a luxury suite in The Lands' Best Inn for the couple. Then he asked Marguerite and Hartshough to host a light meal for them upon their arrival, at which he requested the attendance of Lady Marguerite, Commander Wendt, the Second Gabriel, Lord Ryal, Administrator DeWitt, Steward Estes, and Lord Justinian. (He had also asked Giardini to attend, but Ryal needed her to man the shop with Soames.) Finally, Efran went up to the vacant third-floor room to bathe in the waterfall and change into his dress uniform. The gist of all this was that Efran had something to prove.

While on the third floor, he paused at the door of Joshua's sick room to knock lightly. "Minka? How is he? How are you?" Milo stood by to run messages and give her any help she might need.

Since Wallace had forbidden her to open the door to Efran, she came up to it to say, "He's holding on, Efran. He doesn't want to eat, but I'm giving him the fruit juice—grape and apple—and the infusion of meadowsweet and verbena, and I think that's helping."

"Good," he exhaled, leaning his forehead on the door. "I'll be at Marguerite's for most of the day, I'm afraid. We have some dignitaries coming from Westford, and DeWitt wants me to act civilized."

"Oh, you'll do more than that; you'll charm them into doing whatever you tell them," she said.

"We'll see. I don't think they love me like you do," he returned.

"Wait till they meet you," she chortled. "You're wearing your dress uniform, aren't you?"

"Ah, perhaps," he said, glancing at Milo, who was smiling as a witness. Then Efran said, "I'll check back when I can get rid of them."

"All right," she said quietly, and he listened to her light footfalls retreat from the door.

From there, Efran went down a floor to the workroom. Leaning in the doorway, he said, "I've got an honor guard bringing Thurlow and Lissa to Marguerite's, whenever they get here. Since you're coming to dine with them, you might want to wash up and comb your hair, or, whatever."

DeWitt blinked. "We'll do that, Efran."

"Good." He turned out while his administrators sat back and looked at each other.

Efran then had Kraken saddled to ride on down to the chapel. While the soldier at the door took Kraken to the stables in back, Hartshough bowed to Efran. "We have hors d'oeuvres ready in cold storage, Lord Efran, and the table has been set."

"Thank you, Hartshough." Efran patted his shoulder as Marguerite came up.

"Oh, Efran, don't you look nice," she said, admiring his dress uniform.

"It won't match what they're wearing, so I'm looking to you for elegance," he said, kissing her upswept hair.

“Yes, well, in that regard, Wendt asked to be excused. He’s afraid of displaying too little—deference,” Marguerite said tentatively.

“I was counting on his displaying none at all,” Efran scowled.

She laughed. “Now, Efran, let’s see if we can charm them, first.”

“You and Minka,” he grumbled, dropping into a random chair at the table.

“How is Joshua?” she asked.

“Holding his own, Minka says,” Efran exhaled. He’d so much rather sit in the corridor outside his son’s sick room than see Lissa again.

Hartshough went to the doors to let in a soldier, Hollis, who saluted. “Captain, the honor guard is escorting the visitors through the gates now. They asked to be taken to their room to freshen up, then will come here.”

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## Chapter 2

“That’s good,” Efran told the soldier. “Stop by Ryal’s shop, then go on up to tell Estes and DeWitt to come down now.”

“Captain.” Saluting again, Hollis turned back out.

Minutes later, the Second Gabriel appeared with Ryal, then DeWitt and Estes arrived immediately after. Glancing around, Ryal asked Efran, “Do you really need me here?”

Efran said grimly, “Oh, yes, especially if the Commander’s not here to make pointed comments.”

“To Westford’s new ruling class? Don’t count on me to do that, either,” Ryal said. Efran shrugged in unconcern. Gabriel, knowing a little of the back story, looked on quietly.

Justinian arrived at the table in time to hear that exchange. Shaking out a sleeve, he muttered, “I can hardly wait to discover the necessity of my presence, then.”

“Didn’t you meet Thurlow and Lissa in Eurus?” Efran asked.

“No,” Justinian said. “Wherever they went when Westford burned down, it wasn’t there.”

“Huh,” Efran said thoughtfully.

About a half hour later, Hartshough went to the front doors to escort in a man and woman in well-made day clothes—not dinner finery. Hartshough announced, “Lord Thurlow and Lady Lissa of Westford.”

Thurlow was a clean-shaven man in his early thirties with hair slicked back and a habitual expression of

boredom. Lissa was cute, with a face that scrunched when she smiled and long, fine hair that was such a light brown as to be almost gray.

Marguerite swept forward. “Oh, thank you for coming! I’m so excited to finally meet you. I am Marguerite, married to Commander Wendt. Here with me are Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, Lord Commander Ryal, Steward Estes, Administrator DeWitt, Lord Officer Justinian, and the Commander’s Second Gabriel.” Those named bowed to the guests, who nodded in return. Marguerite added, “Please do have a seat at your nameplates.”

Efran, at the head of the table, waited to see everyone seated before he sat himself. On his right hand were Marguerite, Thurlow, DeWitt, and Gabriel. On his left were Ryal, Lissa, Estes, and Justinian. As Hartshough began bringing in the hors d’oeuvres, Lissa was smiling warmly at everyone around the table, especially Efran. Thurlow glanced at the skinny trees descending from the ceiling and remarked, “Unique architecture.”

Marguerite said, “Yes, the architect Bozzelli designed it as a performance hall, for which we’ve used it on occasion.”

Thurlow looked at her in interest. “So you do have the mezzo-soprano Arbaiza here? I saw her for the first time at my club in Eurus, The Glass House. Why isn’t she at table with us?”

Marguerite paused, and Justinian said, “Regrettably, she had prior obligations.” He studied Thurlow as though trying to place him.

Thurlow looked peeved, but Lissa, still with a glowing smile, said, “I do feel that we ladies are outnumbered. Where is your wife, Efran? I heard all about your stealing the Chataine Sybil!”

Efran glanced at her, leaning back for Hartshough to fill his wine glass. “Minka. I’m afraid she’s tending our son, who is sick.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry!” she said.

Thurlow added, “I hope it’s not the pediatric fever going around Westford. It’s frequently fatal.”

Efran said nothing, but his face blanched. Lissa said, “Oh, no, Thurlow, especially if he hasn’t been to Westford recently.”

Thurlow was shrugging when Efran asked, “What have you seen of the trolls in Westford?”

“Nothing,” Thurlow scoffed. “And I seriously doubt there were any of consequence in Eurus.”

There was a shocked silence, then Ryal said, “Parsifal’s assistant Escarra may enlighten you there, Lord Thurlow.”

“Parsifal?” Thurlow queried, pushing away his half-eaten hors d’oeuvres.

“Yes, the late notary of Eurus,” Ryal said.

Thurlow waved, “Notaries are stupid old men.”

“Now, Thurlow,” Lissa said as though correcting a child.



In the surrounding silence, Efran started laughing. Everyone looked at him, and he asked Thurlow, “What are you here for, other than to make me whack off your head?”

DeWitt put a hand over his face, but Gabriel laughed, “It looks that way, doesn’t it?”

Justinian observed, “Insults are a prime negotiating tool in certain EurAsian circles. Does the name Gyldenbollokes ring a bell, Lord Thurlow? Figle-Stickel? Hammersnark?”

Thurlow shot an uneasy look to him, but Lissa said firmly, “Apologize, Thurlow.”

He grunted, “I apologize for disparaging notaries as a class and not simply the one.”

She looked back at Efran to say warmly, “He just forgets himself in new situations, and starts beating his chest like a caveman.”

Efran sat back to study her. “And needs you to clean up after him? Or are you the one with the power in the first place?”

Coyly, she said, “I like making new friends. And, getting reacquainted with old ones.”

When she smiled at him in a manner disturbingly close to Minka’s look of adoration, Efran took on an aspect disturbingly close to contempt. But then young Salk entered the hall to trot over to him and whisper in his ear.

Efran shoved his chair back to walk quickly toward the door as Salk followed. But the Captain paused to turn and explain, “Joshua’s fever has broken, and he’s sleeping now. I’ll be right back with Minka. Behave yourself, Lord Ryal.”

As he lit out, whistling for Kraken, Ryal raised his hands in disavowal and most of those at table laughed.

It required almost an hour for Efran to return with Minka in hand. The others were still at table enjoying desserts. When the men began to stand for her, she said, “Stop that. I didn’t clean up or anything”—as she glanced at Efran’s dress uniform.

There was mild disagreement in response, but Efran said, “Minka, this is Lord Thurlow and Lady Lissa of Westford. They—came down to visit us for some reason.”

“Welcome to the Abbey Lands,” she said warmly. They smiled.

Efran directed her to the end of the table beside Justinian, who stood to pull out her chair. He asked, “What would you like, dear Minka?” When she shook her head, he added, “Hartshough made pumpkin pie.”

Laughing at her sudden keen look, Efran sat himself across the table from her, next to Gabriel. She lifted her large eyes to Hartshough. “Maybe just a tiny piece,” she murmured.

“With beaten cream, Lady Minka?” Hartshough proposed.

“If you insist,” she grinned.

Marguerite said, “He’ll do better than tiny, but how is Joshua, dear?”

“*Much* better, thank you,” Minka exhaled. “He’s sleeping and Wallace believes he’s completely thrown off the fever. I believe it was the meadowsweet that did it. That broke my fever very quickly after you found it for me,” she told Efran. He nodded in contentment.

“You were a wonderful herbalist,” Lissa said fondly. Efran sat back, crossing his arms over his chest as if disavowing the compliment. Minka only glanced up. Lissa resumed, “Anyway, I was telling your people that Baroffio and Cocci will be coming down to have a look around soon.” Upon his unaltered blank look, she prompted, “My parents. They always thought you were so interesting.”

Efran, still blank, turned his eyes to Estes and then Gabriel. Both had seen firsthand the contempt with which her mother had treated him, even as a Captain. Estes maintained his composure, but Gabriel had to lower his head to grimace at Lissa’s bold prevarication. Minka looked off.

DeWitt, who did not tolerate charades, sat back in resignation at the prospects for cooperation. “Lady Lissa, you are also very interesting. May I ask, what is the purpose of this smiling provocation?” Estes glanced up at this sledgehammer to the first tentative blocks of their proposed alliance.

She turned to him in wondering dismay. “‘Smiling provocation.’ Whatever do you mean?”

DeWitt replied, “I don’t know your parents well, but I do know their set. They have nothing but contempt for Polonti, and it was no secret in our army that they forbade your marrying Efran because of his race. This assertion that they thought he was interesting is just false.”

“Oh, no! That’s not true. They didn’t want me marrying him because he was likely to get killed!” she protested. Thurlow was smiling through all this, completely negating her protestations. Whispering thanks, Minka received her pie with cream from Hartshough.

With a sigh, Estes sat back. “Lissa, what do you want from us?”

She turned to him with a slow smile. And then Verlice brought Faciane in through the front doors with a bang and a flourish. “Well, Mother—ah, I see that we have the whole group gathered for the announcement.” He took special note of Justinian. “Well, here it is: this lovely lady and I are renewing our vows. But we’ve jointly decided that rather than rebuild all of the brewery buildings and fields that are so vulnerable to troll attacks, we’re going to begin a new venture right here in the Lands. It may or may not be a brewery—we’re going to make you wait to hear about that. But it will be a completely new endeavor of ours, together.”

He gazed down at the woman on his arm and she looked back at him in devotion. Justinian stifled a yawn, muttering, “‘A completely new endeavor’ has rather been done here already, you know.”

As the one who had won the woman, Verlice smiled down at him. “Yes, friend, but not like we’re going to do it.” He paused to take in Justinian’s elegant day suit from The Lands Clothing Shop. “The skinny peak lapels are rather elderly, aren’t they?”

“What?” Justinian blinked at him in astonishment. “As opposed to lapels that could carry you skyward in a brisk wind?”

“Ha ha. These are what’s fashionable, my friend.” Verlice stroked the four-inch-wide lapels fondly.

“According to the woman who creates backless dresses?” Justinian asked, frozen in the early stage of a guffaw.

Verlice had embarked on a studious counterargument when Hartshough approached, bowing. “Lord Verlice, Firmin wished you to know that Arbaiza is preparing to sing in the private section.”

“Oh, well, let’s be off. I’ll tell you all about it later, Mother.” Verlice swept back out the front doors with Faciane on his arm, and Thurlow hopped up from the table to follow them.

As the hall settled back into relative decorum, Efran raised Minka’s empty plate. “Another piece, please, Hartshough.”

“Certainly, Lord Efran.” Hartshough took the plate to turn back toward the kitchen. Minka glanced around in wide-eyed guilt, but did not object.

Sighing, Estes looked to Lissa again. “Lissa, why are you here? What do you want?”

She studied him for a moment, then looked back at Efran. He leaned across the table toward Minka as she received her second piece of pie. Grinning, she offered him the first bite, which he accepted. Returning her attention to Estes, Lissa said, “We want to do in Westford what you’ve done here. We want you to show us how.”

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### Chapter 3

There followed a few long minutes of silence around Marguerite’s table, then Efran said, “First, you need armies of thousands attacking you on a regular basis. Then you need people who’ve been with you from the beginning to turn on you and try to kill you.”

DeWitt said, “Before that, however, you need a fortress on a hill which comes with its own guardian angel. And a divine mandate to take care of abandoned children.”

Estes added, “Plus various realms that intersect each other all over the hill.”

Lissa stopped smiling. “You’re making fun of me, but I’m perfectly serious. We want to replicate what you’ve done here.”

The men were silent, but Minka observed, “I think that’s a worthy goal. But what you really need are men who are willing to die for it.”

Shortly thereafter, Lissa left the chapel to join Thurlow in Firmin’s to hear the diva sing. Ryal returned to his shop; Gabriel returned to Barracks A to report to the Commander, and Justinian went with him. The hilltop people returned to the fortress to check on Joshua and all the children.

On the following day, November 8th, Estes invited Lissa and Thurlow to tour the fortress. Estes showed them the rooms off the foyer, including the keep, then the library with the Librarian, the kitchen and dining hall, the nursery, and the back grounds.

The children weren't out here yet; they were in morning classes. As Minka, Ella, Rondi and a number of soldiers had finished Law class with Soames, Minka was now out back with Efran and Joshua.

Emerging from the back door, Estes' guests had to look around to locate the lord of the fortress. Minka was sitting on a bench under a great tree. Next to her on the bench were the lower legs and booted feet of a man. Lissa and Thurlow tilted their heads to the side to get a better view of the scene.

The man was lying on his back in front of the bench with a lump on his chest, which he occasionally raised like a trophy. Minka was laughing, and the trophy waved at her before Efran (obviously) lowered him again to his chest, because the child was still weak from his illness.

Lissa began leading Estes and Thurlow toward the bench. Minka glanced up, and spoke a word of warning to her husband on the ground. He looked back over his shoulder, but didn't get up.

"Good morning," Lissa said warmly. "I'm very glad to see that your son is better."

"Thank you! We are also very grateful," Minka immediately responded.

Efran still didn't bother to get up, but Joshua lifted his head a little. "'S Estes," he murmured.

Minka cried, "Yes, Joshua! That's Estes!"

Holding the boy on one arm, Efran pulled his feet off the bench to sit up and swivel. "Yours is the only name I've ever heard him say," he told the honoree.

Smiling in acknowledgment, Estes said, "Hello, Joshua. Minka. Anyway, Efran, I'm just taking Lissa and Thurlow on a short tour."

Minka nodded, brushing grass and a beetle from Efran's hair as he leaned back against the seat. His expression communicated, *Better you than me*.

Thurlow told him, "It was a shame you missed Arbaiza last night. Perhaps you know how intoxicating she is." Minka's face went blank. That he was referencing a past relationship was confirmed by Lissa's stern look of reproof.

But Efran broke into his dazzling smile. "If you want a really great performance, ask her to sing in the chapel hall."

Thurlow almost caught his breath. "That would be marvelous! Will she?"

"If you're persuasive," Efran said cruelly.

Lissa regarded Minka's raised brows while Estes sighed, "Let's walk around the west grounds here. The view is unforgettable." As they ambled toward the training grounds and stables, Lissa caught sight of Tess and Ella working with the young horses. While Estes was pointing out something in the western woods to Thurlow, Lissa paused to study Tess—her short, dark hair, her mannish work clothes, her familiarity with horses.

Tess was bubbling with excitement because she and her husband Lorient were planning their first-ever holiday. Lissa listened as she told Ella, "We're going to look at a horse farm for sale outside Gerdt's, a village not far from here."

Lissa said, "That does sound like fun. When are you going?"

Appraising the question from a stranger, Tess said, "The fifteenth and sixteenth"—in about a week.

"Oh, I hope you have a wonderful time," Lissa said. Tess turned back to her work, as did Ella. So Lissa hurried to catch up with Thurlow and Estes.

While Estes took their guests to view other parts of the grounds, Tess whispered to Ella, "Who is that?"

"Some people from Westford," Ella shrugged. Meanwhile, Minka made Efran come in to put on clean clothes for the imminent arrival of Lady Lissa's parents.

The Lord Baroffio and Lady Cocci arrived within the hour. As expected, they were sumptuously dressed, with a languid air of self-importance. Efran, persuaded to put on his red Abbey uniform, met them in the foyer with Minka. He bowed and said, "It's a great honor to have you visit us. I know your time is precious, so, what would you like to see?"

"Oh, show us your Treasury," Baroffio said, smirking at his joke.

Efran looked regretful. "I have no idea where it is. Estes won't tell me. But I can show you our pig enclosures. Lwoff is a genius with the piglets."

Baroffio squinted at him. "You raise your own? Up here?"

"Yes. Come have a look." Efran began leading them through the foyer to the door at the end of the short western corridor. "It's easier to reach them this way. If we go through the back grounds, we may get ambushed by children."

Minka rolled her eyes at the warning (which was actually true), but Baroffio asked, "Won't your sows attack?"

Efran glanced back at him. "Not unless you climb over the stone walls, which I wouldn't advise."

"Stone walls. For a pig pen," Baroffio mused.

So Efran led them to the stone-reinforced enclosures, four of them, in the forested western hilltop. Lwoff met them to joyfully talk swine with Baroffio for three-quarters of an hour while Cocci stood back with glazed eyes, holding her skirts up from the forest detritus. Baroffio asked intelligent questions which Lwoff answered comprehensively, pointing out examples from the enclosures. He even reached down to scoop up a piglet for the lord's inspection.

Standing by the abandoned lady, Minka offered, "It's wonderful to watch them find their passion, isn't it?" Cocci stared at her in horror.

When the lord reluctantly prepared to take his leave, Lwoff said, "Aye, we'll send a few piglets back up with you to Westford, if you like. Wasn't all that long ago that we got the best of our pork from there, you know."

Baroffio swung to Efran. "Would you?"



Efran demurred, “Lwoff is in charge of the pigs. What he says goes.”

“Yes, thank you.” Baroffio wrung Lwoff’s hand and Cocci almost fainted.

Upon leaving the forest, Baroffio draped an arm around Efran’s shoulders to talk about the issues of sustaining a burgeoning population. “Oh, yes,” Efran said. “We’re digging a new sewer system to accommodate the growth.”

Baroffio stopped dead. “Really?”

“Yes. Would you like to go look at the progress?” Efran asked.

“Yes,” Baroffio said.

Efran paused by the stables to nod at Squirt. “Four horses, please.”

“Yes sir!” Squirt gestured to one of his helpers as he ran into the stalls.

But Cocci almost wept, “I want to take the carriage.”

“I’m sorry; we have to go off road to see the digging,” Efran said.

So Baroffio told her impatiently, “You can ride.”

Efran said, “Let me get a bodyguard for her.”

As he turned preparatory to summoning a man to assist the lady, not necessarily protect her, Baroffio said, “Are your Lands unsafe for ladies to ride in, then?” Efran bit back the summons, but Squirt gestured Mohr over anyway.

When the party’s horses were brought, Efran looked to Minka, assigned the dun mare. Knowing her reluctance to use a mounting block, Detler leveled a gaze at her as he put one beside the mare. Laughing at him, Minka stepped right up on it to jam her foot in the stirrup and throw a leg over.

Detler grinned at her, then put the block beside Gaunter. Lady Cocci, in her silk and brocade dress, stood looking at it as though it were coiling to attack. So Detler asked, “May I assist you, lady?”

“What,” she gasped.

Glancing at the other three who had begun walking their horses out of the courtyard gates, Detler took her hand to lead her up the steps of the mounting block. He pushed her foot in the stirrup and hoisted her over the saddle. With the reins knotted on the pommel, he whacked Gaunter’s haunches: “Go on!”

Gaunter grudgingly began trotting out of the gates and down the switchback with the lady bouncing like a sack of rice. At this time, Mohr and Doudney began following at a distance, having been instructed by Squirt.

While Efran, Minka and Baroffio waited at the bottom of the switchback for Lady Cocci to catch up, Efran gave the lord an overview of the new sewer project. “We made that a priority after the Faire we hosted about six weeks ago.”

Baroffio grunted, “Yes, when we heard you were having a Faire, we laughed. Then we sent a few men down to

see it. When they came back and told us about it, I and my Steward came down to have a look—incognito, you know. We didn't wish to draw attention. But—my goodness, it must have cost you a pretty copper or two.”

“My administrator tells me that after expenses, we took in almost two thousand royals over eight days,” Efran said blandly.

Minka's eyes widened at the information and Baroffio gasped, “Are you serious?”

“That's exactly what I said,” Efran laughed. “When we get back, I'll drop you off in our workroom to talk to DeWitt.” He glanced back as Gaunter drew up with Cocci hanging on, then said, “This way.” And he began leading them at a walk up Main, stopping at the crosswalks.

While Baroffio looked at the businesses along Main, Cocci focused on the unique dresses passing through the crosswalk in front of them. When one woman with gorgeous red-gold hair paused to glance up at her, smiling, Cocci leaned down to hiss, “Where did you get that dress?”

“Elvey's, right here,” Leila purred. “May I show you others like it?”

“Yes. How do I—” Cocci was struggling with the reins, trying to turn Gaunter toward Elvey's when he only wanted to follow the other horses. So Leila took his bridle to turn him in the correct direction and lead him to the awning-covered doorway, where the doorman assisted Cocci to dismount and Leila brought her inside.

Minka was the only one of the party (other than the bodyguards, who were not of the party) to notice Cocci's abduction, but as she thought it for the best, said nothing. However, she did wave Mohr and Doudney up so that she'd have someone to chat with while Efran was conducting his tour. He did glance back to note the subtraction and additions to their number.

Efran pointed out to Baroffio the beginning of the sewer trench off Main Street. They followed this portion, which was now covered, past several branches until arriving at one current digging location in the eastern section. When they approached on their horses, a number of men paused to greet the Captain. Among them were Krug and Urpèd from the playground: “Ah! Da Effin! Wer wurk! Dig akeducks.”

“Yes, I see. Good for you,” Efran laughed. Baroffio stared at them, then dismounted to talk to the structural engineer Thrupp, who was overseer of the project. While Thrupp unrolled the diagram of the proposed system, Efran turned Kraken back to Minka.

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## Chapter 4

With a nod to Mohr and Doudney, Efran asked Minka, “Where is Lady Cocci?”

“Elvey's,” she said with raised brows.

Efran quietly laughed, “I hope Baroffio brought a lot of money.”

Minka said, “I do too, because Elvey's won't let her take whatever she buys until it's paid for.”

“Which is reasonable,” Efran murmured, a hand on her leg just for reassurance. After glancing at their guest deep in conversation with Thrupp, he asked her, “Are you holding up all right?”

“Yes, of course, as long as I have someone to talk to,” she said, nodding back to the grinning bodyguards. He laughed again, then Baroffio called to him with a question.

Efran walked Kraken over and Baroffio told him, “Thrupp promised me a copy of the plans if I stop by Lemmerz’s construction office tomorrow. Do you know where that is?”

“Certainly. It’s on Main,” Efran said.

“Good, I’ll get that,” Baroffio said, remounting. Then he grunted, “Eh, the man knows what he’s doing, dam’ him.”

“I would hope so,” Efran protested with a laugh.

“Eh, no offense; it’s just so dam’ difficult finding competent people. The construction in Westford is bleeding us dry,” Baroffio grunted. “Where did you get him?”

“Westford, I believe. Most of our early people came from Westford—the ones who stayed, anyway,” Efran said, glancing at Minka. They both remembered the early comers from Eurus who had joined the insurrection under Lyte—Wyse, that is. Most of them were now either dead or gone, the prominent exceptions being Verrin and Coxe, who were loyal and reliable. But Baroffio wanted to continue the tour.

After riding silently for a few minutes, Baroffio grunted, “And to think that if Lissa had married you, she’d be mistress of all this.” Efran glanced at him without replying. He was exceedingly glad that Cocci had rejected him without argument from Baroffio. The Abbey Lands would not exist without Minka.

Apparently aware that he might need to clarify his statement, Baroffio said, “Eh, I was fine with her marrying you—at least you had mettle. Thurlow is a conniving little weasel. But her mother, you know.” Turning in the saddle, he began, “Now don’t you regret—? Well, what happened to Cocci?” he demanded, bewildered.

“She stopped at Elvey’s, Lord Baroffio,” Minka said.

He stared at her as though not knowing who she was, then turned to the Abbey lord. “Elvey’s? What’s that?”

Efran replied, “A dress shop, sir.”

“Oh, well, don’t take it personally. We had a good laugh about the provincial clothing styles here, so if she got bored, she probably stopped for some entertainment,” Baroffio said.

“That’s fine,” Efran said with a cautious glance back at Minka, who was quietly snickering. Doudney and Mohr were stone-faced, which ability came with hard practice. Efran turned the group back to recover the lady.

On Main, he pointed out Elvey’s complex, directing Baroffio to the awning-covered entrance. Then Efran said amiably, “I’ll leave you here, Lord Baroffio. Shall I have your carriage sent down?” He noted that Gaunter was not waiting out front, which meant that Cocci was doing some serious shopping.

“Eh? No, no—I’ll be right back up,” Baroffio said.

“Very good. It’s been pleasant chatting with you, sir,” Efran said, turning Kraken to join Minka. Baroffio did not reply for studying the elaborate entryway. So Efran looked at the bodyguards, who drew close to hear him mutter, “Stay down here to see if they need their carriage. I’m going to order it made ready as soon as we get up hilltop.”

“Yes, Captain,” Doudney said. Then he and Mohr drew their horses back to keep an eye on the entryway.

As Efran and Minka walked their horses away, they heard Baroffio tell Elvey’s doorman, “Send out Lady Cocci.”

“Hurry,” Efran whispered, nudging Kraken to a lope.

Minka laughed, “Why do you not want to pay for her dresses, you brute?”

“Faster,” he said, glancing behind them.

Baroffio had to wait quite a while for his wife to appear, during which time he repeatedly ordered the doorman to produce her. So the doorman went inside and declined to come out again as long as that man was sitting on his horse out there.

When Cocci finally came out, Baroffio gaped at her in a dress of bold colors with an asymmetrical hem and pointy shoulders. “I’ve bought some things and need your wallet,” she said, extending her hand up to him in the saddle.

“Oh. Have you? Ha, ha. Well. Here, then.” He unfastened his pouch from his belt and opened it. Withdrawing two royals, he extended them down to her.

She bypassed his hand to take the pouch and walk back into Elvey’s with it. He gazed down at the lonely pair of royals in his palm, then looked at the closed door to call, “I trust you shan’t need too much of that. It’s for our living expenses while we’re down here, you know.”

Long minutes later, during which he periodically called, “Cocci? Cocci!” she finally emerged from the door again. Baroffio watched her stand on the sidewalk to supervise the transport of many bundles and boxes through the door, counting as they piled up.

Pale, he called weakly, “Cocci? My pouch?”

When she was satisfied with the small mountain on the sidewalk, she came over to toss the flaccid pouch up at him with, “I need the carriage.”

He opened the pouch to gaze at its barrenness. “Cocci! That’s—that was—”

“I *need the carriage*,” she repeated.

He looked up, sightless, to groan to the abandoned door of Elvey’s, “Have our carriage sent down.”

Doudney nodded to Mohr, who reined around to take the message up to the courtyard. Within minutes, he was back with the carriage. He and Doudney then brought the two riderless Fortress horses back up hilltop.

Lord Baroffio and Lady Cocci departed for Westford that afternoon with a full carriage, but no piglets nor sewer plans nor consultation with DeWitt about the Faire. Nor most of the money Baroffio had brought down.

However, Lissa and Thurlow remained, as Minka discovered when she went to visit her auntie the following day (November 9th). Minka didn't attempt to bring Joshua, who was still weak from his illness. Efran had been called to conference with Commander Wendt, so he was not available, either.

In consideration of Efran's continual apprehensions, Minka took Ayling and Cudmore as bodyguards, who were happy to chat with her on their way down to the chapel. When Hartshough led them to the back patio, however, she saw Lissa sitting across the glass table from Auntie. As crestfallen as Minka might have been to find her here, it was nothing compared to the dull vacancy on Lissa's face upon seeing that neither of the men with Minka was Efran.

"Hello, Auntie. Lissa," Minka said, leaning over to hug her auntie's shoulders.

Marguerite patted her arm. "How is Joshua today?"

"Still free of the fever, but resting," Minka said. "Wallace won't let us take him anywhere yet." As Marguerite acknowledged that, Minka ran a hand over the tabletop. "Oh, you got new glass!" Verlice had cracked the previous top by whacking it with his walking stick.

Marguerite said, "Yes, I had to; we use this table constantly. Sit down, dear, you and your men. What would you like?"

Taking the chair between Marguerite and Lissa, Minka glanced at her men sitting in chairs apart from the table. "Oh, nothing right now, Auntie. I just wanted to say hello. Where is Justinian?"

Marguerite looked vaguely troubled. "He had something he wanted to check out, and left early yesterday."

"Oh," Minka said, more troubled by the fact that her auntie was troubled than that of Justinian taking off.

"Where is Efran?" Lissa asked brightly.

Minka paused. "With his Commander."

"That's your husband; is that correct?" Lissa asked Marguerite.

"Yes," Marguerite said.

"The informality is interesting. Efran was always careful to be correct around his Commander in Westford," Lissa observed. His Commander in Westford was Wendt, by the way.

Minka said nothing, choosing to look over the landscaped yard, so Marguerite said, "We've discovered that less formality works better here. It's more of a family situation."

"Oh! How so?" Lissa asked in bright interest.

Marguerite said, "Efran looks at Wendt as a father."



Lissa registered mild surprise. “Really? I never knew that.”

Minka thought, *I never knew about you, either*, but caught herself before it could come out of her mouth. So she stood, saying, “I’ll drop by another time.” Ayling and Cudmore immediately stood.

Marguerite opened her mouth, but Lissa said, “Oh, no, stay, please.”

Minka hesitated, then decided to be frank. “I don’t want to talk about Efran.”

Lissa said, “Oh, of course not. I should talk to him directly. It was amazing to see him again, and here, of all places!”

Minka cautiously sat. “We very much enjoyed showing your father around the Lands yesterday.”

“I’m sure,” Lissa brightly agreed. And the three of them sat silent for the next thirty seconds.

Verlice suddenly appeared from the kitchen. “Well now, Mother—Uh oh. Do I need to ask permission to speak to you?”—for Minka had jumped up from her chair.

“Oh, no, Verlice! I want you to sit right down here and tell your mother everything. I know she can’t wait to hear! I’ll just run along and find Efran. We’ll all chat later. Bye, now!” And Minka had rushed into the kitchen, her bodyguards close behind, before anyone could utter a word.

On the front steps of the chapel, Minka sagged. Cudmore said, “I’ll go get the horses, Lady Minka.”

“Thank you,” she said dully. Ayling nodded as Cudmore took off around the chapel. “How rude was that of me?” she asked her remaining bodyguard.

Ayling shook his head. “I wouldn’t talk in front of her either, Lady Minka. If it’s not your husband she’s after, it’s something worse.”

Considering that, she looked up. “You may be right.”

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## Chapter 5

When Cudmore brought their horses around, Minka climbed up on Rose and said, “Let’s just go to Barracks A. I won’t crash their meeting; I just want to sit somewhere safely away from Lissa until Efran comes out.”

“We’re with you, Lady Minka,” Cudmore agreed, and they walked their horses leisurely down Main.

Arriving at the barracks, they tied off their horses and entered to find Captain Towner’s scribe Viglian in sole possession of the front office. “Lady Minka! Shall I get the Captain out for you?”

“No, thank you. I don’t want to interrupt anything, I just want to wait—” She broke off as the door to the conference room opened. Efran leaned out to glance around, then wave her in, her bodyguards with her.

She came into the room hesitantly while the men around the table rose to bow. “I didn’t mean to disturb you, Efran; I just wanted to wait here till you got—” He pulled her toward the table while Ayling and Cudmore slipped in behind her and stood along the wall. Then Efran closed the door again.

From his usual chair at the head of the table, Wendt said, “Thank you for joining us, Lieutenant Commander. Have a seat.” He nodded to the chair Efran had pulled out at Wendt’s right hand—obviously, the chair he had been sitting in until hearing her in the outer office. The rest of the men on that side of the table moved down for Efran to sit on her right. She flashed an uneasy smile at them.

Gesturing to the man sitting at the far end of the table, the Commander resumed, “We were just discussing the dilemma Bullara brought to us—”

“Oh, is she still after you?” Minka cried sympathetically. Bullara’s heavy features sagged as he nodded in deep distress.

The table erupted in laughter. Minka bit her lip, glancing around cautiously. Efran leaned over to hug her as Wendt said, “Yes, well, that’s a heavy trial, for sure, but this dilemma is a little different.”

Nodding to a large pouch in the middle of the table, Wendt said, “Show her, Efran.” He reached out to shake the pouch open, which disgorged a number of gold coins. He picked up one to place in her hand.

She studied it for only a moment before shaking her head. “It’s kind of like a royal, only, uneven and badly stamped. So it must be counterfeit,” she observed, handing it back to her husband.

He flashed a smile to Wendt, who said, “We’re not surprised that you picked up on that right away. The man who gave that pouch to Bullara was expecting that he wouldn’t. And he didn’t. But he had an uneasy conscience over what he was asked to do to earn that, so brought it to us.”

Glancing between Wendt, Efran, and Bullara, Minka asked, “What . . . ?”

Wendt replied, “Thurlow gave that pouch to him—with a hundred coins—as down payment on the thousand ‘royals’ he would receive for handing over all the trolls in the children’s playground.”

Minka gaped at Wendt. “Our friendly trolls? *Why?*” she asked in outrage.

“We don’t know,” Wendt said. “Bullara accepted the down payment, but had second thoughts because he’s been working around the trolls digging the—aqueducts, and has developed friendships with them. So he decided to come clean with us.”

Minka turned to the man at the end of the table. “Oh, good for you, Bullara! I’m so proud of you! We’re all very fond of our trolls and don’t want to see anything happen to them, either. You did nothing wrong taking the money when you brought it right to Commander Wendt,” she ended decisively.

He nodded righteously. “I think so, too, Lady Minka.”

“You didn’t try to spend any of it, did you?” she asked darkly.

His face clouded, and he reached into a pocket to bring out four or five coins to lay on the table. There was suppressed laughter at the disclosure. Minka continued to eye him, demanding, “Is that *all?*”

He whined faintly, then reached into the other pocket to relinquish another handful. Minka said, “That had better be all, because they’re going to count them, you know, and if there’s not one hundred there, they’ll come right back to you to ask where they are.”

Drooping in dismay, he reached down to take off one shoe, and then the other, to pour out a stream of gold from each. By now, some of the men had their heads in their hands, laughing. But Minka said, “Hush! All right then, Bullara, if that’s truly all, I’m going to take you down to Ryal’s to swear out an emergency divorce from Barrueta on the basis of harassment. And he’ll draw up an order of protection so that if she won’t leave you alone, he’ll have her thrown in a barracks cell for three days.”

A momentary silence followed that declaration. Hesitantly, Efran asked her, “How . . . do you know this?”

She looked at him in surprise. “From Law class, of course.” Then her eyes went wide in horror. “Have I been harassing you? Oh, I’m so sorry! Today was just—” He interrupted her to gather her up in amused disavowal.

“No—wait.” She squirmed out of his arms to look down the table again. “Now, Bullara, do you want to swear out the divorce and get a protective order? If you do, and she comes after you again, they’ll throw her in a cell. Is that what you want?”

Everyone looked to the end of the table. Bullara considered that, then winced and shook his head. Minka said, “All right, never mind.” Still amused, Efran held her on one arm.

Stroking his forehead, Wendt said, “Well, thank you for clearing that up for us, Minka. Now, Bullara, we need to know more from you. What exactly did Thurlow want you to do for this money?”

Bullara looked depressed. “He said to bring the men out of the playground into the trees, where there would be nets. If they catch the men in nets, they can go in and get the women and children.”

Wendt asked, “Why do they want them, Bullara?” The big man shrugged, indicating ignorance. Wendt then asked, “Does anyone know where Thurlow is now?”

No one replied, but Minka said, “Lissa is at your house with Auntie.”

“Ah. Then I think I’d better go home. Efran, why don’t you take a few men out to the woods; see if you can find these nets?” Wendt suggested.

“With me,” Minka interjected.

Wendt glanced at Efran, who told her wryly, “I have to take you, now.”

“You’re all dismissed, then,” Wendt said, standing. As the men stood, he added, “Bullara, if Thurlow approaches you again, you’re to bring him straight here. Don’t tell him anything; just bring him.”

“Yes, sir,” Bullara acknowledged. Then he asked, “Do I get a reward?”

Wendt paused, as did the other men. He asked, “Have you given us *all* the fake coins?”

“Yes, sir,” Bullara said, pained.

Wendt nodded. "Then, why not? Gabriel, give him five royals. Bullara, don't say anything to anyone about this."

"Yes, sir," Bullara said happily. Gabriel reached up to pat him on the back as they left the conference room.

From there, Efran took Minka, Ayling, Cudmore, Mumme and Martyn out on horseback toward the woods west of the Passage. Meanwhile, Wendt headed home.

Taking with him Graeme, Finn, and Dango on foot, Wendt told them on the way, "Finn, you and Dango relieve Routh and Serrano at the front doors. If you see Thurlow, you're to bring him to Barracks A. Graeme, I want you to stand over Lady Marguerite. Whenever she's alone, you can tell her what we found out."

"Yes, Commander," Graeme said, and the others acknowledged the instructions.

Hartshough greeted Wendt and his men at the door. After waiting for the two on watch to give the Commander a routine report, and note their replacement with Finn and Dango, the butler inquired, "Shall you like an early midday meal, or perhaps a bracer, Lord Commander?"

"Nothing yet, thank you, Hartshough. Who's here?" Wendt asked, glancing toward the back patio.

"Lady Lissa, visiting with Lady Marguerite, sir," Hartshough replied.

"Have you seen anything of Thurlow?" Wendt asked.

"Not today, sir," Hartshough said.

"Please check quietly to see if they still have rooms at The Lands' Best Inn, and if the desk clerk knows where he is," Wendt requested.

"Yes, Lord Commander." Hartshough bowed, and Wendt went on back to the patio, accompanied by Graeme.

Leaning over Marguerite's chair, Wendt kissed her head. "Hello, ladies. Lissa, I heard that your father had a profitable tour yesterday, and your mother found some things she liked at Elvey's."

"I suppose so," she said with her pleasant smile. She glanced at Graeme's effacing himself beside the door to the kitchen.

Sitting at the table, Wendt asked, "Where is Thurlow? I believe that Gabriel had some information he had asked for."

"You know, I haven't seen him today. It's not that unusual for us to split up when we're touring, however. We have different interests," she replied easily. Marguerite merely listened.

"I think that's healthy, to a degree," Wendt said. "You must be pleased with the rebuilding in Westford. Those of us who served there are glad to see it being brought back to life."

"Yes, it is gratifying," she replied.

Wendt then looked over the back grounds. "Where is Eryk?"

Marguerite sat up. "Oh, Hartshough just now sent him to market. Do you need him?"

“No, I’ll wait till he returns. Hartshough’s errands are probably more important right now,” Wendt said easily.

At that moment, Eryk was just emerging from Firmin’s storefront with a large sack of produce. Windry was sitting despondently in Firmin’s outdoor dining area, waiting for Lilou to come on duty so that Windry could order something cheap, hoping to afflict her daughter with guilt. Seeing Eryk, she sat up a little. Glimpsing Windry as well, he almost skittered across the street to the east sidewalk. She let down in frustrated disappointment.

“I have to do something,” Windry murmured. “I don’t have enough to make it through next week, even though I’m paid up on rent for a while. Oh, I wish I hadn’t bought all that stupid cotton yarn. It is pretty, and it does weave beautifully, but the fabric’s not good for anything but—”

She broke off, catching sight of the women parading in ridiculous dresses with high necklines on tightly fitted bodices and sharply pointed shoulders. Sneering at the outlandish designs, she suddenly realized: “—dresses. That woven cotton is good for *dresses*.”

Windry leapt up from the table, sending her chair rocking, to run down the street toward her home. The servers at Firmin’s sighed in relief, including Lilou. Tired of telling her to order or leave, they’d been hiding.

Arriving at home, Windry threw herself down to the stool in front of her loom. First, she spent several hours finishing all the half-done wool projects she had lying around—shawls, scarves, hats, socks, skirts, blankets, and the like. These she took around to several shops, starting with The Lands Clothing Shop right on the next street over. Then she went to Besiana’s Bath and Bed Supplies, Froggatt’s Indispensable Everyday Needs, and Twombly’s Dry Goods. These outlets quickly bought her items for resale. That gave Windry plenty of money to live on while she began designing something entirely new with the cotton yarns and woven fabrics she already had.

Efran with Minka, Ayling, Cudmore, Mumme and Martyn crossed the new bridge over the Passage and bypassed the path to the playground. Instead, they dismounted on the edge of the woods around it. Patting Kraken, he murmured, “You stay here; I don’t want you getting netted.” Kraken shook his head, but obeyed. “And you stay beside me, please,” Efran told Minka, who nodded submissively. She was still wondering if she harassed him.

As they began tentatively fanning out, Efran whispered to his men, “What do you think? Trip wire?” He surveyed the detritus at his feet.

They were briefly startled by the rapid passage of a pygmy hog through the undergrowth. “Ground wires in woods tend to spring on small animals, Captain,” Mumme objected. So they all began scanning at eye level or above. But they walked carefully, testing the ground at each step. Martyn was looking at overhanging branches while Efran studied the trunks: any trip wires descending from branches would most likely be anchored there.

Minka, however, being much shorter than any of them, was sweeping the ground with her eyes. “Efran,” she said. At the same time, Ayling stumbled over something, then looked down at his feet.

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Chapter 6

Everyone watched as Minka bent to lift a heavy black net from among fallen leaves. Ayling, likewise, picked up the protruding edge of another net twenty feet away. Martyn helped her spread out her find in the air for them to study the tattered remains.

“It’s been ripped to shreds,” Cudmore murmured in wonder. “And this netting is reinforced with wire—at least eleven or twelve gauge.”

“Broken clean through,” Ayling noted, stretching the net around a gaping hole.

“Cut with a blade?” Efran asked.

Cudmore peered at the end of a wire. “Eh, hard to tell. But to me, it looks broken, Captain.”

“The trolls hunt in these woods, don’t they?” Mumme asked.

Efran said, “That’s what I understand, yes. So the traps have already been sprung, and. . .” He let off for the shreds to speak for themselves. “Well. Let’s take one of these back to show the Commander.”

“Yes, Captain.” Ayling folded up the remains of the net he held; Minka and Martyn dropped the other back to the ground, and they returned to the horses.

Coming out of the woods, however, Efran drew Kraken to a stop beside the path leading to the playground which the troll families now occupied. “Let’s just check to see. . .”

“If our trolls recognize it?” Minka asked.

Efran swung back to her. “Yes.”

So they spurred down the path. Approaching the open gates of the playground, Efran reached back for the net Ayling carried. “The lady and I will take it in to ask; the rest of you wait outside here, please.”

“Yes, Captain.” “Yes, sir,” his men assented.

As Efran and Minka rode into the enclosure to dismount, numerous wiry heads bobbed up, and several men came trotting over. “Da Effin! An’ da Curly Hair!”

Efran glanced back at her in delight, but turned to greet their troll friends. “Yes, ah, Irtz?”

“Da! Da!” Irtz said happily.

“And, uh, Urpèd?” Efran asked dubiously.

“Sheuf,” he said. As Efran was apologizing, he waved, “Nah. Urpèd dig akeducks.”

“Oh, very good. All right. Irtz, Sheuf. Do you know this? Did it fall on you?” Efran asked. As he showed them the tattered net, he pantomimed something falling on his head.

The trolls became very excited. “Da, da!” “On head. *Whoomph!*” “All on head.”

Pointing to the hole, Efran asked, “You did this? How?”

“Ah,” Irtz said. “Dis.” Lifting his broad, knobby hand, he extended his fingers so that the nails emerged like a cat’s claws. His were sharp, at least an inch long.

“Oh, excellent,” Efran breathed. Then he paused, trying to figure out how to make himself understood here. “If it happens again—if anyone tries to take you—” He pantomimed these actions as best he could. “You tell me. Come tell me.” He pointed to Irtz and them himself.

Irtz understood. “Da, Effin.”

While they were engaged in that conversation, Minka felt a tug on her skirt, and looked down at a little troll girl in some kind of pink covering. Minka knelt in delight. “Hello! Aren’t you sweet! What is your name?”

“Gallie. Deetler?” she asked.

Minka gasped, “You’re Detler’s little friend!”

“Da. Tombee’s?” She held up a royal.

“Oh, you need to go shopping at Twombly’s!” Minka cried.

“Da,” Gallie said, pleased.

As Efran turned back to her, Minka stood. “Efran, this is Detler’s friend Gallie, and she needs him to take her to Twombly’s again!” He had met her there just a week ago.

Efran turned his beautiful smile down on the little girl troll. “We’ll find him.” Turning back to Irtz, Efran asked, “Gallie to Detler?”

“Da, da,” Irtz said, waving. So Efran gave the shredded net back to Ayling and helped Minka get back up on Rose, then set Gallie in front of her. After having shied away from carrying Nibor, Rose showed remarkably little objection to Gallie (maybe because of the pink dress).

So with waves all the way around—Gallie waving back to her family somewhere in the playground—the Captain’s group returned to the Lands.

They all dismounted at Barracks A, where they escorted little Gallie in for Efran to summon Detler, wherever he was. The Commander was not here, still at the chapel, apparently. Efran let Ayling show the net to Gabriel and tell him what they had discovered.

Then as Efran began to turn out of the barracks, Detler appeared, saluting. “You summoned me, Captain?”

“Yes.” Efran turned to gesture, but a little whirlwind in pink rushed up.

“Deetler! Tombee’s!” she cried, brandishing her royal.

Detler knelt in delight. “Gallie, what a little woman you are, demanding to go shopping again! And I told you to

call me, didn't I? So let's go, then." He stood, extending his hand to her, and she took it like the belle of the ball. "Permission to be dismissed, Captain."

"You are dismissed," Efran said, smiling down at the belle.

Everyone watched them leave the barracks to take the shortcut to Twombly's, then Efran looked down at Minka. "Well, now that the trolls are secured, I suppose I'd better find the Commander. Do you want to come?" he asked facetiously.

"Don't make me harass you," she said, eyes narrowed.

He laughed, then paused. "Wait—show me what you'd do."

"Not here!" she cried.

"All right, let's go out in the street," he proposed, taking her arm. She buried her face at the men's suppressed smiles. Efran turned to wave Tiras and Stourt to accompany them.

He helped her up on Rose again, although she didn't want him to, and they walked their horses down Main and past Ryal's to the chapel, their bodyguards following. Eryk took their horses around back while Hartshough escorted them to the back patio. On the way, he pleaded, "May I serve you and your gentlemen a bracer, Lord Efran? Lady Minka? The tomatoes actually produce a delightful refresher."

Efran was noncommittal, trying to see who all was on the patio, but Minka said, "That sounds wonderful, Hartshough! We'd appreciate that very much. Thank you!"

"You are so welcome, Lady Minka," Hartshough said gravely, bowing. Stourt patted his arm.

As Hartshough left them at the door to the patio, Efran glanced dubiously at her. "Tomatoes?" He had no problem with vegetables, but tomatoes were—mushy.

She whispered, "We'll break his heart if we don't try them."

He started to laugh again, then saw Lissa at the table with Wendt and Marguerite and sobered at once. Minka barely refrained from asking, *Are you still here?*

Lissa turned to him in satisfaction as Marguerite was rising from her chair. "Here, Efran, take my seat. Wendt wants—"

"Sit down," Efran instructed her, sitting Minka beside her. The men took chairs along the wall while Efran brought up a spare chair to set between Marguerite and Wendt, slightly behind them. Sitting, he leaned his elbows on his knees to look up at Lissa. "Where's Thurlow?"

"I have no idea," she smiled at him.

"Find him," he smiled back at her. Her smile fading, she paused. He added, "It may be a little less awkward for you to ask around than for me to send out my men for him."

Now she looked concerned. "What's wrong?"

Efran leaned back, patting his thighs. “He’s won the grand prize in our visitor sweepstakes, and I have to present it to him before it starts leaking.”

Minka went rigid to contain a snort. Lissa’s face turned cool. She stood, murmuring, “I forgot how brutal you could be when you didn’t want someone around.”

Efran said, “Stourt, help her find her husband.”

“Yes, Captain,” Stourt said, standing. “Shall we start at the inn, Lady Lissa?” She turned on her heel without acknowledging him, but he followed her anyway.

To Tiras, Efran said, “Go tell whoever’s at the front door that I want her shadowed by two men until she goes to bed, and I want a pair of men at her door until she leaves the next morning, when I want her followed again.”

“Yes, Captain.” Tiras strode to the doors, gave his message, then returned for the Captain to gesture him to Stourt’s vacant chair. Leaning his elbows on his knees again, Efran told Wendt and Marguerite what they had discovered in the woods and what he’d learned from Irtz. Then Wendt had to backtrack to tell Marguerite about Bullara’s confession.

While they were discussing all this, Hartshough brought in a tray to unload tall glasses with a red vegetable liquid in which young celery stalks stood perched. The men looked at it dubiously as he departed the patio, but Minka picked hers up to drink around the celery. Her eyes went wide, and she looked toward the kitchen to cry, “Hartshough, that’s wonderful! What all did you put in it?”

He emerged again to bow. “Thank you, Lady Minka. I fear that the recipe is a closely guarded secret at Averne’s.”

“What did you do to Averne to get hold of his closely guarded secret?” she asked, grinning.

“Pardon, Lady Minka, but that also is a closely guarded secret,” he said impassively, and she fell back in her chair to laugh.

Stirring the drink with the celery, Efran watched Wendt take a sip and raise his brows. “That’s actually rather good,” he said before draining it.

“You want to please your wife,” Efran excused him, then looked over to where Tiras had finished his in one gulp.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand (before Minka gave him a napkin) Tiras said, “Sorry, Captain; I have to agree with the Commander.”

“Of course,” Efran grunted, still stirring the concoction with the green stalk. Having survived for so much of his life on garbage, he had grown discerning about his food (and drink).

Leaning back, Minka called, “Is there enough for me to have seconds, Hartshough?”

“For you, Lady Minka, yes.” He came over to refill her tall glass from a pitcher. Minka smacked her lips, looking at her husband while she took a draught.

Efran glanced over to Marguerite, who had almost finished hers, as well. “If you try it, you’ll like it, Efran.”

“Ratcheting up the pressure,” he noted.

Minka raised her eyes over her glass to murmur, “Coward.”

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## Chapter 7

Tiras’ eyes went wide—as Captain of the Red Regiment of the Army of Westford, Efran had won commendations for bravery at the Battle of the West Bank and the Assault on Brier Ridge. Efran raised his chin at his wife, but removed the celery and picked up the glass to begin drinking.

Watching her, he drank until the glass was empty. He set it down to contemplate the faces fixed on him. Then he turned his head toward the kitchen. Casually—not at all affected by the steady gazes—he asked, “Could I get a refill, Hartshough?”

They all let down in quiet, vindicated chuckling as Hartshough reemerged onto the patio. Efran raised his glass; Hartshough lifted the pitcher. But before pouring, he asked, “Did you like it, Lord Efran?”

“It was all right,” he said, watching the pitcher.

Hartshough tilted it, then paused again. “Enough for seconds, Lord Efran?”

“Yes,” he said tightly, taking a bite of celery.

“If you’re quite sure, then.” To everyone’s relief, Hartshough refilled his glass, then asked, “Do you require another celery stalk, Lord Efran?”

“No. Thank you. This one will do,” Efran said, crunching the stalk. He glanced at Minka reproachfully before draining his second glass.

By this time, Wendt had sent Tiras out to check on Lissa and Stourt’s progress in finding her husband. In a little while, Tiras came back to report, “No one’s seen him since early this afternoon, Commander, Captain. So Captain Towner has ordered the lower barracks to turn out to search for him.”

“All right, keep us posted,” Wendt nodded to him, and Tiras trotted out again. Wendt turned to Efran with a mildly quizzical face. “That’s strange.”

“Not good,” Efran agreed, still crunching the celery stalk. Minka had started eating hers, as well.

Not long afterward, Tiras returned to salute and say, “Commander, Captain, they found Thurlow in one of the new sewer trenches dead, with a broken neck. Coghill is looking at him now.”

Wendt exhaled gently and Efran leaned back in his chair. He told Tiras, “All right, everything goes to Ryal, now, as he’s the one to investigate. Inform Captain Towner and Coghill, and send someone up to Estes and DeWitt with all this. Do you have further instructions, Commander?” Efran turned to ask.

“No,” Wendt said quietly. Efran nodded to Tiras, who saluted and quickly left.

Then Efran stood to walk around the table, extending his hand to Minka. She got up to go to his side. He glanced around as though peeved at Thurlow for getting himself killed. “Well, if there’s anything to discover, Ryal will find it. Permission to be dismissed, Commander.”

“Yes, Efran. I’ll route reports to you,” Wendt said. Minka leaned over to hug her auntie, then they departed to receive their horses from Eryk (who actually just followed Kraken as he led Rose to the front of the chapel).

As they rode up the switchback at a walk, Minka observed without censure, “You never told me about Lissa.”

He shook his head vaguely. “Once I knew that her parents wouldn’t have me, I just—forgot all about her. We never slept together. That was after Leila—after I decided not to kill myself—so I was . . . trying to do things differently.” Thinking about this, he snorted, “I tried so hard to be different that I changed the way I talked after Baroffio said something about my ‘backwoods brogue.’ I didn’t realize that I had any accent at all; I just talked the way my men did—who were mostly poor, of course.”

He glanced over at her silence. With a half-smile, he noted, “In the time we’ve been together, you’ve slipped a little from your high Eurasian, you know. You’ve got a bit of that brogue in your vowels.”

She looked thoughtful, then said, “That was just without thinking. But now it strikes me that the only honest people I know talk that way—like your men—except for Marguerite, Hartshough, and Justinian. But all three of them seem to use the Eurasian accent as a cover, a façade. When they don’t have an audience, they slip out of it.”

Efran nodded. “I noticed that.”

Considering this further, she said, “Ryal doesn’t speak with a brogue, though—is there such a thing as high Westfordian? His is definitely not Eurasian.”

“Yes, actually—Westfordians who were proud of their history avoided the Eurasian flourishes. Ryal just speaks plainly so as to be understood, talking about difficult concepts,” Efran said.

“DeWitt also speaks high Westfordian,” she pronounced.

“Commander’s Aide had to ’splain matters to the Surchatain and nobles of Westford,” Efran said wryly.

She acknowledged that, then asked, “How would you describe Wendt’s speech?”

“Universal. He has no accent,” he said. She thought about that, then nodded.

He suddenly pulled Kraken over to block Rose so that they both stopped on the switchback. As Minka looked at him in surprise, he demanded, “What is it about Wendt that Marguerite doesn’t like?”

She stared at him, then cried, “I can’t tell you that! It was confided to me in secret!”

“I’m your husband. Tell me,” he grinned.

She whined, “You can’t tell anyone.”



“Maybe, maybe not,” he said, still smiling. She leaned over Rose’s neck with a groan, but he warned, “Whoever we block coming up is going to hear it as well.”

She looked back quickly to see riders ascending behind them. While Efran grinned at her, she sighed, “He wears his socks to bed.”

Efran stared at her. “That’s it?” he asked, disbelieving. When she nodded, he turned Kraken to continue ascending. Contemplating the image of his Commander making moves on his wife while wearing socks, Efran startled gurgling.

“Don’t tell anyone!” Minka cried. He couldn’t promise anything for laughing.

They arrived at the fortress in late afternoon, about an hour before dinner. Efran sent a man up to the workroom to tell Estes and DeWitt that he was here, then they picked up Joshua from the nursery. He was still lethargic, but happy to see Papa and Mama. With the toddler (about 22 months old) on his papa’s shoulder, they three went out to the back grounds.

There, they were met by all the children in great excitement, all talking at once, jumping up and down, and pointing to the west. Efran and Minka went out farther on the grounds, trying to see the cause for the brouhaha. Joshua raised his languid head, then Minka grasped his father’s arm. “Efran—!”

When he focused on the disorder in the sparring groups, he saw the flapping black shape rise up over their heads, evading their hands. The three-week-old dragon then veered toward the new arrivals on the back grounds while its two-headed sibling scabbled over the seven-foot-tall black iron fence between the fortress grounds and the woodland. That one was more difficult to see, given that part of it replicated the fence while other parts changed to blend in with the grass as it also scrambled toward the people.

The archers fell away, lowering their bows as Quennel shouted at them not to fire. The horses in the training pens were bucking and stamping wildly, so that Tess got thrown again. Ella was able to climb out of the pen while her yearling reared on its tether.

Still holding Joshua on his left shoulder, Efran put out his right hand to intercept the 70-pound baby winging toward Minka. Efran winced as the baby, still flapping, latched onto his arm with all four clawed feet. The children scattered, screaming, while it nodded happily to its new handler. Then it reached out to lick toward Minka with its yellow tongue.

“Just put him on the ground, Efran,” she said. Gingerly, he knelt to lower the baby while the second one, almost unseen, rambled over with both heads waving.

Minka patted all the heads while Efran grimaced, glimpsing sharp teeth. The men in archery and sparring practice ran over, but Efran raised a hand, and they stopped about ten feet away. Apparently, the babies had just come up from their nest on the northwestern hillside to greet the first humans they had met after their hatching. While keeping an anxious eye on Minka, Efran scanned for the father Jonguitud or mother Gevorgyan—most likely camouflaged—but saw neither.

The bravest of the children—Noah, Toby, and Hassie, to begin with—came over cautiously to join Minka in petting the heads. Efran watched, sweating buckets. Glancing around, Minka said, “Let’s see if we can just walk them to the front fence.”

Straightening, she began walking in the direction she wanted them to go, and they padded happily along with her. They had to pass the training pens and stables, but all the horses were already thoroughly spooked. So Minka walked over to the section of fence bordering the northwestern hillside. They all looked skyward at a loud call—*Kak kak kak kak*.

“That’s Gevorgyan,” Efran breathed, scanning the placid blue sky. The babies must have recognized it, for the black one lifted off to fly unsteadily into the fence. Efran pushed it on over one-handed while Joshua watched attentively. Then Efran had to look for the two-headed baby camouflaged in the grass. He leaned over to feel around, finally picking it up with his right hand to drop it over the fence as well.

Then the large group of grown-ups and children watched the babies scabble down to their nest on the hillside, where mother Gevorgyan was evidently settling down. Jonguitud was probably still fishing in the cavern, as he did not appear.

While the children were happily congratulating each other, the dinner bell rang, so they all ran around the fortress to wash up at the well and go in. Trailing them with Joshua, Efran put a limp arm around Minka’s shoulders. “I don’t have the appetite to eat anything after that,” he groaned.

However, Madea’s crew had prepared a beef stew with slow-roasted and smoked cuts that changed his mind.

The following morning (November 10th), Ryal sent for Efran to come down to his shop. Knowing what this must be about, Efran was prompt to respond. He entered the notary shop, glancing up at the securely attached bell, then paused at the counter to smile at Giardi. Repressing a laugh, she pointed to the back room, where Ryal could be heard saying, “Stop flirting with my assistant and get back here, Efran.”

Grinning, Efran did as he was told. Upon entering the back room, he informed Ryal, “I made her laugh today.”

“Congratulations,” Ryal said dryly, sifting through parchments spread out on the small table. “Have a seat.” Faintly groaning, Efran did that as well. Ryal said, “To summarize, Coghill says that Thurlow’s neck was unlikely to have been broken by his falling into the trench, as it was simply dirt—no rock—only about four feet deep in that area. It could have been the result of a fight, but Thurlow showed no other marks or bruising. So Coghill tentatively ruled it a malicious death, either accidental or deliberate.”

“Which makes Bullara the most likely suspect, but anyone who knows him will tell you he didn’t do it,” Efran said.

“Yes, I interviewed him as well, and he strenuously denied it. I believe him simply because he brought the fake royals to Commander Wendt and confessed the scheme that Thurlow had proposed,” Ryal said, separating out pages of testimony as he talked. Efran nodded in agreement.

Ryal continued, “The next most likely suspects seem to be the trolls.”

Efran sat up. “The trolls? How could anyone imagine that?”

“Because of Thurlow’s scheme to take them, for whatever reason,” Ryal said.

Efran was shaking his head. “I talked to them—Irtz and Sheuf—yesterday, after we found the torn nets in the woods. They described the nets falling on them, and their ripping them up. But they showed no knowledge of who was behind it. It’s absurd to think that any of them could ask around to find out who did it, and then find

him to break his neck over a sewer trench without any witnesses,” Efran scowled.

“I believe you,” Ryal sighed. “But I would like to rule them out.”

“Were there any punctures or scratches on Thurlow’s neck?” Efran asked.

“No,” Ryal said.

“That alone rules them out. If you need, I can bring one by for you to look at their fingernails—their claws. That’s what they used to tear up the nets, and if any one of them grabbed Thurlow by his neck, they’d slice a vein before breaking it,” Efran said.

“Yes, I may have to see that. The messengers that Commander Wendt sent up to Lord Baroffio in Westford came back to report that he was breathing fire,” Ryal said.

“Ah. There’s your motive,” Efran said.

Ryal looked puzzled. “How so?”

Humorously bitter, Efran said, “When I rode around with Baroffio yesterday, giving him the grand tour, not only was I stupid enough to tell him what we took in from the Faire, but he also told me that his son-in-law is a ‘conniving little weasel.’ So, one of his men takes out the weasel, then Baroffio extorts us for a good chunk to help pay for the reconstruction of Westford, which he admitted was bleeding them dry.”

“Oh ho,” Ryal said. Then he asked, “Lord Efran, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this interview?”

Efran looked surprised. “Don’t I always?”

“Answer correctly, please, because I am going to take formal notes of everything you just told me. And then I’m going to ask you to take me to talk to one of the trolls,” Ryal said.

“Yes, I do so swear,” Efran replied.

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## Chapter 8

After Ryal had taken down his statement, however, Efran sat back and said, “It’s not going to help much for you or me to talk to Krug. But we have someone up hilltop who can communicate with him. So, I’m going to get a man to bring Krug here, and I’m going to bring down Nibor to translate for all of us.”

Ryal paused, then said, “That is an excellent plan, Efran.”

Nodding, Efran got up to go to the outer door and whistle. When Routh and Suco ran up saluting, he stepped out to tell them, “Go pull off Krug and Urpèd—whichever trolls are digging the sewers—and bring them here to give testimony. If you can make them understand you, tell them we’ll pay them for the digging they miss. And stop by to tell Commander Wendt he may want someone to come hear it.”

“Yes, Captain.” They saluted and took off.

Swinging up on Kraken, Efran leaned over the pommel to tell him, “I’m going to bring our fortress troll down here. Do you want to carry her or do you want me to take another horse?”

Kraken bucked twice, so that Efran had to clutch his neck to stay on. *All right; I’m good.*

“Thanks for letting me know,” Efran grunted, sitting up on the saddle again.

When they got up to the hilltop courtyard, Efran slid down to warn him, “I’m bringing her out. If you buck with her on you, you’ll be hauling compost for the rest of your life. Which may be short.”

*Threats, threats,* Kraken snorted.

“All right, then,” Efran said. He trotted up the steps and down the corridor to swing into the library. There, he found Law class just breaking up. “Ah. Excellent. I need you,” he said, taking Minka’s hand, and she glowed at him in adoration. He paused to soak that up, then said, “And you, too, Soames. Ryal will need you to transcribe a hearing.”

Ella was already out the door on her way to work with the horses, but Rondi paused in tentative interest as Efran said, “Librarian, Ryal has to interview the trolls at his shop, and we need someone who can translate questions and answers for us. Do you think Nibor can help?”

“Let us inquire, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said, bowing.

Efran added, “We want to defend them against possible murder charges.”

Minka gasped, “Murder? Thurlow?”

Efran looked at her to nod, then they all watched the Librarian approach the corner partition. “Nibor, will you help the Abbey defend their trolls?”

There was movement behind the partition, then the lantern was extinguished. The edge of the partition moved, and the Librarian opened the panel for Nibor to step out, hesitantly glancing around.

With his beautiful smile, Efran extended his arm. “Thank you, Nibor. You may ride or walk, and I’ll bring you right back up afterward.”

Rondi asked, “May I come watch?”

“Yes,” Efran said. “And if you would, step up to the workroom to tell Estes and DeWitt; see if either of them wants to come hear.”

“I’ll do that.” Rondi turned out in a swirl of skirts (like Minka).

As Nibor came warily to Efran’s side, Minka took her hand. “Oh, Nibor, I’m so proud of you!” Nibor looked dubious, but allowed Minka to hold her hand.

Efran glanced back. “Thank you, Librarian.”

“You are most welcome, Lord Efran. We all desire justice,” he said, bowing.

In the courtyard, Minka asked Nibor, “Do you want to ride, or—?” But Nibor had begun walking down the switchback. So Minka walked with her.

Efran had lifted his foot to the stirrup when Kraken, ears pricked, moved out from beside him so suddenly that Efran almost fell. “Wha—?” He was left standing in place to watch Kraken trot after the two females. Catching up to them, Kraken nudged Nibor from behind, who recoiled in fear.

When Kraken nudged her again, Minka laughed, “He wants you to ride him, Nibor! Efran, can you help her up?”

Drawing up to them, he grunted, “What else can I do with a horse who can’t abide being ignored, even by a troll? May I lift you?” he asked Nibor. She didn’t shy away, so he raised her to sit in the saddle. She gripped the pommel, drawing up her knees, and just held on while Kraken walked her down, Minka beside them.

Trailing them, Efran glanced back at Soames, Rondi, DeWitt and Estes. They were also following them down the switchback, smiling.

When this procession arrived at Ryal’s shop, they found Krug and Urpèd already seated at the back table with Ryal. Captain Towner’s scribe Viglian was seated against the wall to take notes. Upon seeing Nibor, the two trolls lurched up to babble excitedly at her. She said something to them, and they sat, looking expectantly at Ryal.

He said, “Thank you for coming, Nibor. Please sit here, if you will. Soames, I think there’s room for you with Viglian at the scribe’s table in the back corner, and, Minka, Rondi, DeWitt and Estes, please sit along the wall here. Are there enough chairs?” Ryal craned his neck, looking. Spotting Rondi, then, Krug and Urpèd had to greet her happily as well, and she grinned at them. So the trolls already liked this interviewing very much.

Efran brought out one more chair from the outer office for everyone to get settled. “Now there are enough chairs; I’m standing, Ryal. Giardini’s going to keep me company when your customers let her,” Efran said, glancing at her. She returned a prim smile to him.

Ryal almost rolled his eyes, but said, “Very well. Again, thank you for coming, Nibor. This will be a formal hearing, as there are lives at stake. Nibor, do you swear on your soul to translate truthfully to the best of your ability?” She listened, then nodded her wiry head of hair. “That is a yes,” he told Soames, who was writing.

“Now, Nibor, please translate the oaths to our troll friends here. Krug and Urpèd, do you swear on your souls to tell the truth in this hearing?”

She turned to the attentive trolls to speak to them, and they both waved, “Ah, da, da.”

“They say yes,” she repeated cautiously.

“Thank you, Nibor,” Ryal said. His first questions to them concerned the nets. He brought out the torn net which Ayling had delivered to him, and this they identified at once. That situation turned out to be much as Efran had surmised: Urpèd, Sheuf and Schuchard had been hunting in the woods the day before yesterday (November 8th) when the nets dropped on them suddenly from the trees.

Efran interrupted to ask what they were using to hunt with; when Nibor had translated the question, they held up

their extended claws to show him. “There, Ryal, look at that,” he said.

Carefully taking Krug’s hand, Ryal examined the extended claws. “This is bone?” he asked, glancing back at Efran.

“I think so; we could get Coghill to confirm that, if necessary. Ask them to show you how they grip something,” Efran said.

Ryal glanced around, then used both hands to pick up a fat ledger from the floor. “Hold that,” he instructed Krug, which direction Nibor translated. When Krug took the heavy ledger in one hand, his claws punctured the leather cover. “That’s good,” Ryal said, taking back the perforated ledger ruefully. “This alone makes trolls as a class very dangerous.” His eyes briefly flicked up to Nibor.

From the wall, Estes said, “Nibor doesn’t have claws like that, only fingernails.”

“That’s true, Ryal,” Minka said quickly.

Surprised, he asked Nibor, “May I look at your hand?” Reluctantly, she stretched her fingers toward him. Adjusting his spectacles, he said, “I see that’s correct. And they are very nice-looking nails, Nibor.” She withdrew her hand to study her own fingernails.

Ryal told Soames, “At any rate, note the holes which the claws left in the cover from his merely holding it. Therefore—”

“None of them could have broken Thurlow’s neck without piercing the skin,” Soames finished for him, writing furiously.

“That is correct,” Ryal said.

“How could they have carried me for so long, then? And running?” Rondi asked, frowning.

Nibor looked at her, then translated the question. Krug brightened. “Ah! Dis.” Rising, he went over to sweep her off the chair and twirl around, bouncing a little.

Several others jumped up with confused and urgent directions; DeWitt rose to hold him still. “Wait. Let’s look.” He brushed away Rondi’s trailing dress that covered Krug’s hand so that Estes could study it. He pointed out, “His claws are retracted because his fingers are curled together. He’s holding her on his arms, not in his hands. In other words, she’s not prey.”

“Yes, he’s not hurting me at all,” Rondi said.

“Da,” Krug said, pleased. Then he put her back down.

“Thank you,” she said, a little embarrassed.

Whispering, “Good for you,” Minka took her hand as she sat again.

With that question answered, Ryal resumed the interview. Referencing the nets, he asked the trolls if they had any idea who set them or why. No, they did not.



After a few more incidental questions in that regard, Ryal asked if they knew Thurlow. No, they did not. Efran turned with a brief negatory shake of his head: “We’ve got to let them look at him.”

Ryal suspended questioning the witnesses while Efran left the shop. In a few minutes he returned, holding the outer door open for two soldiers to bring in a stretcher with a body. This they maneuvered into the back room for Ryal to uncover the face. “Do you know him?”

In surprise, Krug and Urpèd said, “Da! Da!” “Dis Ipock.”

This startled them all. “‘Ipock’?” Ryal repeated.

“Da,” Krug said.

“All right,” Ryal said slowly. “You may take—oh, wait just a moment.” Before the body was taken away again, Ryal briefly examined it. The women looked away or covered their eyes. He said, “I note that there are no marks on the body except for Doctor Coghill’s autopsy incisions. He’ll have a written report for us soon, but told me that he had found nothing unusual.” Efran nodded.

After the soldiers had removed the body to return it to Coghill, Ryal asked, “Now, Krug, Urpèd—what day did you first meet this Ipock?”

After looking to Nibor for the translation, Krug gave a lengthy answer, supplemented by Urpèd’s interjections. Nibor then translated, “Ipock came to their village—”

“Village? Where?” Ryal asked, brows drawn.

“The playground, three days ago,” Nibor clarified. That would have been November 7th. “He came without asking; no one knew him, and they knew he was not of the Lands, because he was—” She paused to search for a word, then looked at Estes to say, “*Hoopuni*.”

Everyone swiveled to Estes, who translated, “A trickster, a fraud. So they were suspicious of him right away.”

Nibor continued, “He spoke to them in High Trollish, which he had put to memory by sounds—he did not know the meaning of words he said. But he offered them great money for their hair—if they would cut their hair to give to him. He showed them coins that they knew were bad, because they had been earning good coins digging. They did not like him at once, and chased him out with much anger.”

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## Chapter 9

Ryal said, “I see. How did Thurlow arrive at and leave their village? On a horse? Carriage?”

Nibor asked this of the trolls, and Urpèd lifted his foot to pat it. “He came by feet,” Nibor told Ryal.

Ryal asked, “Did they leave their village to chase him?”

This question she put to them; they waved, scowling. Nibor translated Krug's reply with, "No, they had much work to do."

After a moment's silence, Ryal looked around the group. "Does anyone have a question?"

DeWitt asked the obvious question, "Why would he want their hair?"

Nibor asked this of Krug and Urpèd. Their faces went stony and they said nothing. Nibor looked conflicted. Estes said gently, "Nibor, tell us whatever you know."

Hesitantly, she said, "Troll hair can be used in trophy, to show—conquest. But it is also used in dark arts, to make bad things, and trolls that are not bad wish to keep their hair from being used this way. It can come back to hurt them."

There was a moment of deep silence, then Efran said, "Nibor, ask them if they will let us put guards at their gates."

Nibor asked them this; Krug and Urpèd both waved it off: "Na, na."

Efran asked them directly, "Will you come tell us if someone else approaches you? If other *hoopuni* come?"

"Da," Krug said, conciliatory, and Urpèd looked agreeable.

They all looked to Soames and Viglian, who were writing violently. When they paused to look up, Ryal asked, "Does anyone else have questions?"

DeWitt sighed, "A lot, but Krug and Urpèd have given us a great deal to go on."

"And have certainly exonerated themselves. There is no question of their innocence in Thurlow's death," Ryal said. Nibor translated this for them, and they looked satisfied.

Efran stood to lean over the table, offering his hand. "Thank you, Krug. Urpèd." They shook his hand happily, as they had shaken the children's hands without injuring them. They also shook each other's hands in congratulations. "Who's got their pay?" Efran asked, looking around.

"Here." DeWitt stood to dig in his pocket and give them each three royals. This they accepted, and DeWitt requested of Nibor, "Please ask them if they want to return to digging or to their village."

When she asked, they both insisted, "Wurk! Wer wurk."

"All right. You may go." Efran stood aside to open the door to the front of the shop. Krug and Urpèd left, waving happily to their interviewers and the customers waiting in line, who startled. Handing one customer a form to sign, Giardi waved back to them.

The rest of them—Efran, DeWitt, Estes, Nibor, Viglian, Minka and Rondi—gathered outside the shop, where DeWitt paused to tell Efran, "Well then, we'll take Nibor back up—" He broke off as they all looked at the Commander's Second Gabriel, who was saluting Efran.

"Captain, the Commander has received Lord Baroffio and two of his associates at the chapel. The rest of his men, about thirty, have been sent refreshments outside the gates. Lady Lissa is also at the chapel to meet with the

Commander, so he wishes your presence when you are available,” Gabriel said.

Efran said, “Yes, I’m coming now.” He briefly stepped out to look down Main and see soldiers in Westfordian blue on either side of the road just outside the gates. As Gabriel remounted his horse to take this message to the Commander, Efran turned to kiss Minka’s head. “Please go on up hilltop with DeWitt; I’ll send for you if I absolutely muck everything up.”

“All right,” she said; DeWitt snorted mildly, extending a hand to her. Efran watched them begin up the switchback with Nibor far ahead of them. Then he swung up on Kraken to ride the short distance to the chapel.

Because Efran refused to let Kraken take a shortcut through the chapel, Eryk took him around back to unsaddle him so that he could roll in the lush grass. Then Hartshough pointed Efran to the dining area. A group of people sitting around the table looked over as he approached.

“Thank you for joining us, Captain,” Wendt said. “Please take your seat here.” Sitting at the head of the table, he indicated the chair around the corner at his right hand.

“Thank you, Commander,” Efran said, sitting. Directly across from him was Baroffio, who attempted to stare him down. Efran smiled vaguely, glancing down the table. Next to Baroffio was Captain Towner, with ink, quill and parchment to take notes. Beside him was a Westfordian noble unknown to Efran, then a chair down from him was Marguerite. She barely suppressed a laugh when Efran crinkled his eyes at her.

Lissa was sitting at Efran’s right, and another unknown lord was next to her. As they all had drinks of one kind or another, Hartshough asked, “Shall I bring you refreshment, Lord Efran?”

Efran glanced around, hesitating, and Marguerite almost started laughing again. Then he said, “That—tomato drink would be welcome, if you have any left, Hartshough.”

Wendt permitted himself a bare smile. Hartshough bowed with, “I do indeed, Lord Efran.” And he turned to the kitchen.

“Thank you,” Efran said, watching in satisfaction as Marguerite did laugh. The lords looked on in mild impatience.

When Efran received his glass, which he promptly emptied by half, Wendt said, “Captain, let me introduce Lord Lundeen next to Captain Towner here—he’s been assisting Lord Baroffio in financing the rebuilding in Westford. Next to Lady Lissa is Lord Callisto, also of great assistance to the restoration. I have apprised Lord Baroffio of our efforts to discover how Lord Thurlow died. Particularly, after interviewing Bullara and his associates, who were transporting him to a new hiding place, we can definitely rule him out of any involvement.” While listening, Efran finished off his drink.

“Then why is he in hiding?” Lundeen asked without expression.

“Due to a well-known domestic situation, sir,” Wendt said with a half-smile. Efran’s chest rippled with a suppressed snort, and Lissa glanced at him. Addressing Efran, Wendt said, “At any rate, I understand that you were sitting in on Lord Ryal’s interrogation of the trolls.”

“Yes,” Efran said, tapping the celery stalk on the edge of the glass. “We had Nibor down to translate, and Estes and DeWitt in to ask questions, so Ryal went after the matter like a bulldog. And he determined that the trolls had nothing to do with it, either.”

Callisto turned in his seat to him. “Were they not digging these trenches?”

Studying him, Efran said, “Yes, as were many other men who also did not kill Thurlow.”

“We wish to see their testimony,” Callisto said.

“Certainly, although it may take several hours for Soames to write up his notes—it was a very comprehensive interview. Viglian took notes as well, so they will compare their transcripts for accuracy before a final copy is ready. Better look for that tomorrow, at the earliest,” Efran said, contemplating the celery stalk. Glancing around, he took a bite to begin crunching it.

“Could you glean anything certain?” Wendt asked.

Efran reflected on that while he finished chewing his bite. “Frankly, Commander, it raised more questions than it answered—Nibor was extremely helpful in getting specifics from Krug and Urpèd, who were the two we interviewed. We learned that they are far more intelligent than we assumed, and not nearly as gullible as others may have thought.”

“How so?” Baroffio asked. “Trolls are by nature ignorant brutes.”

Efran paused. “At one time I would have agreed with you, and I still think that many are. But my experiences with our playground trolls have thrown that over. They are righteous.”

The Westfordians looked at each other in astonishment. Baroffio sputtered, “Now what did you hear that makes you say that?”

Efran shook his head. “Whatever I told you might be misleading. You have to wait for the official transcript.”

“Then let us talk to this Nibor,” Callisto said.

Again Efran shook his head. “She knows nothing about it beyond the interview. Wait for the transcript.”

“Is it righteous, as well?” Callisto asked.

Efran looked vaguely confused. “It will certainly be more accurate than what I told you.”

“This troll, I mean,” Callisto clarified.

Efran’s face went blank. “You may not see Nibor.”

Baroffio turned to Wendt. “We demand to be allowed to conduct our own investigation.”

“No,” Efran said. “By law, Lord Ryal is the one in charge of the investigation. Before coming to us two years ago, he was the notary of Westford for many years, and his integrity is beyond question.”

Baroffio studied him a moment, then said, “Your Commander may have a different opinion from you, Captain.”

Efran took another bite of celery and Wendt said, “I’m afraid not, Lord Baroffio. First, I have known Ryal for years, and he is certainly qualified to conduct an impartial investigation. But even if I disagreed with Efran on

this, he outranks me here. He is Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

The Westfordians turned to stare at Efran, who crunched his celery. Swallowing, he said, “Lord Baroffio, you, your daughter, and your two associates may lodge in the Lands at your own expense for however long the investigation takes, and I don’t even have to tell Ryal to share information with you. Once his findings are certified, they are public. However, your men outside the gates must remove themselves from Abbey property—that is, beyond the old stone bridge.”

“They are already outside your gates,” Baroffio noted.

“They are on Abbey property. They must withdraw beyond the old stone bridge,” Efran repeated.

“Or what?” Baroffio asked, amused.

Wendt said, “Lord Baroffio, we’re trying to accommodate you, but Efran is right to demand that you withdraw your troops—they intimidate our merchants and guests. I won’t need authorization from him to use force if you don’t.” Efran crunched the stalk.

Lissa spun in her chair to shout at him, “Put down the celery!” He looked at her to chew, then, the tender young leaves quivering beyond his lips. So she jerked them out of his mouth.

At that time, Hartshough let in Suco, who trotted up to the table to salute. “Commander, Coghill requests the Captain’s presence in his quarters.”

Efran stood, turning to Wendt. “Permission to be dismissed, Commander.”

“Go,” Wendt nodded.

Efran went around the end of the table, following Suco. Lissa looked after them, serenely folding the napkin in her lap.

Kraken lunged up from the grass in the backyard, but Efran was taking a shortcut on foot behind Ryal’s and the community well before landing on the sidewalk in front of Delano’s. Kraken nudged up the gate latch of the chapel yard to pursue him down Main.

Kraken caught up with him as Efran opened the door of Coghill’s front office (behind which were his treatment and examining rooms, then his living quarters). Efran turned to pat Kraken’s nose. “I’ll be right out.” Then he went in, leaving his horse to block the door with Suco behind him.

At the front desk, Delio looked up; Efran said, “Yes, Coghill—”

“Back here, Captain,” Coghill said. So Efran went into the next room where the doctor stood over a body on the table. While Efran stopped to stare down at it, Coghill said, “Before releasing Thurlow’s body to the undertaker Smellie, I thought to check for one or two other possible conditions. So I opened up the incision I made yesterday, and. . . .” He let off, at a loss for words.

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Chapter 10

At that time, one of the playground troll youngsters wanted to go hunt pygmy hogs in the woods, but all the grownups were too busy to go with him. So he went by himself, but almost the moment he got into the woods, he was set upon by two men who cut off almost all of his hair. They let him go without hurting him, however, and he ran crying back to the playground. His mother whacked him for going out alone, but she never thought to tell the men or Captain Efran about it until much later.

In Coghill's office, he and Efran were looking down at Thurlow's body. Efran stood speechless a moment, then asked, "Has Ryal seen this?"

"Yes, just now, and he told me to show you," Coghill said.

"Stand by." Efran turned to go to the front door. "Suco!"

"Yes, Captain," he said from behind Kraken.

Efran instructed, "Take my horse to the chapel; ask Commander Wendt, Captain Towner, Lord Baroffio and Lady Lissa to come here at once—*only* those four. Then go find Goss; get him down here with sketch paper and charcoal."

"Yes, Captain." Suco turned Kraken, who lowered his head submissively. Leaping up onto his bare back, Suco turned him up Main at a run.

Efran then stepped down from the doorway to whistle in the direction of Barracks A next door. Immediately Connor came running over. "Captain?"

"I need two men at this door," Efran said. Connor turned to gesture to someone behind him, who turned out to be Heus. As they both landed at the doctor's steps, saluting, Efran told them, "Commander Wendt, Captain Towner, Lord Baroffio and Lady Lissa will be arriving momentarily. Oh, and Goss. You're to turn away anyone else who tries to come in unless they're bleeding. Badly."

"Yes, Captain," Connor said. He and Heus stood on either side of the steps facing the street, hands folded behind them.

Efran reentered the doctor's house to return to the back room. Coghill was standing over the corpse with a scalpel. Glancing up at Efran, he said, "You see the incision I made yesterday to check for abnormalities in his internal organs, of which I found none. Everything looked normal. So I saw no reason to remove any organs. After seeing this today, I cut open an arm, and found—" He opened the skin flap for Efran to look.

"Muscle and bone. What's wrong with that?" Efran murmured.

"Nothing. That looks as it should. So just now, I cut down farther from the arm, to the shoulder, and down into the chest cavity," Coghill said. Again, he laid open the skin flaps to Efran's view.

Efran stared in disbelief. "It's—"

Connor appeared at the door of the examining room. "Those you summoned are here, Captain, except for Goss."



“Yes.” Efran came out to the doctor’s receiving room to attempt to preface what they were about to see, but paused as Commander Wendt was giving Captain Towner instructions.

Towner left, and Wendt turned to Efran. “The Westfordian soldiers seemed disinclined to pull back, so Towner’s regiment is going to encourage them to go ahead and do that.”

Baroffio said pettishly, “I still don’t see why they should.”

“To not get shot? You three come on back, then,” Efran said.

Wendt, Baroffio, and Lissa entered, but she refused to look at the body. Coghill began, “Hello, all. I don’t know what to say except to simply tell you what I’ve done and seen. Here is the incision I made yesterday to inspect the dead man’s internal organs—”

Baroffio sputtered, “And then stuffed it with straw packed in muslin, like a scarecrow. What was the point of that?”

“No, sir, I never put anything into the body. When I closed the incision yesterday, the organs were all as they should be. I reopened the incision today to make a further examination, and found all this,” Coghill said.

“Well then, who stuffed the body?” Baroffio demanded.

Efran told Coghill, “Open up the arm and shoulder incisions to show him.”

As Coghill began pulling back the skin on both sides of the incision, Lissa turned full away, unable to watch. Outraged, Baroffio said, “Stop mutilating him!”

“Look at it!” Efran demanded. “The arm is muscle and bone. The shoulder is muscle and bone, except where it’s changing into straw and muslin in front of our eyes!”

“You’re insane!” Baroffio shouted. “His organs are underneath all that—that—rubbish which you stuffed inside him to cover up the fact that he was murdered!”

Efran took a scalpel off the doctor’s tray and drove it into the midsection where the incision gaped open. Lissa cried out, grabbing Efran’s arm hard enough to draw blood with her fingernails. He shook her off, then cut a line down the muslin. With that, he dropped the scalpel to pull the fabric apart with both hands.

“Stop it!” Lissa cried, pulling his head back by his hair.

He pushed her arm away, scowling. “Keep your hands off me.” She had pulled out a few strands of his hair.

Wendt moved her away from him. “Let him finish.”

Reaching down into the torn muslin, Efran brought up handfuls of straw until it was piled up around the table like snow. There was nothing but straw on muslin clear to the back of the body cavity.

Wendt, studying the corpse, said, “Doctor, cut down the neck here to the chest, if you would.”

Despite Baroffio’s protests, Coghill made the cut and spread the skin. The men watched the muslin of the chest

spread slowly upward over the muscle and tendons of the neck. Cutting into the muslin, Coghill exposed only straw. Wendt said, “Now cut from the abdomen down the leg.”

This Coghill did rapidly, because the transformation was beginning to pick up speed. They watched the fat of the abdomen become muslin packed tightly with straw. Shortly, everything they saw was inert material—except, from the outside, the uncut parts of the body appeared normal. The skin looked exactly to be that of a dead person, with a waxen pallor and tinges of purple on the feet, hands, and lips.

Wendt raised up thoughtfully. “This was never a human being. This was a mannequin.”

“How can that be?” Coghill whispered. “He talked and walked exactly as a person, even fooling his wife! How was this done?” Lissa was staring down at what she had known as her husband.

“By arts I don’t care to understand,” Wendt said. And Efran remembered what Nibor had said about troll hair.

At that time, Goss appeared at the door of the examination room with sketch paper and wrapped charcoal. He saluted. “Goss responding to your summons, Commander. Captain.”

The others blinked at him for a moment, then Efran gestured him over. “Stand right here and sketch what you see.”

Goss came to the side of the table to look at the dead man’s slack face and multiple incisions over a body littered with straw. “I . . . don’t understand what I’m seeing, Captain.”

“Exactly. Just draw it,” Efran said.

“Yes, sir.” Goss awkwardly nudged aside piles of straw with his foot, then brought up his sketch board and charcoal to begin drawing the half-stuffed body before him. But he was distracted by the straw at his feet, and kept looking down at it.

Bewildered, offended, and deeply distressed, Baroffio took his daughter out of the doctor’s office to return to the inn. While Coghill sent Smellie away empty-handed—who was going to pay to bury a strawman?—Efran was quietly asking Wendt whether they should have Ryal show Baroffio, alone, his notes from the trolls’ interview.

Goss interrupted them: “Commander, Captain—pardon me.”

“Yes?” Efran looked at Goss but Wendt looked down at the floor, where Goss was looking.

“What are these—black, kinky wires in with the straw?” Goss asked, kicking at the pile again.

Efran’s face went slack. “What?” he whispered.

Goss bent to pick up a handful of straw to show them. “They’re just—short bits. But they’re not grass, nor any kind of plant I’ve ever seen.”

Coming over to look, Coghill used tweezers to pick out a black wire about an inch long and hold it under a magnifying lens. Then he looked down at the collection of similar wires scattered throughout the straw. “They look to be added as an ingredient, almost. They’ve all been cut to a uniform size and mixed in. And see here—” He swept a foot through the pile on the floor. “The straw has been uniformly cut as well, to about three inches long.” A glance at the litter on the floor, the table, or within the muslin in the body cavity confirmed this.

“I have no idea how I’m going to write all this up,” Coghill finished in some despair. Then he stepped out to tell Delio, “That medical apprentice we interviewed—Tolliver—have him come see to our patients for the time being.” Nodding, she rose to go out.

Efran glanced around. “All right, we’ll—” Taking a piece of sketch paper to hold under Goss’ handful, he said, “Drop what you’ve got here; I’ll see what we can find out. Go ahead and sketch the mannequin.”

“Yes, Captain.” Goss emptied his handful over the paper, which Efran folded to put in his pocket.

Wendt began, “They almost look like. . . .” He didn’t voice the comparative he had in mind.

“Yes, Commander. We’re going on over to Ryal’s,” Efran said, distracted. “Bring your sketch there when you’re done, Goss.”

“Yes, Captain,” he said, glancing up from the beginnings of his drawing.

When Efran and Wendt exited Coghill’s office, they found Suco and Kraken right outside, along with Connor and Heus. Petting Kraken’s nose, Efran told them all, “Fall in; we’re going to Ryal’s.” The men saluted.

Wendt was looking toward the wall gates, so Efran turned to look as well. With Abbey men arrayed along the gates and walls, all but one of the Westfordians had withdrawn past the old stone bridge. Meanwhile, Lord Lundeen was talking to an officer through the gate at the side of the road.

“Towner will keep an eye on them,” Wendt murmured. Efran mutely agreed, then turned up Main toward the notary office. Kraken walked in the street beside him, and the men followed.

When Efran saw Minka’s horse Rose tied outside Ryal’s shop, he muttered, “Uh oh.”

“Someone looking for you,” Wendt observed. Efran grimaced at the prospect of awkward explanations.

Before they entered the shop, Wendt instructed the soldiers to stand outside for messages. Efran went in, coming up to the counter where Minka turned toward him. Her eyes were dry but her face was pale as she said, “When Kraken trotted up hilltop with a rider in red who was not you, I didn’t panic or anything.”

“I’m proud of you,” he said, reaching an arm to her. She leaned on his chest, twining a hand in his shirt.

Giardi, at the counter, smiled at him; Ryal came out from the back room to say, “Efran. Commander Wendt. Soames is still working on the transcript of the trolls’ testimony, but—now—Thurlow’s body—”

With a pained laugh, Efran said, “Yes, we’re going to share with you what we know, which is precious little. But Soames may have to put off the transcription work to take notes for us here.”

So Efran, Wendt, and Minka accompanied Ryal into the interview room, where Soames looked up from pages scattered across the table. Ryal shut the door, and Efran pulled a folded paper out of his pocket. Over the next hour, he and Wendt told Ryal and Minka what they had seen of Thurlow’s body. Soames took notes.

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## Chapter 11

At this time, Goss brought in his sketch for the Captain and Commander to look at first. Wendt said, “That’s accurate.”

Efran said, “He even added notes here about the muslin, the straw and the wires. Good work, Goss.”

“Thank you, Captain, Commander,” he said.

As Efran handed it to Ryal, he said, “Goss, I need you to sign and date this, please.”

“Yes, sir.” Goss came around the table to take Soames’ quill. He signed the sketch, then paused to ask, “What is today?”

“November tenth. Be sure to add the year, as well—eighty-one fifty-five,” Soames said. Thus Goss dated it, and left with a salute.

After Soames had seen the sketch, he handed it to Minka. She studied it with drawn brows, then murmured, “Auntie needs to see this.” Efran agreed.

Following that, Efran declared himself done for the day; he was taking Minka up hilltop to see the children. Ryal sent a message to Baroffio and Lissa requesting an interview with her at her earliest convenience tomorrow; Soames set himself to copy out another ream of notes. But Wendt took the interview with the trolls, the sketch, and the folded paper home to show Marguerite.

Because Wendt and Marguerite were dining alone tonight, they asked Hartshough to eat with them. (Windry had asked Eryk to come to her house for dinner, and Justinian was still gone.) A pair of soldiers guarded the chapel doors, as usual, though not so much for protection anymore as to run messages for the Commander, should he need it.

So Wendt, Marguerite, and Hartshough sat at one end of the long dining table to eat and talk. Wendt showed both of them Ryal’s certified copy of his interview with the trolls, then told them about the transformation of Thurlow’s body, bringing out the sketch and the folded packet of straw and wire clippings for them to see. Marguerite was faerie, the daughter of the last Faerie Queene over all the Southern Continent; Hartshough was part faerie, part mountain troll. Therefore, Wendt felt that if anyone on the Lands could give him insight about this aberration of nature, they could.

In fact, there was a lot they could tell him.

Sifting through the pieces of straw and wire, Marguerite said, “Yes, that’s definitely troll hair. I’m very glad our trolls were able to break out of the nets, because trolls in general won’t give up their hair willingly; they usually have to be killed for it. The art of replicating a human—making a mannequin of a specific person—is certainly a dark art, very complex and difficult. There can’t be more than a handful on the Southern Continent who can do it. Is that right, Hartshough?”

“Yes, Lady Marguerite, and I am disturbed to see that it’s been done here or in Westford,” Hartshough said.

Wendt asked, “Then where is the real Thurlow?”

“I’m afraid he might have been killed to make way for it,” Marguerite said.

“That’s bad,” Wendt muttered. “If they covered their tracks well enough, it may be impossible to tell when he was murdered. Now, how is this animated?”

“Like a puppeteer with a marionette,” Marguerite said, raising her shoulders.

Wendt looked dissatisfied. “But how was Thurlow replicated so perfectly?”

Marguerite said, “Well, the puppeteer needs to harvest certain tokens from the victim who is to be replaced—hair, saliva, blood, and, something else. What else, Hartshough?”

“Urine, Lady Marguerite. But so little a quantity is needed, soiled underwear may suffice,” he said. “Also, semen is extremely powerful, so that it may substitute for the saliva, blood and urine, all three.”

“Saliva. Blood. Hair.” Wendt suddenly realized that he had witnessed these three being harvested from the same person. “Just small quantities of each?”

“A mere drop, Commander,” Hartshough said.

“How can we prevent someone being replicated?” Wendt asked. “If the blood, the saliva, and the hair have already been collected, what can we do to stop it?”

Marguerite turned her brilliant violet-blue eyes to him. “Misdirection, dear. Now who do you suspect is the puppeteer and who is the victim?”

“Let me tell you what happened,” he said, pulling his chair closer to the table as the other two leaned toward him. And they remained at the table for hours, refining a plan until shortly before Eryk came home.

When he entered, Wendt had just gone to bed and Marguerite was picking up her dishes to take them into the kitchen, where Hartshough was at work. (Besides his regular duties, he had a lot to do tonight—emptying a rat trap and brushing several of the men’s uniform jackets.) Eryk took the dishes from Marguerite. “Let me do this, Lady.”

“I can carry them, Eryk,” she said, studying him. “What’s wrong?”

He looked deeply conflicted. “Windry wants to—to be together again, and I don’t know. . . .”

She nodded in understanding. “Don’t let yourself be pushed into anything you’re not sure of, Eryk. I think you have a right to make her wait; make her prove her—sincerity,” she said.

He raised his face in relief. “Thank you for that, Lady Marguerite.”

“You’re welcome to it,” she said, turning to the kitchen with her dishes. Eryk went up to his room on the loft.

She went to bed, then, but when the evening became late night without any sign of Justinian, she grew worried. So Wendt told her where he was, which did not alleviate her worry at all.

Elsewhere that night, behind the dark southwest corner of Croft’s, a sweating fortress worker met a visiting lord.

“Criminy, that was the scariest thing I’ve ever done. Can you imagine what they’d do to me if they found me digging through the Captain’s dirty laundry?”

“Do you have them?” the lord asked.

“Yeah, ’ere you go, and they’s pretty smelly.” He shoved a pair of breeches at the lord.

“How do I know they’re his, Luckinbill?” the lord grunted, holding them up in the dim light of a lantern in the stables behind them.

Startled by the use of his name, Luckinbill spat, “Look at the laundry mark, Lord Lundeen! The ‘C’ circled! That’s the Cap’n’s mark, so the laundresses know to give it special attention! Now you better have what you promised!”

“Lower your voice! Here.” Lundeen shoved a pouch at him. Luckinbill opened it to take out a few of the gold coins. But before he could get them up to the light, Lundeen hissed, “Someone’s coming!” So they darted away in different directions.

Stalking back to the inn, Lundeen muttered, “Can’t process it tonight, but at least we got it. We’ve got everything we need now. But . . . just in case, *just in case* something goes wrong, we’ll harvest the other as well.”

First thing the next morning, Wendt stopped by Ryal’s to return the items he had borrowed to show Marguerite and Hartshough. While there, he and Ryal collaborated on a strategy. Since Ryal had already asked Lissa and Baroffio for an interview today, Wendt sent messengers to them and the lords Lundeen and Callisto at The Lands’ Best Inn to tell them that the certified transcript of the notary’s interview of the trolls was ready to view. Unfortunately, the notary had no other copy, so they had to come to his shop to see it.

When Ryal received an acknowledgment of their coming, he sent word to Marguerite. She, in turn, informed Hartshough. He put on his hat, arranged his boutonnière, took up a small wallet, and walked next door to The Lands’ Best Inn. On the way, he passed a well-dressed group of three men and one woman who ignored his tip of the hat in passing. (Incidentally, Ryal had only a hazy idea of the part that Hartshough was to play.)

Upon entering the lobby of the inn, Hartshough proceeded upstairs to a luxury suite. After pausing to put on silk gloves, he placed a finger on the escutcheon to unlock the door. This he opened to go just inside, closing it behind him. Then he stood at the doorway to turn his head this way and that, sniffing. (Although mountain trolls are only distantly related to their human-eating cousins, they share certain characteristics, such as highly developed olfactory organs.)

Not detecting what he had come for, Hartshough exited that suite. Before he could relock the door, a maid passed him to enter it. Ah—she had work to do there. So he went down the corridor to another luxury suite. This he unlocked in the same manner, and again stood in the outer room to sniff. First, he discerned that the maid had just cleaned this suite, so would not be an interruption.

The next thing he detected was that his objective was in the inner room. However, his attention was immediately drawn to a watchdog—a brass figure of a boxer, about two feet tall. This sculpture could retain sounds for the owners to hear upon their return. So, withdrawing his kerchief, Hartshough affected the voice of the floor supervisor to say, “Now what difficulties did Luna have cleaning this room?” In passing the boxer, he draped the kerchief over the dog’s head, which would prevent its picking up anything else until the kerchief was removed.



Then he padded to the inner door and opened it. His nose directed him to a battered wooden box sitting on the bedside table. It appeared to be a medicine chest, which wealthy travelers often had their personal physicians pack with remedies for common ailments.

Approaching the box cautiously, Hartshough examined it visually and by smell. Abruptly, he lifted up to say, "If you enter, you will thwart my efforts to stop these people." And the little man who had followed him to the bedroom door in curiosity scampered off again.

Satisfied, Hartshough returned to his task. With gloved hands, he opened the hinged top. Resting in the shallow, velvet-lined interior was a row of small bottles labeled, "Lavender/sage {headache}," "Coriander {fever}," "Mint {stomach pain}," "Licorice {coughs}," and "Vinegar {cleansing}."

That these rested so close to the top of the box indicated a hidden compartment beneath. So Hartshough leaned down to study the open box closely. He immediately saw the small hole along the back edge of the box, visible only when it was opened, and the tiny tip of a sprayer inside it. Detecting wolfsbane in the small canister behind it, Hartshough perceived that any erroneous attempt to lift the top shelf—in fact, the false bottom—would cause the wolfsbane to spray into the face of the would-be thief.

Looking further, he saw the smaller holes on each side of the shelf, and the hidden levers beneath them. So he withdrew two dressmaker's pins from underneath his boutonnière and inserted these in the holes at exactly the same moment. There was a confirming *click*, and he was able to lift out the false bottom and set it aside. The pins remained secure in the levers on the underside of the shelf he had just removed.

In the bottom of the box, protected by a glass cover, were four small round glass dishes lying on a velvet-covered base. They were labeled, "*la salive*," "*le sang*," "*la pisse*," and "*les cheveux*." The first two had small spots in the center of each dish, the first being cloudy white, the second brown. The third dish was empty; the fourth contained short segments of two hairs with the roots. So Hartshough got to work.

First, he lifted off the glass cover to stand it on edge without touching the box. (This was possible by a butler's arts.) Removing a wallet from his waistcoat pocket, he opened it to view three small tubes. From the first, he extracted the needle from its scabbard, the point of which he held over the first dish ("*la salive*") in order to deposit the tiniest drop in the center of the drop already there. Hartshough was proud of his own contribution of spittle to this dish, which would render it unusable for its original purpose.

The insertion into the second dish required deft work to get the tiny gel-like drop correctly deposited into the midst of the drop already there, but this also was accomplished by Hartshough's steady hand. The blood had been contributed by a rat unwise enough to enter a trap in the chapel's backyard stables.

Hartshough's third tube contained thick black hairs, also with roots. Three Polonti men had unknowingly contributed these hairs when Hartshough had brushed their uniform jackets (as a service to frequent guards and messengers). The difficulty here is that they were not all the same length, nor the length of the hairs residing in the dish. So Hartshough had to take a moment to find the pair of nail scissors in his pocket and trim two hairs to the correct length at the correct angle, making sure that the excess went into his jacket pocket. Then, with tweezers, he removed the resident hairs from the glass dish to his pocket and deposited those he had brought, taking care to arrange them in the same position.

Checking to see that all was in order, he replaced the wallet and nail scissors in his vest pocket. Then he took up the glass cover to position it exactly as it had been over the dishes. From there, getting the top shelf back on without spraying wolfsbane was a little trickier.

Picking up the shelf by the pins, Hartshough needed to lower it so that the levers of the top and bottom engaged precisely. The only way for him to do this (without the owner's device) was to, first, insert the tips of the pins into the side holes without engaging the bottom levers. Then he must look down into the sprayer hole to align it exactly with the tip of the sprayer beneath. The slightest deviation would trigger the spray, and if he did not receive a face full of wolfsbane, it would still alert the owner that his (or her) traces had been tampered with.

But again, the butler's hands provided the necessary stability to rejoin the top to the bottom with a satisfying *click*. He returned the pins to their place beneath his boutonnière and softly closed the lid of the medicine box. Retreating to the door of the bedroom, Hartshough turned to deeply inhale, removing all vestiges of his scent from the room.

With the voice of the floor supervisor, Hartshough went to the brass watchdog to remove his kerchief and say, "That's good, then." He exited the corridor door to shut and relock it with a touch. Removing his gloves, he departed, a harmless butler on errands for the lady of the house.

On his way down the street, he glanced up with mildly reproofing eyes to the little men in tweed perched atop the new streetlamps along Chapel Road. They grinned at him, doffing their flat caps in respect, hunching their shoulders as they chuckled in approval.

Upon his return to the chapel, Marguerite met him at once. "Well?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, Lady Marguerite; I was successful in finding the containers for the traces and corrupting them. However, I am troubled by the nature of the anti-theft devices by which the traces were protected," he said thoughtfully, removing his hat to hang it on the coat rack.

"How so? Do you mean they were expecting us to break in?" she asked in concern.

"No, not *us*, precisely, but—someone. Yes, they were definitely hedging against incursion by other interested parties, which appear to be sprites," Hartshough said.

"Sprites!" she said in astonishment. "More like Gotobed?"

"Apparently so. While sprites generally have no objection to playing tricks on humans, these appear to have taken a great dislike to the strawmen—or their creator," he observed.

"Is that right," Marguerite murmured. And she sent a message to her husband to ask him to stop by the house when he had a moment. He quickly found a moment. Upon being informed of Hartshough's sabotage, Wendt expressed deep appreciation to his wife and butler. Then he returned to the barracks to close himself and Efran in the conference room to tell him. Efran was disturbed by this news. So they two talked over what should be done.

While they were discussing this, Gabriel knocked on the door. "Commander?"

"Yes, come in," Wendt said, leaning back.

Gabriel opened the door. "Commander, Captain—Arne has been talking with a man who claims he saw Thurlow killed." Wendt and Efran glanced at each other in surprise.

"Is he here? Send him in," Wendt said.

"Yes, sir. He's what you might call a reluctant witness," Gabriel said.

“Why?” Efran asked.

“I’ll let him tell you that, Captain.” Gabriel stepped back to open the door, telling someone outside, “They want to hear what you have to say. The Commander and the Captain. Captain Efran. Yes, just go on in.”

A laborer shuffled in to remove his cap as he glanced furtively at the two seated at the conference table. Gabriel said, “Commander Wendt, Captain Efran, this is Kravchuk; he’s been digging on the aqueducts. Tell the Commander and the Captain what you saw, Kravchuk.”

“Yeah, uh,” Kravchuk began unhappily, twisting his cap in his hands as he looked between the two. “Gettin’ ready to dig, early on the ninth, saw the man—didn’t know who he was till Cap’n put out the word to search—saw him bein’ pushed into the trench, and he didn’t come out again.”

“Who pushed him, Kravchuk? Did you recognize him?” Wendt asked.

The man looked sick. “No, sir. Fact was, he was—a little man, ah, maybe, three, three and a half feet tall, in this—this blue tweed suit with these big red buttons and a—a duckbill cap. He pushes the man right into the ditch and then looks at me like, ‘What’re you gonna do about it?’ And, then he’s gone. He just—disappeared. And that’s the gospel truth, sir.”

“I see. Thank you, Kravchuk,” Wendt said.

“You’re not gonna spread it around that I told you, sir, are you?” he asked apprehensively.

“No, Kravchuk; we’ll keep your name out of it. Thank you for coming forward,” Wendt said.

“Yes, sir.” The laborer turned to go, and Gabriel showed him out.

Wendt and Efran looked at each other. “Are we going to be playing sprite games again?” Efran asked.

“I don’t know, but you’d better tell Minka. I’ll talk to Marguerite,” Wendt said, and Efran agreed.

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## Chapter 12

In Ryal’s shop, four visitors sat at the table in his back room to bicker over the interview sheets. Baroffio started with them all; after reading the first page, he handed it to his daughter, who read it thoroughly. When she was finally done with it, she passed it on to Lundeen. Thus Callisto had to wait in growing impatience to receive the information they all had before him.

After reading the last page, Baroffio sat back with glassy eyes. “I don’t believe a word of it,” he declared. “That Thurlow would come to them speaking trollish to ask for their hair is posterous to the extreme.”

Ryal said carefully, “There is considerable doubt as to whether the man who spoke to the trolls was actually Thurlow. So I wish to interview Lady Lissa, if you permit.” He had to pause to take a question from Giardi as to

the wording of a particular form. When he had answered her, he left the door to the front room open.

Ryal then looked to Soames, gesturing him over to the table. “Lords Lundeen and Callisto, will you kindly sit against the wall here so that I and my scribe may interview the lady?”

“I’m not done reading,” Callisto said irritably.

“You may take the unread portion to the new chair,” Ryal said. In aggravation, Callisto relocated to a chair next to Lundeen. Ryal and Soames sat with Lissa and Baroffio at the table, where Ryal waited to begin until Soames had his quill, ink bottle, and papers ready.

He nodded at the notary, and Ryal asked, “Lady Lissa, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this interview?”

“Yes,” Lissa said.

“Thank you. Now, Lady Lissa, how long have you know Lord Thurlow?” Ryal asked.

“Years. A decade,” she said hazily. “His family and mine go way back.”

“And how long have you been married?” Ryal asked.

“Three years this December,” she said.

“I see. Where did you live?” he asked.

“In Westford, until the Goulven chased everyone away, and vandals burned everything down,” she said tonelessly. “We lost so much—practically everything.”

“I’m sure. It was a terrible time for many families. That was almost a year ago. When did you return to Westford to live?” Ryal asked.

“About—a month ago. My parents have been there a bit longer,” she said.

“And where did you stay in the months between the fire that destroyed Westford and returning in October?” he asked.

“With friends,” she said in a whisper.

“Yes. Where?” Ryal repeated.

She seemed reluctant to answer. “At an estate outside Deneau.”

“What is the name of the estate?” Ryal asked. He glanced at Soames, who only had to take down a word here or there.

Baroffio asked brusquely, “Is all this necessary?”

Ryal replied, “Yes, Lord Baroffio, and if you interrupt again, I will ask you to step out.” Baroffio reddened, and Ryal repeated, “The name of the estate, Lady Lissa?”

“Fettiplace,” she said. “They raise guinea fowl; have a flock of hundreds.”

“And who are the owners?” Ryal asked.

Baroffio stirred threateningly, but Lissa replied, “Fearer and Kami.”

“And how did you come to stay with them?” Ryal asked.

She raised her eyes to the ceiling in exasperation, but at that time, they all became aware of a hubbub outside. The wall gates alarm bell rang, to be repeated by the hilltop courtyard gates bell. Giardi went to the door to look out into the street. “There’s someone at the gates, but just a few people in a carriage, not an army,” she said. Startled, she added, “There goes Efran, galloping down Main bareback!”

Ryal said dryly, “Then I trust that Lord Efran will suffice to handle a few people in a carriage at the gates. Lady Lissa, how did you come to stay with Fearer and Kami at Fettiplace?”

In resignation, she said, “They are Thurlow’s parents.”

There was a moment of silence, then he asked, “Did Thurlow stay there with you?”

“Off and on. He had business to attend in other places,” she said.

“What was his business?” Ryal asked with drawn brows. The lords sitting against the wall were silent. Baroffio inhaled as though to speak, but Ryal turned to him to say quietly, “You are not under oath to contribute anything, Lord Baroffio. If you have something that must be aired, I will interview you when Lady Lissa and I are done.” Baroffio closed his mouth and sat back.

Returning to his reluctant witness, Ryal repeated, “What was Thurlow’s business, Lady Lissa?”

“I don’t really know,” she said quietly.

“What of it do you know?” he asked.

“Nothing, really. He bought and sold. He sold stock for his parents all over,” she said, clearly evasive.

“When did he rejoin you at Westford?” Ryal asked.

“He didn’t,” she tossed off.

Soames squinted in confusion, and Ryal asked, “Wasn’t he with you when you arrived here four days ago?”

Baroffio looked at his daughter with an indefinable expression while she studied Ryal as though he had sprouted horns.

The outer door opened, and solid footfalls approached the back room. Efran appeared in the doorway, taking in at a glance everyone who was there. His face was almost expressionless, except for a fiercely humorous glint in his eyes. He looked behind him, then stepped into the room to stand in a corner.

And in the doorway appeared Thurlow, flushed and windblown. “Lissa! And Baroffio! What the hell are you

doing here, and what was this nonsense about running gabbots in Eurus? It's a madhouse up there!"

At that time, a woman with a medical insigne was finishing up with Joshua in his isolation room of the nursery. He appeared to be fully recovered from the fever, but the fortress doctor Wallace wanted him to remain in quarantine for a few more days. The longtime nursery worker Cordelia was watching the woman uneasily. "What do you need all that for? His wraps? And hair? And you made him cry poking him for blood!"

"There now, he's all right. Coghill wants to do some tests to see how he's doing," the medical woman said, packing everything away in her bag.

"But Wallace is treating him," Cordelia protested.

"And he's doing an excellent job, obviously. This is just for research. We'll let you know if anything more is needed," she said reassuringly. Then with an air of authority, she left the nursery and departed the fortress by the front doors. She marched down the new switchback to turn off Chapel Road at The Lands' Best Inn.

Meanwhile, everyone in the interview room was staring blankly at Thurlow, except Efran, who was watching them all. Ryal was the first to come to life. "Lord Baroffio, please give your chair to your son-in-law." When Baroffio did not move for apparent shock, Efran leaned over and gently got him to his feet to stand him at the wall.

Exhaling in bewilderment, Thurlow threw himself down to the chair. "What is this?"

Ryal said, "We're going to attempt to answer your questions, Lord Thurlow. Do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?"

"Yes," Thurlow said, looking at his wife beside him.

As Ryal began a question, Minka appeared at the door of the back room, having been alerted by the alarm bells. Efran held out an arm, and she went over to him. But when she caught sight of Thurlow, her eyes grew wide, and she almost stopped. Catching herself, she scrunched into Efran's side. He leaned down to whisper, "Justinian." And she raised up to quietly watch the interview.

After noting Minka's arrival, Ryal resumed, "Now, Lord Thurlow, am I correct in assuming that you just arrived from Eurus?"

"Yes, this—dandy that I've seen up there once or twice came to tell me I was needed in the Abbey Lands. I had no idea what he was talking about—thought he was out to fleece me or worse, but he insisted that my wife and her father were here! He had a pair of these Abbey men in red uniforms with him as well, so I thought, 'Dash it all; I'm going to see what's going on down there.'"

Knowing who the "dandy" must have been, Ryal glanced to Efran, who blinked in confirmation. Ryal turned back to ask Thurlow, "And why were you in Eurus?"

"Well—" Thurlow looked at his father-in-law in exasperation. "Baroffio told me there was a counterfeiter up there running my gabbots—" He broke off, staring at Ryal.

"'Gabbots'?" Ryal asked carefully. "What are gabbots, Lord Thurlow?"

Thurlow relaxed. “A product of mine. The details are proprietary.”

“I see. So, Lord Baroffio apparently gave you misleading information about something important to you to compel you to Eurus. When was this, Lord Thurlow?” Ryal asked.

“About—a week? Ten days ago? The minute I get up there, I find the whole dam’ city in an uproar—everyone hunkered down, fighting. My horse was stolen out from under me and I was robbed of everything I was carrying by the second day,” Thurlow said, wiping sweat from his face.

Minka looked up at Efran with anxious eyes, and he whispered, “Justinian brought him back.”

Ryal asked Thurlow, “Were you traveling alone?”

“No, I had two associates with me. But we got separated immediately; I don’t know where they are now,” he said wearily.

“And how did this ‘dandy’ from the Abbey Lands find you?” Ryal asked.

Thurlow looked baffled. “As to how, I can’t imagine—he must have been familiar with my club, The Glass House. I managed to get there in one piece to hide, but, without any money, they were about to put me out on the streets again. Then this Lord Justinian showed up—two days ago? All clean and dapper and unruffled; told me he had a carriage to take me to the Abbey Lands. I could hardly believe him, but then he gave me Baroffio’s calling card.”

He paused to direct a black look at his father-in-law, whose face never changed expression. Neither of them knew that Justinian had simply gone to the Abbey Lands printer Tallmadge to have a short run of cards printed up with Baroffio’s name.

Thurlow continued, “I decided to risk it, so he took me around back where he had these gorillas on horseback around this—high-dollar carriage with two more gorillas driving it. I told him, ‘There’s no way you’re getting this rig out of this hellhole,’ and he just smiled at me, dam’ him.

“So we took off like lightning, and these Polonti savages on horseback rode ahead of us with their swords out. When a mob thought to stop us on the street, one of the Abbey men up top started shooting anyone who got close, and they fell right away from us. Oh, and there were another two men inside the carriage with us, punching anyone who got within arm’s length of the windows. It was staggering. The men were all laughing about it,” Thurlow mused, breathing. In his corner, Efran grinned, and Minka burrowed deeper into him. Soames was scratching mightily with his quill.

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## Chapter 13

Thurlow continued, “When we made it out of Eurus, this Lord Justinian gave me a bit of caviar on flat bread and a sip of Frapin Cuvée cognac which knocked me right out. When I awoke this morning, we were stopped in the woods where these Polonti were—slow-roasting a—a hare on a spit. Basting it with water, and—cognac. That was the second, or third hare of the morning. They’d already cooked and eaten two others. They and Lord



Justinian. So they boned that one and gave it to me. I ate it all,” Thurlow said as though reliving an unparalleled experience. Efran was laughing.

“So we climbed back in the carriage and arrived here as though returning from holiday.” Thurlow woke up to look at his wife. “And I find you all here after sending me on a merry chase to the pit of hell.”

They were silent but for Soames’ exertions with quill and ink. When he had fairly caught up, Ryal said, “Lady Lissa, will you please explain why your husband was sent on a false trail into an extremely dangerous situation?”

Lissa merely looked at Ryal, but Baroffio stood. “This is a family situation that has nothing to do with you. We are not compelled to testify further to you.”

Efran straightened in his corner, but did not interfere. Soames glanced at Lord Callisto in his chair against the wall. Ryal said, “On the contrary, we were accused of the death of this man, and have been diverted from our normal business by inexplicable happenings. To preclude further complications, we claim the right to fully investigate your doings.”

Baroffio bristled, “You have suffered no harm nor loss from a genuine, near-tragic misunderstanding. You will release us or I will claim unlawful detention.”

Ryal sat back to regard Baroffio. Then the notary stood to ask, “Lord Efran, may I speak to you outside for a moment?” Efran left the corner, leading Minka by the hand, and Ryal followed them out. With the door to the interview room still open, they three stood by the outer door to confer in whispers. Meanwhile, customers went in and out around them to be helped by Giardi, with Efran acting as doorman.

Minutes later, they reached a decision. Efran left the shop, issuing a whistle; Ryal returned to the interview room while Minka stood behind the counter with Giardi. Ryal nodded at Soames to resume taking notes, then he told the visitors, “We are escorting you to your suites at the inn to collect your possessions. Then we will escort you off the Lands. If you return, you will answer our questions. There is much here that we still do not understand which may affect us greatly in future.”

“We will not trouble you again,” Baroffio said, moving away from the wall as his men stood.

Soames said, “Lord Ryal, Lord Callisto slipped a page into his vest.”

The visitors stopped, incredulous at the accusation. “That’s a lie,” Callisto said indignantly, opening his vest to show nothing there. Upon hearing this, Minka slipped out the front door.

“Remove your coat and vest, sir,” Ryal instructed.

Callisto stated, “I certainly will not.” And the two lords were the first to leave the room.

The outer door of the notary shop opened for the bearlike Stephanos to step in. While the lords paused, he took the shirt front of each one in a paw. “Which one, Lady Minka?” he grunted.

She said, “In your right hand.”

Stephanos shook Lundeen out of his left hand, then stripped off Callisto’s jacket, vest, and shirt. With the removal of that last article, a few folded parchments fluttered to the floor. Giardi’s transactions at the counter came to a brief halt while everyone in line watched.

Minka swiftly picked up the sheets to have a look. “Pages three and four of the trolls’ testimony,” she said, extending them toward Ryal. “With these, is it all there?” she asked him.

Ryal flipped through the remaining pages on the table as Soames went over to take the slightly rumpled sheets that Minka held out. “Pages three and four—with the identification of Ipock as Thurlow,” Ryal murmured, glancing up. “Yes, the rest are here. Thank you, Stephanos. You may take them on out. Ah—I see that their escorts have arrived.”

Including three customers at the counter, they all looked as Efran opened the front door from the outside. Taking in the tableau, he stepped back for Stephanos to bring out the red-faced lord clutching his clothes over his bare chest. Lundeen, Baroffio, and Lissa followed them to be welcomed by a half-dozen Abbey men on the sidewalk.

Baroffio dug in his heels at that point. He informed Efran, “I still want the piglets.”

A number of men laughed in disbelief. Efran replied, “They will cost you a two-hour interview in which you fully answer all of our questions.”

Baroffio looked to be considering it, but Efran jerked his head. “Take them to get their things out of their suites and escort them to the gates. Their horses and carriage will be waiting.”

Stephanos said, “Yes, Captain,” and the men with him saluted.

Thurlow had paused by the notary’s door. “What am I to do?”

Ryal looked at Efran, who told Thurlow, “You may stay or go as you wish. There’s more Ryal may want to ask you.”

“I’ll stay, then,” Thurlow said, looking at Lissa. She looked over at him, then wavered and fell to the floor, unconscious.

She was carried back to her suite at The Lands’ Best Inn, and Coghill’s assistant Tolliver was called to attend her. After he had examined her, he returned to report to Ryal, “It appears to be an attack of nerves from the recent events. She has a woman attending her, so I’d recommend she be permitted to stay one extra day before making the return trip to Westford.” Ryal agreed that this was reasonable, as a pair of Abbey soldiers were standing watch at her door.

Shortly afterwards, Baroffio, Lundeen, and Callisto, with their attendants, were escorted courteously out of the gates. (However, the carriage with its horses, driver and footman remained at Croft’s to transport Lissa on the morrow.) Thurlow was provided with temporary lodging at Firmin’s, meals included, to recover and give the notary whatever other information he could.

Also at that time, Justinian was escorted into the conference room of Barracks A, along with his escort—whom Wendt had selected—to tell a roomful of people how in the world he knew Thurlow was in Eurus and managed to find him. (Toward the end of this interview, Lissa walked out of her room at the inn, unrecognized by the Abbey guards. Her attendant also left, dressed as a maid. This left no one in the room. Lissa and her companion then went to the home of a friend on the Lands. Little men were watching this transition.)

Tired but smiling, Justinian sipped the last of the Frapin Cuvée cognac and settled back to tell his story. “Due to my dear brother’s invitation to a compulsory state dinner, I got the chance to see this Lord Thurlow face to face.

Efran had asked if I'd met him in Eurus, and I said no. But when I saw him at table, I realized that I *had* seen him there, only by another name—Courtlandt. But that was months ago, March or April, before the trolls moved in to take over."

Efran asked, "Was he there with Lissa?"

"No," Justinian said. "He presented himself as an inventor of sorts, selling these little perpetual motion devices. I only caught a glimpse of one, so I couldn't describe it or what it was supposed to do."

"Were these gabbots?" Ryal asked dryly.

Justinian's face sharpened. "I do believe so," he said, looking to the side to hear something from the past. "They could have been. Wish I'd bought one, now. At any rate, when I saw him at dinner on the seventh, and his complete disconnect from the persona Courtlandt I knew from Eurus, I really felt I needed to go have a look."

Gabriel noted, "He turned several shades of green when you asked about various shifty characters in Eurus."

"Didn't he," Justinian snorted. "When I went to the Commander with the request to go, he was reluctant to let me, having a better idea of the situation there than I had. But he provided me a superlative escort, so that it was almost a pleasure trip." His hearers congratulated the six men: Stites, Tourse, Beardall, Conte, Whobrey, and Capur, who were all to receive commendations (which, as Commander, Wendt awarded far less frequently than Efran had).

Minka asked Justinian, "How did you ever find him?"

"That was probably the easiest part of the whole venture, dear Minka," Justinian replied, setting his empty snifter on the table. "At Marguerite's dinner, he mentioned his club in Eurus, The Glass House. So that was the first place I checked. I was not looking for *him*, of course, but for information *about him*. You cannot imagine my astonishment to find him there in the flesh, and imminently to be tossed out on his ear. It took very little persuasion to get him to come," Justinian said.

Efran asked, "How did he explain his presence there when you'd left him in the Lands?"

"He didn't!" Justinian said, still mildly offended and amazed. "He insisted he'd been there for days, sent by Baroffio upon reports of Thurlow's invention being counterfeited. He had no idea of the chaos into which the city had descended. Of course, at the time I knew nothing about his going missing here, and then being found dead, and then found to be a scarecrow. I still don't understand it, but, I was very glad for such a successful outcome of a shot in the dark."

As Justinian appeared to have finished his recounting, Tourse murmured, "Don't forget the hitchhiker, Lord Justinian."

The others paused, and Justinian said, "Oh, that's right! Your Abbey men caught Thurlow attempting to hide another man in the luggage compartment, insisting that he was a valuable source of information. So we allowed him to ride down with us, and he managed to disappear in the homecoming celebration."

"He'll be found," Wendt said complacently.

So, with more congratulations and hearty pats on the back, Justinian was sent off to rest at the chapel. Meanwhile, a handful of Landers discovered that they had been paid for their dishonest work with badly

counterfeited coins. Worse, several had attempted to pass them, and merchants complained.

One of the merchants, Eavenson, identified the passer as a laborer, Luckinbill, who wished to buy a fancy new leather hat with them. When questioned, Luckinbill identified Lord Lundeen as the one who gave them to him, but wouldn't admit as to why. Ryal ordered him evicted from the Lands. He was, but was smuggled back in shortly.

The following day, November 12th, several more disturbing developments came to light. First, Lady Lissa was found to be missing from her room. Soldiers were searching for her without success.

Then while Minka, Ella, Rondi, and various soldiers were in Law class with Soames, Efran picked up Joshua from the nursery with the intention of riding him around on Soup to see if he could hold the reins. In handing him over the half-door, Cordelia said, "I have to tell you, Lord Efran, I'm a little upset at the doctor Coghill right now."

"At Coghill?" Efran laughed. "What did the gentlest man on the Lands do to you?"

"Not me personally, but I dislike his new assistant very much," she said with feeling.

"He has a new assistant?" Efran asked.

"Yes, and she came by here yesterday to look at Joshua, and did all kinds of things—looked in his mouth and his wraps, and pulled out some hair, and even pricked him for a drop of blood! He cried and I was just so upset," Cordelia said.

Efran had gone white. He paused to summon moisture to his dry mouth, and said, "All right, Cordelia, don't worry about it. I'll check with Coghill."

"I hope he gets rid of her. I won't let her in to look at Joshua again or any of our other little ones," she said darkly.

"Good. Thank you." Heart thumping in his chest, he took Joshua out to the front courtyard to tell one of the gatesmen, Cudmore, "Have Kraken saddled for me, please."

"Aye, Captain," he said, studying his face. And he sent Eymor back to the stables to get him.

When Kraken was brought out, Efran grasped the pommel with his left hand, holding Joshua on his right arm, to swing up into the saddle. When the boy laughed, "Whee!" at the movement, Efran almost lost his composure. But he walked Kraken down the switchback and up Main until coming to Coghill's house/clinic, right next to Barracks A.

Dismounting with Joshua, Efran went in to look around. Coghill's wife Delio was sitting at a table in the small front room. "Hello, Captain. Oh, Joshua, you're looking very well!" Joshua waved to her.

"Yes," Efran said, wiping his mouth. "Delio, does—Coghill have a new assistant? A woman?"

"What? No, he's got a man, Tolliver," she said, offended. "And whatever woman is claiming to be his assistant, just send her to me and I'll straighten her right out!"

“Yes, no problem, Delio,” he said, sick. He left there to walk with Joshua next door to the barracks. Kraken, ears pricked, followed.

Entering the outer office, Efran glanced sightlessly from Gabriel to Towner to Viglian, and they stilled. He whispered, “Is the Commander in?”

Before they could answer, the door to the conference room opened, and Urpèd came out with a hand on the shoulder of a young troll with most of his hair missing. As Efran stared at him in horror, Urpèd said, “Da, Effin! Dey cut all dis, and we going fight dem.”

“Yes, don’t worry, Urpèd,” Efran said, choking.

“Da,” Urpèd said in confirmation, and steered out the sullen boy with a clawed hand on his shoulder.

Wendt was watching the Captain from the doorway to the conference room. “Efran?” he queried.

“Who did it? Who cut the boy’s hair?” Efran gasped.

“Two Southerners he didn’t know,” Wendt said. When Efran couldn’t get anything else out, Wendt said, “Come back here,” jerking his head to the conference room. “You also, Gabriel.”

They three, with Efran carrying Joshua, went back to sit at the long table. Efran had to rock in his chair for a minute, then gasped, “A woman claiming to be from Coghill got into the nursery yesterday and—took his wraps, and hair, and pricked him for blood—”

Gabriel went rigid and Wendt leaned back, softly exhaling. Baroffio’s party had left yesterday. But Lissa was missing. . . .

Wendt raised sharp blue eyes at the motes that floated in the sunlight from the south-facing window. “Gabriel.”

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## Chapter 14

“Yes, Commander,” Gabriel said.

“Lord Baroffio and Lady Cocci have built a house in Westford—is that right?” Wendt asked.

“Yes, sir, to my understanding,” Gabriel said.

“And they employ the Lords Lundeen and Callisto. Is that correct?” Wendt inquired.

“In some capacity, yes, sir.”

“We need one or other of the lords here. Take you three men, discreetly armed, dressed as tradesmen. Go find Lundeen or Callisto and bring them. In any condition,” Wendt said, eyeing his Second.

Gabriel received the message. “Yes, Commander.” He rose to leave the conference room.

Efran sat clutching his son, who patted his face. Wendt said, “Efran.” Eyes watering, Efran tried to focus on him. Wendt continued, “We won’t let anything happen to Joshua.”

“Yes, Commander,” Efran whispered.

Wendt stood. “Come on back to the house.”

“Yes, sir,” Efran exhaled, rising with Joshua on his chest.

As Wendt was on foot, Efran walked with him while Kraken followed. Aware that his human was in distress, Kraken nudged him from behind, and Efran paused to stroke his nose. “It’s all right. Marguerite will help us,” Efran told him. Kraken nodded. As always, they were discreetly followed by two men in case the Commander had orders, or, something unexpected happened.

Meeting them at the door, Hartshough said, “It is rather early for the midday meal, Commander, but perhaps you and the Captain would care for a bracer?”

Efran looked at him sharply, and Hartshough added, “Unfortunately, the late tomatoes have been inferior—”

Efran said quickly, “That’s good, Hartshough; if I had all I wanted, I’d get sick of it.”

“But I have used the last few good tomatoes to brew up a small pitcher,” Hartshough finished.

“Oh, well, then, of course,” Efran said.

“And you, Commander?” Hartshough asked.

“Nothing now, thank you. But we really do need Marguerite,” Wendt said easily.

“I shall alert her, sir,” Hartshough said, moving off. As Kraken came in with them, one of the men—Leneghan—led him through the chapel to the backyard.

Wendt sat at the dining table. Efran followed, placing Joshua on the floor by his chair. The toddler grasped a chair leg to pull himself to a stand, then rambled over to the Commander’s chair to pat his leg.

Marguerite came out of her bedroom with a look of mild surprise. “Wendt! And Efran.” She paused at his face. “What has happened?”

“Come sit down, dear.” Wendt pulled out a chair for her, and Efran began spilling out his discovery.

By the time he had covered that with her, as well as the shearing of Urpèd’s boy, Hartshough had opened the door to Minka. Coming to the table, she began, “There you are! I couldn’t imagine—” She broke off to look at their faces.

Marguerite said, “Come sit, Minka. We have to talk.”

She slipped into the chair beside Efran for him to tell her about Coghill’s phantom assistant. Minka stared at him, then Joshua, then looked pleadingly at her auntie. “What can we do?” Minka breathed.

Marguerite hesitated. “Just for the short term, I would mark him with ink, beneath his clothes, so that it can’t be readily seen. No pricking of the skin; I wouldn’t want anything permanent, but just a mark that was not on him when he was harvested.”

Efran flinched at the last word, but looked around for Hartshough. The butler placed his tall celery-adorned tomato bracer in front of him, which Efran didn’t even see. “Hartshough, will you—get a quill, draw a cross on Joshua—ah, on his side, under his arm—” He had to close his eyes against the tears.

Minka reached for his hand. “I like that. He’s under the protection of the Cross.”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said. While he went off to get quill and ink, Efran drained the tomato bracer in one draught, then began on the celery stalk.

When Hartshough returned with his writing supplies, Efran took off Joshua’s shirt. Patting his bare chest, the toddler grinned up at his father. “You’ll be all right,” Efran whispered.

Efran lifted Joshua’s right arm for Hartshough to dip his quill and begin outlining the cross as directed. The toddler squealed, hunching. “I do believe I am tickling him,” Hartshough noted, redipping the quill.

“Just let him for a minute,” Efran told his son, who let off the squealing but not the hunching.

Once Hartshough had the outline, he asked, “Shall I black it in, Lord Efran?”

“Yes, so that we can see it when we need to,” Efran said. It was a small cross, only about an inch tall.

Hartshough completed the drawing and Efran continued to hold up Joshua’s arm while it dried. Joshua leaned his head down as far as he could to see the body art. Efran exhaled, “All right, there’s that. What else can we do?”

With a slow shake of her head, Marguerite studied the little guy. “Without knowing who is giving the orders and what their purpose is, I don’t see what we can do, but pray.”

“It’s always aimed at the Lord of the Fortress,” Minka murmured.

Marguerite added, “And this is such a personal attack—very disturbing, for someone to use a small child like this.”

“Maybe that’s the point: that it’s personal,” Minka said. Efran thought about that, disliking his thoughts.

They sat for a little while longer, then Wendt rose. “I’d better go check in at the barracks.” Since he had men combing the Lands for Lissa, he saw no reason to paralyze Efran with the fact of her absence. All of the men knew her by sight.

“Thank you, Commander,” Efran said, his voice low with gratitude. Leneghan went with the Commander, but Seagrave stayed in the hall, just inside the door.

About the time that Efran and Minka were rising from the table with Joshua, Melott entered the front doors, saluting. “Captain, the Commander requests your presence in the barracks.”

Efran stared at him. “What—what—?”



“The Second and his team have returned from Westford, Captain,” Melott said.

“Already?” Efran turned to Minka. “Here, I’ll have a man take him up for you—”

“I want to see, Efran,” she said stubbornly.

Marguerite interjected, “Leave him here with me, Efran. I hardly ever get him.”

Efran wavered. “He gets into everything, Marguerite—”

“Then he’s sure to find something to play with,” she noted.

Minka grinned at her as Efran capitulated, setting Joshua on the floor. “Mind Auntie. I’ll be right back.”

“Nanty,” Joshua said, looking back at her.

“Be still, my heart,” she said, then sat on the floor with him.

Efran started to trot out before catching a glimpse of Kraken about to come through the back door. “Stay there! We’re coming back for Joshua!” Kraken obeyed.

Efran walked down Main at a reasonable pace so that Minka could keep up without his dragging her. They entered Barracks A for Viglian to jerk his head toward the conference room. “Back there, Captain.”

After they had entered, Viglian shut the door behind them. And they looked at Lundeen and Callisto laid out on the long table, apparently dead. Gabriel was talking when they came in, so Wendt said, “Start over at the beginning, Gabriel.”

“Yes, sir, Commander. Captain, Lady Minka. I took Truro, Verrin, and Hawk to Westford with me [nodding to the three who were standing at the wall], and we found Lord Baroffio’s house LeVisay pretty quickly. It’s—a nice enough house, not grand, but I understand that all the houses that the nobles are building in Westford are temporary. When they get more businesses built, and start acquiring income, then they’ll build better ones.”

His listeners nodded, then Gabriel went on, “We were approaching the house from the front when we heard some kind of disturbance around the side, near the stables. We could hear shouting, and the horses whinnying and stamping. So we came around the house and saw these two [gesturing toward the bodies on the table] in some kind of confrontation with . . . a group of little men in tweed suits and caps.”

As they stared at him, he said, “They reminded me right off of the little chap, the sprite, that fought Seagrave for the right to play his games.” This was nine days ago. “We were—a good forty feet away, not close enough to see what was going on. Both Lundeen and Callisto were mounted, with the little men around them. Their horses started bucking like crazy, and both were thrown, and, lay still. The horses ran back to the stables. Then the little men looked back at us, and, stuck out their tongues and wiggled their fingers with their thumbs in their ears, and—disappeared.” Gabriel raised his shoulders while the other three nodded or otherwise indicated the truth of that.

Gabriel resumed, “When we got to the men on the ground and picked them up, we found both dead, with their necks broken.” He leaned over to turn Lundeen’s head, which flopped on his shoulders.

Wendt murmured, "Like Thurlow." He turned to order Corwyn at the door: "Ask Coghill to step across here with his autopsy tools."

"Yes, Commander." Corwyn lit out for Coghill's house next door.

Efran whispered, "Could they be . . . ?"

"We're going to find out," Wendt said grimly.

When Coghill arrived with his bag to stare down at the bodies, Wendt said, "Both these men apparently died from a broken neck. Whatever you did with Thurlow that first night, I'd like for you to do with them, Doctor."

"I'm almost afraid to," Coghill said.

"I don't blame you. Do it anyway," Wendt said with a glimmer of humor.

"Here?" Coghill asked, glancing around the conference room.

"Yes," the Commander said.

"Let's get a sheet over your table, first," Coghill said, setting his bag on a chair.

As the men moved the bodies in order to cover the table, Minka told Efran, "All right, I'm going back up hilltop and I wish you would come."

"I will. We just have to stop by and get Joshua," he exhaled.

As they departed, Wendt told Efran, "We don't expect to see anything until tomorrow, but I'll send you word if we do."

"Thank you, Commander." Efran and Minka went back up Main to the chapel. While Efran went around back to get Kraken, Marguerite brought Joshua out to Minka in front. Efran put both wife and son on his horse. After walking them on Kraken up the switchback, Efran had Tourle walk them around back to play with the children. The Captain then went upstairs to report to Estes and DeWitt.

While Minka was in Law class the next morning (November 13th) with Soames, Ella, Rondi, and numerous soldiers, Wendt sent a message asking Efran to come down to Barracks A. Efran had Kraken saddled before taking him down, and he was cooperative about it. Knowing that something bad had happened to the boy, Kraken was behaving.

As Efran walked into the barracks, Viglian opened the door to the conference room, then shut it again after he entered. He saw Wendt, Gabriel and Towner watching as Coghill stood over Lundeen's body on the long conference table, reopening the abdominal incision he had made yesterday. And there was the muslin stuffed with straw. Efran looked over to Callisto, laid out farther up on the table. His gaping midsection bristled with cut straw interspersed with segments of wiry troll hair.

Gesturing wearily with the scalpel, Coghill said, "They are the same as Thurlow. But at least I found the reason for the weakness of the neck." He cut completely through the packed straw to part it at the back of the neck. "There is no spine," he said.

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## Chapter 15

Efran looked through the gap in the straw to see no bones in the neck. He stared at Coghill, then Wendt, sputtering, “Without a spine, how was it possible for them to even stand up?”

Coghill said, “Apparently, because of the denseness of the packed straw. Also, the troll hair seems to impart some—magnetic qualities. But in such narrow confines of the neck, the lack of a solid yet flexible support makes it prone to breaking. I can’t begin to understand the physiology—why it would kill them—but, this deficiency in the transformation, when the rest of it is so comprehensive, is—inexplicable.”

“The Creator will not be mimicked,” Wendt murmured.

Efran barely heard him, with the further questions that roiled him: “With no spine—is there a brain?”

“No. It’s *all straw*,” Coghill said emphatically.

“Then—how were they talking? Acting with purpose?” Efran demanded, flabbergasted.

Wendt observed, “Marguerite said something about a puppeteer.”

Efran studied him. “So, someone else was telling them what to say and do.”

“That appears certain,” Wendt said.

Coghill glanced at him in acknowledgment, then said, “What’s more, that gives us a means of determining who is a scarecrow while they’re alive. Reach your hand under the body and feel the bottom of the neck, Lord Efran.”

Doing this, Efran said, “I don’t feel the bones that should be there.” Just to check, he put a hand to the back of his own neck to feel the slightly protruding vertebra at the level of his shoulders. “Yes, that bone’s obvious. And it’s easy to feel when it’s not there. But . . . *why?*” he breathed. “What’s the point? With a weakness like that, battle is impossible. They can even die from falling down!”

Wendt exhaled, “At this point, we can only guess. My first thought is simply that evil propagates itself. Unless . . . there is a more personal agenda.”

“And, they are apparently unaware of this fatal flaw,” Coghill said, leaning on the table.

Viglian opened the door to the conference room. Saluting, he said, “Commander, Lord Baroffio and a contingent of Westfordian nobles are at the gates, demanding justice for the murders of his men.”

“How many are with Baroffio?” Wendt asked.

“Four nobles with a force of approximately fifty, Commander,” Viglian replied.

“Tell them we’ll be right out to speak to them,” Wendt said.

“Yes, Commander.” Viglian said.

He began to close the door again, but Wendt said, “Pass along the message and stay just a moment, Viglian.”

“Yes, Commander.”

When Viglian returned to the conference room, the Commander closed the door and leaned over the table to consult with all of them—Efran, Gabriel, Towner, Viglian, and Coghill—over a strategy. They liked his plan, so the six of them left the barracks to walk over to the front gates. The barracks door guards Routh and Pleyel watched intently.

Baroffio began expostulating at their appearance, but Wendt raised his hand. “Lord Baroffio, we want to clear up the situation with the Lords Callisto and Lundeen. However, we’ve seen a deadly plague break out nearby, so before we let you in, we require our doctor and his associates to check all of you briefly. If you won’t allow this precaution, we have nothing more to discuss.”

Baroffio appeared hesitant, but the nobleman beside him said, “We’ll allow that. Dismount,” he ordered the men behind them. They all complied, including the other three nobles, so Coghill, Towner, Viglian, and Gabriel stepped out to place a hand at the back of each man’s neck. They worked their way quickly from the front to the rear of the group, then returned to Baroffio, who remained on his horse.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, get down, Baroffio,” the nobleman said in exasperation.

As he did, reluctantly, Wendt told the nobleman who had spoken, “I am Commander Wendt. Who are you, sir?”

“I am Lord Colquhoun,” he said.

“Thank you, sir,” Wendt said.

They watched Coghill feel the back of Baroffio’s neck, then the doctor and his associates reentered the gates to speak quietly to Wendt and Efran. Following, Wendt turned to say, “Lord Baroffio, Lord Colquhoun, you and the other nobles may enter; the rest of your men must remain outside the gates and off the road.” They were presently blocking traffic.

Again Baroffio hesitated, but Colquhoun waved to the men behind him: “Do as you’re told.” The Westfordian security force reluctantly separated to the sides of the paved road and the Abbey wall guards opened the gates.

“This way, gentlemen,” Wendt said, leading them to Barracks A. Routh opened the door while Pleyel offered to take their horses, but the visiting nobles chose to leave them out front for the time being.

In the outer office, Wendt said casually, “First, we’d like to hear how Lady Lissa is doing.”

Baroffio said irately, “She’s resting in bed, after the trauma you put her through!”

“I’m very sorry about that. When did she arrive home?” Wendt asked.

“The day after we did! Now what did you want to show us?” Baroffio demanded.

First, Wendt whispered to Gabriel, who sent Nee running across Main Street to Croft's stables. Wendt told Baroffio, "One moment, please. We're checking on a small detail." Efran looked mildly questioning, but Wendt waited for Nee's return.

He quickly returned to whisper, "Commander, her carriage and coachmen are gone."

Wendt said, "I see. Come this way, then, gentlemen." Wendt brought the five nobles into the conference room to look in bewilderment at the strawmen.

Wendt told them, "Lord Baroffio should be well acquainted with what you're seeing, gentlemen. When his son-in-law Thurlow was discovered dead of a broken neck, our doctor Coghill began to perform an autopsy on him. And this is exactly what he found—straw and wiry hairs packed tightly in muslin. And then a representative of ours traveled to Eurus to find Lord Thurlow alive, and bring him back.

"We spent the last four days gathering information on this, during which time Lord Baroffio's party left. When we discovered that Lords Lundeen and Callisto had been passing counterfeit coins in the Lands, our men went to Westford to compel them back to face charges. They could not, and this is why." Wendt gestured to the straw without referencing the lack of spines. "These are duplicates of the lords, and not the real men themselves."

The visitors were speechless at first. One peered at Wendt to say, "This is outlandish in the extreme. You are attempting to justify murder with a—a—macabre display!"

Coghill said, "I have my autopsy notes, drawings, the body of the duplicate Thurlow—which is becoming less identifiable with each day—and the living man, if you'd care to see them."

"This is insulting and degrading!" the noble shouted.

"You will hear further from us!" another shouted, while Baroffio said nothing. They all stormed out—

Except Lord Colquhoun. He crossed his arms over his chest to say, "Show me your proofs." Over the next two hours, they did that, even bringing Thurlow out from Firmin's excellent bar, staffed by a knowledgeable sommelier. Thurlow's testimony was rather garbled, in that he was not only inebriated, but clueless as to what had actually happened to start with. But he was a living man, and not a corpse on a table.

Also, Coghill showed Colquhoun the lack of spines in the strawmen, and had him feel at the back of Lundeen's neck, and his own neck.

As the Westfordian lord prepared to leave, badly shaken, Wendt told him, "One more thing, Lord Colquhoun: do not let anyone take samples of your bodily fluids or hair for any reason. As you may now realize, the test for disease which doctor Coghill and our men administered was to feel for the bones of the spine at the back of the neck. And I will tell you that Lord Baroffio does not have those bones."

Lord Colquhoun's face blanched, but he said, "I will be in touch."

"God speed, sir. Send to us if you need help," Wendt said.

"Thank you, Commander." Colquhoun strode out, then, to receive his horse from the stables and meet his twenty men beyond the gates. The Landers watched the lord mount up and look back at them, then ride off with his bodyguard.

Those with Commander Wendt were quiet for a little while. Wendt was thinking, *Can we count on what Baroffio says about Lissa being home in bed?* “Probably not,” he murmured. But they were still looking everywhere for her. What else could they do?

Then Efran asked, “Do you think Baroffio even knows he’s a strawman?”

The others looked at each other, then to the Commander, who said, “He may not.”

Viglian said, “But Lundeen and Callisto must have known, since they were apparently paying for having samples gathered.”

“Unless they were doing it on someone’s orders,” Captain Towner noted. He added, “So, are the real lords Lundeen and Callisto also walking around somewhere?”

“If they haven’t been murdered,” Coghill said.

Gabriel observed, “I’m curious why you didn’t introduce the Captain to Colquhoun, Commander.”

Wendt exhaled, “Out of an abundance of caution. Someone has already attempted to harvest his hair and body fluids once—at least.”

The others looked at Efran in alarm, who was impassive. He knew who’d done the harvesting, and when. But he shook it off. “All right, I’m going to report to Ryal, and, check on Joshua.” All of the men hilltop had been instructed to let no strangers through the courtyard gates without a pair of men as escort. Further instructions regarding Joshua were pointless: he had already been harvested.

But Joshua had gotten so very dirty playing that day that the nursery girl put him right in the tub to scrub him thoroughly without ever noticing the inked cross under his arm.

Leaving Barracks A, Efran found Kraken waiting on the steps, so that the men had to push by him to get in or out. “Come on, then,” Efran exhaled, taking his reins to turn him off the steps. As he put his foot in the stirrup, Kraken said, *She’s looking for you.*

He looked up to see Minka on Rose with Shane and Connor right behind her riding down Main. Settling in the saddle, Efran kicked Kraken lightly and said, “Good. We’re stopping at Ryal’s.”

*Can I come in?* Kraken asked.

“No, you have to wait to hear about it,” Efran laughed.

Kraken snorted with a displeased shake of the head. When the four riders met in front of Croft’s, they pulled up for Minka to demand, “What happened?”

Efran jerked his head. “Come with me to Ryal’s so I can tell you all at once. How is Joshua?”

Turning her horse with her bodyguard following, she said, “He’s fine, Efran. Protected all the way around.”

“Good,” he murmured, not comforted in the least.

After dismounting at the notary shop, Efran had Shane and Connor come in with them, so they’d know what

they all were dealing with. With a lull in customers at the moment, Efran stood at the front counter to tell Ryal and Giardi what had just transpired. Connor had a few questions, which Efran answered, so that by the time they got back up hilltop, he had missed the midday meal completely, and Madea had to scrounge him a plate from leftovers.

Over the next several days, the Landers just waited for something to happen so they'd know what to do. No one died of a broken neck or was required to give up bodily fluids, no matter how little. Efran had someone check in daily with the playground trolls, who were happily building, hunting, planting and digging aqueducts. No one had accosted them for hair or anything else, for which the trolls were glad. But neither would anyone stay for dinner with them.

During that lull, on November 14th, Windry took four dresses of woven cotton in soft colors to The Lands Clothing Shop, hoping to interest them in her work. When she came in the front door, the first person she spotted was Minka, helping Racheal arrange stock. They both looked over at her, and Windry, almost dead on her feet already, began to turn out again. But Minka said, "Hello, Windry. What've you got there?"

"I . . ." Windry helplessly put the four folded garments on the counter.

Minka came over to lift the top one and shake it out by the shoulders. "It's—a dress. With half-sleeves that look like sleeves and not something that would cut you . . . a dropped waist and gentle lines. Oh, it looks like I could ride in that. Isn't it a full skirt?" She held the top portion to her shoulders while the skirt flowed almost down to her feet.

Racheal came over to look. "Oh, Minka, the pink looks so sweet on you. We can hem it for you, if you like." Rondi came out from a back room; seeing them gathered at one counter, she came over.

"No, you know—" Minka suddenly pulled the dress on over the one she was wearing, and it was almost tight on her.

Windry blurted, "After making that one, I realized the others would need to be larger."

"I don't have any long dresses, and I couldn't wear it working, but I need dresses that aren't fancy but too nice to work in, don't I?" Minka said. Racheal pulled over a full-length rolling mirror for Minka to turn this way and that in front of it.

Rondi said, "That's lovely. All the dresses I'm seeing on the street give me a headache." She went over to unfold the dresses on the counter. Picking up the top one, she murmured, "Oh, look at the lovely shades of blue—it looks like a sky with wispy clouds. And it's so soft." She pressed it to her cheek.

"That looks beautiful with your hair. It's all so smooth together," Minka said in gentle envy.

Sosie, a co-owner of the shop, came over with another customer, a woman. While Sosie looked at the dresses, the woman said almost accusingly, "You don't sell women's clothes anymore!"

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Chapter 16

Sosie admitted, “We got discouraged when our embroidered dresses didn’t sell. But these—who brought them?”

“Windry. I want this one,” Minka said of the one she was wearing. The creator of the dresses stood dumb.

“I want the blue. What do you want for them, Windry?” Rondi asked.

Racheal said, “We’ll take the other two to put on display—”

But the woman tore the rose-colored dress from her hands. “This one’s mine!”

“Is five royals a dress all right, Windry? When can you get us more?” Racheal asked.

“A—few—days,” Windry squeaked out.

While Minka was insisting that Efran would pay for hers and Rondi’s dresses and Racheal was insisting that they accept them as a bonus for helping, Windry staggered out of the shop with a purse full of twenty royals. She made it to her little house to pass out on her bed even before eating.

Wearing their new dresses home from the shop that afternoon, Minka and Rondi chose to walk while their bodyguards led their horses on foot behind them, with their own. The two young women were laughing and flouncing happily as girls did when they felt cute, so passersby, especially men, stopped to stare. The bodyguards stared back.

Women who looked like canvases of abstract art stopped dead to watch the girls skip by in something totally new and different. Then, knowing where both were working, those same women mobbed The Lands Clothing Shop. Elvey’s vast complex went dead; the designer Challinor and numerous lovely models were suddenly unemployed. Also, by this time Trina had stopped wasting what money she had left on making outlandish dresses.

When Windry woke a few hours later, she had urgent messages covering her door for more dresses. But other independent shops and dressmakers had caught the fever of soft simplicity, and got right to work.

Rondi and Minka wore their new dresses to dinner that night. Necks were craned toward them, but the men here were more careful to not stare. And as Minka had insisted, Efran sent ten royals to Racheal the following day.

On that day—November 15th—Windry woke up, thinking. She dressed and went to Avene’s for a very nice breakfast. Then, still thinking, she went home. Ignoring all the urgent messages, she put five royals in a little velvet bag and went out again.

She stopped on the sidewalk in front of Firmin’s, looking. There were customers in the streetside seating area, but no servers right now. So Windry waited on the sidewalk.

Her presence was irritating both customers and servers—especially her daughter Lilou, who couldn’t get to her tables. So Ionadi finally came out to say, “Hello, Windry. I’m sorry that Lilou can’t come right now.”

“That’s all right, Ionadi; please give her this.” And Windry handed her the small bag. “I’m not sure how much I

borrowed from her, but there's five royals in that. If it doesn't cover what I owe her, please tell me and I'll make it up to her." With that, Windry turned and walked off. Ionadi weighed that, then took the bag and the message back to Lilou.

Also that day, Baroffio, Colquhoun, McElfresh and their bodyguards were riding through the areas of new construction in Westford, appraising what had been done and what was left to do. Baroffio groaned, "A beauty shop! Why on earth do we have to waste money on a beauty shop in early construction?"

Colquhoun observed, "It's a great draw for the ladies, a mark of civilization, especially right across from the new inn. But, Baroffio—we need a better name for it. 'Lissa's Palace' sounds like a private estate, or a playground for the wealthy. We want visitors to know that this is the new Porterhouse Inn."

"They'll learn if they're not stupid," Baroffio snapped. "That's the name, and that is what it will remain."

Colquhoun grunted in displeasure, but McElfresh's horse shied at the sudden appearance of a furry, piglike animal running between its feet. "What—?" McElfresh blurted, but then five or six more passed around the horses' hooves on their way to the garbage bins behind the inn. The horses snorted and reared slightly, but their riders kept control.

When that disturbance did not sufficiently alarm Baroffio's horse so as to make it buck or bolt, a small man in a brown tweed suit bent behind the horse to bite its hind cannon. All of the men except Baroffio—Colquhoun, McElfresh, and their four bodyguards—saw it, and none of them could believe it. But Baroffio's horse reacted as desired, and began bucking. The little biter vanished.

Baroffio was thrown, landing heavily on his shoulder before rolling to his back. "What the devil was that?" McElfresh blurted.

But Colquhoun was looking down at Baroffio, who lay alarmingly still. "Baroffio? Are you quite all right, old man?"

One of the men dismounted to kneel beside the fallen lord. When he rolled Baroffio over, his head lolled unnaturally. Shocked, the bodyguard looked up. "He's broken his neck!"

Colquhoun covered his mouth with a trembling hand. "Load him on his horse; take him home," he said unsteadily. As two bodyguards were lifting the dead lord to lie across his saddle, Colquhoun instructed the other two men to inform the Commander at the Abbey Lands of Baroffio's sudden death.

When Baroffio's men arrived at his house LeVisay with the lord's body, they found no one there but servants. Wearing one of her most exuberant outfits bought at Elvey's—a black-and-white checkered ensemble sprinkled with bright yellow flowers and accessorized with collar, cuffs, and hat of bright red—Lady Cocci had just taken a carriage to the Lands to get more clothes.

Arriving at the main gates of the Abbey Lands, she was forced to step out of her carriage to have her neck checked. This inspection she passed, of course. Then the lady was driven down Main to sneer in disbelief at the women flowing down the sidewalks in dresses of serene colors and simple styling. Worse, when her carriage pulled up to Elvey's awning-covered entrance, she found it closed. The footman hopped down to read the sign on the door. He returned to the carriage window to report, "Lady Cocci, the sign says, 'Reopening soon with an all-new line!'"

"Oh, really?" she snorted. "We'll see about that! Back home, Hoyt."

“Yes, Lady Cocci,” he said as the footman, Heuron, scrambled back up to the high seat. And Hoyt turned the carriage around to depart the gates again.

Lady Lissa was not home, either, and no one knew exactly where she was at the moment.

Following Law class on the next morning, November 16th, Minka went out with Joshua on the back grounds. The children weren't out of class yet, and only a smattering of garden workers were on duty. Ella hadn't even made it out to the training pens because her work boots were missing. It was cool and overcast on the hilltop—not cold enough for cloaks, just not the usual brilliant sunshine. After receiving a message from Ryal, Efran had gone down to his shop this morning.

Enon carried Joshua on his shoulders beside Minka as she went over to the new east-facing bench under the walnut tree. This had quickly become her favorite of the three benches, enabling the most comprehensive view of the eastern Lands and even part of the Sea. As she sat, looking over the beautiful, hazy view, something rose up in her—a presentiment of dread, of sorrow.

Hoofbeats drew close; she and Enon looked over as Tess pulled up to take Joshua off Enon's shoulders and set him on the saddle in front of her. “Captain wants him below!” she said, and took off again at a lope.

Minka and Enon watched, stunned, as Tess rode around the east side of the fortress with the child. Minka gasped, “Then why wouldn't he tell a man—”

But Enon was shouting, “No! NO!” And they both began running after her. Javier, at the back door, turned to run into the fortress.

By the time Minka and Enon had reached the northeastern corner of the fortress, Tess was already out of the grocer's gate and loping down the new switchback. The courtyard gate guards Cyneheard and Heus watched uneasily. “Is that Tess? With Joshua?” Cyneheard asked. Heus shook his head.

Enon was shouting something as he came around the corner, but Javier burst out of the fortress doors, crying, “Sound the alarm! That's not Tess! She and Loriot are on holiday today!”

Heus began hauling on the bell while everyone else gazed down the hilltop. The rider with her captive had disappeared somewhere off Chapel Road. While everyone in the courtyard was searching the plots below, Efran came leaping down Ryal's steps to look up to the hilltop. But they were all frozen, watching.

On the sidewalk in front of Ryal's, Efran raised his hands in query, circling to look. Those in the courtyard above noted a riderless horse trot out from somewhere behind the chapel house. But that told them nothing, so they were still looking. Efran was turning in bewilderment, searching for whatever was the problem.

“There!” Heus shouted. “On the notary's roof! She's got the boy—and there's a man crouching near her—!”

“Efran!” At the woman's voice from above, Efran spun to look up. There stood a woman with short, dark hair, wearing the kind of work clothes that Tess always wore. But she wasn't Tess. And she was armed. Holding Joshua out over the edge of the building, she called, “Catch him!” And she threw him off the roof.

Heart in his throat, Efran darted toward him, but then immediately there was another Joshua sailing over the edge of the roof in the opposite direction. “Or him!” she laughed.

On the sidewalk below, within reach of neither, Efran had an instant to decide which direction to go. With no time to think, he lunged toward the second. When he barely got below him in time to stop his fall, he heard a sickening thud as the first hit the pavement to his left.

Meanwhile, a soldier on the opposite sidewalk had sent an arrow into the woman's chest. Other soldiers found the ladder propped against the back of Ryal's shop and swarmed up it toward her accomplice, but he leapt off the roof to hit the top of a stall in the backyard. He fell to the ground, clutching his stomach in great pain, and staggered away a few steps before falling dead.

Efran was on his knees on the sidewalk with the living child who clapped and laughed, "Whee!" Shakily pulling up on his shirt, Efran lifted his right arm to look for an inked mark and saw—

Nothing. Nothing but healthy brown skin. Shaking, Efran put him down and went over to the dead child sprawled on the pavement. Soldiers encircled the area to keep gaping bystanders away. Trembling violently as he leaned over the broken body, Efran raised his right arm to pull up his shirt. And there he saw—

Nothing. Again, there was no mark. Sitting on his heels, Efran looked to the child who had toddled over to pat his shoulder. "Papa! Papapa!" Then Efran reached a hand to feel his back. It was unnecessary to lift his shirt; the little spine was prominent all along his back side.

As Efran clutched him, weeping silently, Ryal knelt beside him to run a finger along Joshua's spine. Then he looked up to say, "He caught the right one. Take the other away."

A great exhalation of relief passed through the crowd. Still trembling, Efran lifted his son as he stood, assisted by Ryal and Giardi. Minka, having run down the switchback (and fallen twice) arrived before him, breathless in wonder and love. She breathed, "Oh, Efran—!"

"How could you?" he choked out. "I trusted you to watch him! How could you let her take him?" he cried in fury.

"No, Efran!" Ryal rebuked him while Giardi cried, "Efran!" Minka went still in shock. But he turned away in disgust and anger.

Enon stopped him. "Captain, we all saw—"

"Later," Efran groaned. While the men stood helplessly looking at each other, he began walking up the switchback with Joshua in his arms and Kraken at his shoulder.

Minka looked aside. Someone was talking to her, but she couldn't hear them. She was watching a riderless horse nibble the geraniums that Giardi had planted in the shop's front beds. So Minka went over to put her left foot in the stirrup, swing her right leg over, and turn the horse up Main.

As she loped toward the gates, Gabriel gestured to the two closest men on horseback, Koschat and Nyarko. "Follow her."

"Yes, Second," Koschat said. Nyarko saluted, and they turned after her.

Minka rode on out of the gates, which stood open, and the gate guards acknowledged the bodyguards that followed close behind. Unaware of them, she continued loping up the northbound road, past the old stone bridge.

With every mile she covered, the air grew cooler. She wasn't even sure when she had been in Westford last, but she had forgotten that the farther one got from the Sea, the colder it was in fall and winter. And mid-November was already too chilly for a woven cotton dress. But she rode on.

Entering Westford, she slowed to look around. Yes, the rebuilding was amazing, especially on the main streets. Seeing the lake that had once been the palace of Westford, she looked to the left, over the meadows. And in the distance was the ramshackle remains of a henhouse with an intact stone well nearby.

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## Chapter 17

As the body of Tess' impersonator, Lissa, was taken down from the roof of the notary shop and placed on a stretcher for transport to Coghill's, Wendt put a hand on the lead bearer. With Gabriel beside him, Wendt studied her, particularly the deep hole in her chest from which the arrow had been removed. She was unquestionably dead. Then he put his hand behind her neck to feel the prominent vertebra where it should be.

The Commander lifted up, troubled. He murmured to Gabriel, "She could not have expected to come away alive from this stunt. Yet she went to a great deal of effort to set it up and carry it out with no plan for escape. *Why?*"

"I don't think we'll ever know, Commander," Gabriel said.

Wendt grimaced, "But it's essential to know." He stood back from the stretcher to let the men take it away.

Minka turned the horse left—west—on the main thoroughfare where the Porterhouse Inn had stood for many years. There, she paused to watch the sign proclaiming, "Lissa's Palace" being taken down. Up against the building nearby stood the larger sign, "The New Porterhouse Inn," which was awaiting its elevation.

Then Minka looked across the street, where Ryal's old notary shop had once stood. In its place was a new building with the sign, "Lovedahl's Beauty Treatments." Minka surveyed this for a moment, then walked the horse over to dismount and go inside.

Twenty feet behind her, Koschat and Nyarko grimaced at each other. They were conspicuous in their red Abbey uniforms, but there was nothing to be done about it. As the senior of the two, Koschat said, "Well, she'll be in there for a while. I'll go give them word and then come back to relieve you."

"Thanks," Nyarko said wryly, and Koschat turned to ride south again.

Upon Minka's entrance, a large woman approached warmly. "Hello, dear! I'm Lovedahl. Oh, aren't you a sweet thing! What can I do for you?"

Minka studied her, then asked, "Will you take the horse in payment?"

Lovedahl glanced out her front window to view the animal. "Is it stolen?" she asked apprehensively.

"No, it's my husband's," Minka said.

“Yes, then. Jian!” she called.

A young teenaged boy came out from a back room. “Yes’m?”

Minka turned to evaluate him. He was fairly clean, with well-trimmed, recently washed light brown hair. He was only a few inches taller than she. Eyeing his long-sleeved shirt and heavy work pants, she murmured, “I’ll need clothes, too.”

The boy tossed off, “Well, you can have mine, if Lady Lovedahl’ll buy me more.”

They both looked at her, and she said, “For the horse, yes. Jian, take it around back.”

“Yes’m,” he said, moving off. Going out the front door, he paused to regard the foreign soldier suspiciously, so Nyarko turned his horse to trot to the front of the Porterhouse. Jian then took the reins of the girl’s horse to walk it around to the shop’s overgrown backyard. With him gone, Nyarko walked his horse to stand near a corner of the house that had no windows, hidden from view of the Porterhouse.

Meanwhile, Lovedahl eyed Minka speculatively to ask, “Now, dear, what shall I do for you?”

“I want to cut my hair. I want it very short, like a boy’s. Like Jian’s. And I want it straightened. No curl,” Minka said. As she talked, she removed the small gold loops from her ears to toss them onto a nearby counter. She wasn’t wearing any other jewelry right now—certainly nothing that said, *I will love you forever*.

“We can do that. The short hair seems to be a new rage. I was called down to the Abbey Lands just days ago to give a client a short cut and color. But, the straightening is rather harsh on the hair. It may bleach it a little,” Lovedahl warned.

“That’s fine,” Minka said, looking off.

“Sit here, then. We won’t take your horse until you’re happy with my work.” Lovedahl patted a cushioned chair in front of a mirror, and Minka sat.

Nyarko watched the boy reenter the house through a back door, then for the next several hours, the Lands soldier had nothing to do but watch, and nothing to watch. Never letting his attention wander too far from the beauty shop, Nyarko observed the traffic up and down the street and the new sign going up over the inn. But he did wonder what was taking Koschat so long.

Inside the shop, after the cutting, trimming, and shaping of Minka’s hair, Lovedahl lathered on a potion that had to sit on her head for quite a while. It burned a little, but Minka did not complain. Finally Lovedahl washed it out thoroughly and rubbed Minka’s head dry with a soft towel.

Looking at her reflection, Minka didn’t even recognize herself. Without all the curl to puff out her hair, it was rather thin. And now it lay limp, straight and almost white around her pale face. She drew wisps of hair over her earlobes to hide the holes. “That’s perfect. I look like a young boy—maybe twelve. Except for the dress. I need Jian’s clothes,” Minka said, standing from the chair.

“Jian,” Lovedahl summoned again.

He came, raising his brows in surprise at the change in the girl. “Yes’m?”

“Yes, Jian. Bring her a shirt and pants—and a light jacket, at least. It’s going to get cold tonight. Shoes, two pairs of socks, and a couple sets of underwear, bottoms and tops. All clean,” she dictated.

“That’s prac’ly all I got. You’ll buy me more?” he asked, wincing.

“Of course. You have to put in a good appearance for the shop,” she said.

“All righty,” he said dubiously. He went to his room in the back of the house, then came out with all the specified items—even a flat cap for her head.

Minka took everything to Lovedahl’s bedroom to change, and put all of it on. Then she came out to look at them both.

They studied her in disbelief. “He’ll never know it’s you,” Lovedahl murmured. Minka nodded, then Lovedahl added, “The inn across the street always needs help, dear.”

“Thank you,” Minka whispered. “My name is Leyman.” She left out the back door, but had to cross to the front of the shop to get to the inn across the street. Glimpsing her in the boy’s clothes and cap, Nyarko assumed it was the boy he had seen earlier. When Jian came out later to lead the horse across the street, Nyarko was looking down the road south. But he turned in time to see the boy with the horse at the Porterhouse.

While all this was going on in Westford, a group of men sat around the long table in the second-floor workroom of the fortress. Ryal, Wendt, Estes, Koschat and Gabriel were watching Efran sit in his usual chair, rocking Joshua. Several other men, including Connor and Hawk, stood in the doorway to listen.

DeWitt entered the room around Hawk and Connor, who saluted. Sighing as he sat, DeWitt said, “Well, it will take time to uncover everything, but right now it looks as though Lissa began planning this after that first dinner on the seventh—possibly before. She was not a strawman; she had a spine. But somehow, she managed to appropriate the tools and the knowledge to create them.”

He paused, then said, “Efran. Send Joshua back down to the nursery.” Efran raised his head in reluctance, but DeWitt insisted, “If you let this change how you raise him, you’ll cripple him for life. Efran, give Joshua to Gabriel.” The Second rose from his chair to stand beside Efran’s.

Deeply unwilling, Efran forced himself to sit back and hand the boy up to Gabriel. He took him on arm to hand him off to Hawk in the doorway, then returned to the table. Hawk took Joshua on downstairs.

There was a silence, then Ryal said, “Efran, you were inexcusably hard on Minka. It was not her fault; as Enon tried to tell you, she wasn’t the one holding Joshua at the time. You’ve got some deep soul-searching and genuine penance to do.”

“I know,” Efran whispered.

Koschat said, “I left Nyarko watching the beauty shop in Westford—”

“A beauty shop. Trying to make herself over, again,” Efran groaned. Shaking his head, he said, “Ryal, I—I don’t have the integrity, or the self-discipline to be Lord Sovereign—”

Ryal got almost angry. “You’re not entitled to judge that, Efran, and for you to withdraw from your charter



because of this would be the most selfish, cowardly act I've ever witnessed. I will flay you before I allow you to quit because you said something you shouldn't have."

Gabriel exhaled a laugh of agreement. Efran dropped his head. "How do I . . . even begin to—to—"

DeWitt grunted, "You can start by going to that beauty shop and pleading on your knees for her to come back."

Estes stood. "I'll go with you, Efran. Connor, you come, too. But we need to get there quickly; we've already left her there too long."

Wendt added, "Yes, and look for that horse. That will tell you something."

"Yes. Thank you," Efran said, standing.

In Westford, Lovedahl cleaned up her shop after her most recent client while Jian sold the horse and tack to the New Porterhouse stables. Meanwhile, Minka—Leyman, that is—knocked at the back door of the kitchen. It was opened by a large woman in a full apron who scowled down at her. The boy whispered, "My name's Leyman; I can wash dishes and clean tables."

"Oh, you're not begging. Good, then. Come," she said, whisking her in. "You're clean; that's good. Patcher hat 'n' coat under one of the counters here, and get th' apron on." Minka quickly stripped off the jacket and hat to fold them and shove them into a cabinet underneath the nearest counter. The woman tossed her an apron which swallowed her. Then she steered her new dishwasher toward a mountain of dirty dishes waiting before a tub of dirty water.

Assessing everything at a glance, Minka whispered, "I need clean water."

The woman paused over her, having much to get done herself, then said, "All right, just empty that here." She pulled up the chain to the rubber stopper in the bottom of the tub, which allowed the water to drain into a large bucket beneath it. Correctly doubting Minka's ability to draw more than a kettle's worth of water, the mistress turned to a large, beefy man who had just brought in an armload of wood. "Goggin, draw Leyman here clean wash water."

"Yes'm." Having begun to take off his hat and coat to hang them on a coat rack at the door, he quickly put them back on. Then he easily lifted the full bucket beneath the wash tub to take it out.

The kitchen mistress told Minka, "You can pump your rinse water into this tub"—indicating a small hand pump emptying into a tub that could be stoppered at the bottom, as well. It was an efficient use of water which the fortress also practiced—all the dirty water was dumped into the gardens out back. "Afore you wash the plates, scrape 'em off into the pig bucket down here," the mistress added.

The kitchen muscle man Goggin quickly refilled the wash tub, to which Minka added soap. And when the mistress tossed a pair of gloves at her, Minka almost gasped, looking up with wide, grateful eyes. The woman smirked, "I take care of my help."

"Thank you, ma'am," Minka whispered. She set to washing well and quickly, stacking up a pile to rinse under the pump all at once. Then she placed the rinsed dishes in the drying racks so as to use space wisely but allow them to dry. The mistress observed all this, and approved. And Minka was glad for having learned to properly wash dishes in the fortress.

Meanwhile, Koschat, Connor, Estes and Efran set out for Westford in the early afternoon, all wearing decent tradesmen clothing. Efran was already exhausted from the morning's trauma. It was a quick half-hour ride to Westford, then Nyarko rode over to meet them as they approached the shop. "Captain, she went into the beauty shop hours ago, and I haven't seen her come back out. I may have missed her. But the woman's boy took the horse to the Porterhouse."

"All right, thank you, Nyarko. Stand by," Efran exhaled. "Ah, we don't want to scare the woman, so, Connor, you come in with me to look around, easy like. Estes, it may help if you check out back."

"Yes, Efran. No worries; we'll find her," Estes said, turning his horse.

Lovedahl, watching through a slit in the window curtain, murmured, "Here comes 'er husband, Jian. Everything cleaned up?"

"Yes'm," he said, glancing around. "I hid 'er dress and shoes in your closet, and—" He broke off, eyeing the trash basket full of curly brown hair.

He moved toward it, but by then, two large men had entered the shop—one was a Polonti who had the bearing of authority but dead eyes, the other a blond Southerner who glanced around everywhere as he entered. Immediately he smelled the treatment that had been used on Minka's hair.

The Polonti bowed to Lovedahl. "Pardon our intrusion, Lady, but I am looking for my wife, who—may have ridden here after I—spoke to her harshly. Her son needs her, and I must apologize to her on my knees."

He was so sincere that she almost felt sorry for him. "Oh, dear! Yes, she was here—a tall, voluptuous woman with mounds of red hair? She asked for a shampoo and curl. But she didn't give us a name, did she, Jian?"

"No, ma'am," he said, sick as he watched the blond man eye the pile of hair in the trash basket. Then Jian glanced out the back window to see another man of their party, also Polonti, looking at footprints in the grass leading from the back door.

"Thank you, Lady. If she comes by again, tell her that I . . . beg her forgiveness." The Polonti laid a handful of gold on her counter. Jian studied his brokenness.

"I certainly will, dear sir," she said compassionately. Watching them turn to leave, she thought, *May you rot in hell, but I will gladly spend your gold knowing that you'll never recognize her, even face to face.*

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## Chapter 18

Lovedahl watched out the front curtain while the two men who had just left her shop met up with the other three. Efran said, "I don't think she's still there. Do you?" he directed to Connor and Estes. Connor shook his head, starting to mention the shorn brown curls he'd seen in the wastebasket. But then he decided not to, knowing how much that would distress the Captain.

Estes said, "No, she's not there, Efran. There were two distinct sets of footprints—one leading from the house to

the stables, then across the street with hoofprints. The other prints were the same size, but lighter, and led from the back door and around the Porterhouse to the back door of the kitchen.”

“Ah,” Efran exhaled, and the other men nodded. Although Connor kept quiet about the hair, he was beginning to form a pretty good picture of who they were looking for. Efran continued, “Koschat, you and Nyarko ride back and tell DeWitt that Connor, Estes and I will be dining at the Porterhouse and, possibly staying overnight, if we don’t find her right away.”

“Yes, Captain,” Koschat said, saluting, then he and Nyarko departed. The three remaining walked their horses across the street to the stableyard. After they had groomed their own animals, Connor rented a room.

Before they went into the dining room together, Efran paused to stroke Kraken’s nose. “Don’t bust out of your stall tonight; I didn’t bring enough to pay for it and I’ll get you out tomorrow.” Kraken nodded, resting his head on his human’s shoulder. He was hurting without the other human tucked into his side.

On the Lands, during the hours following Efran’s heart-stopping rescue of his son, a few people became aware of the silent withdrawal of something lovely, something necessary that could hardly be pinpointed. First, Wendt asked Marguerite, “What do you sense of Minka?”

She looked up at him with eyes of sorrow, newly wrinkled. “Nothing,” she whispered. “She’s shut me out—turned her back on us entirely. Oh, Wendt.” She leaned on him to cry. He held her, trying to console her, then squinted at the trees that filled the hall: they were now dry sticks, dead and unmoving.

In fact, the Landers suddenly noticed that all of the faerie trees all over the Lands had died, including the great tree on the rooftop, whose branches extended over the entire roof and roots descended deep into the rock of the hilltop below. Not only had the trees died—or because they had died—the Abbey Lands faeries had vanished. Neither Queene Kele, nor Nutbin nor Ditson nor any of the others responded when called. This had only happened twice before: during the trauma of the insurrection and the appearance of De’Ath.

Without the water faeries to make the water flow, Marguerite’s copper-and-rock fountain dried up. Without the bell faeries, the rooftop bells stopped ringing. And without the garden faeries, the fall flowers and crops began to wither, all within hours.

The Librarian shrank for lack of joy; Nibor went to sleep behind the partition; Jongitud and his babies stayed down in the caverns. Having lost their Moiwahine, the Polonti grew sullen. All these symptoms were not recognized by everyone, nor right away. Still, many Landers were tense without knowing why or what should be done. But when Wendt had to go back to work that day, with Estes, Efran and Connor in Westford looking for Minka, DeWitt went down to the chapel house to knock on the door.

Hartshough answered like an old man. “Administrator DeWitt, thank you for dropping by, but the Commander has just now returned to Barracks A.”

DeWitt patted his shoulder. “I’m glad that someone is getting some work done, Hartshough. But I’m here to see Marguerite.”

“I shall inform her, Administrator. Please come in to wait,” Hartshough said, bowing. So DeWitt entered to sit on the divan.

When she came down the stairs to see him waiting, she perked up. “DeWitt! Have you heard anything?”

Standing, he smiled. “Nothing important, Marguerite. It just occurred to me that we’re missing out on some encouragement.”

“How so?” she asked.

“You and I are going to talk to Madgwick,” he said, putting her hand on his arm.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” she exhaled as they turned out of the chapel.

“The Fortress Administrator has got to have a few original ideas,” he said, walking her down Chapel Road to turn north on Main.

Meanwhile, Coghill had come to Wendt with a final report, of sorts, on their strawmen. They sat in the conference room with Viglian taking notes as Coghill opened, “Well, as we saw, and thanked God for, the baby that Captain Efran did not catch was the straw clone. I don’t know how he knew, or was able to determine in a fraction of a second which one was the living child, and then get to him before he hit the ground.”

“Mercy,” Wendt murmured, fingers at his lips.

“Quite so,” Coghill said. “I believe you already know that Lady Lissa was not a clone; she was a real person, killed by an archer after her accomplice threw the second baby—the real one—off the notary’s roof. Her accomplice who died jumping was a laborer named Luckinbill; had a few counterfeit royals on him that he’d evidently been trying to pass.”

Wendt nodded in confirmation. “He was supposed to have been evicted for that, but somehow got lodging in Laborer’s Hall. They found a sack of fifty royals—genuine ones—under his cot. He’d been getting ready to leave before that last job, which he apparently hadn’t expected.”

“I see.” Coghill continued, “And I believe you received word that Lord Baroffio died of a broken neck when he fell from his horse. His wife refuses to let us examine his body or send us any information, but Lord Colquhoun is certain that he was also a strawman.”

Again Wendt nodded. Neither of them knew that Elvey, discovering that Cocci had been by her shop when it was closed, had sent a messenger to her at LeVisay. Discovering her to be a new widow, Elvey was working hard to comfort the lady, and, bring her back.

After a short silence, Coghill remarked to Wendt, “Colquhoun also said—” He paused in bewilderment, then enunciated in disbelief, “He said that a small man in tweed bit Baroffio’s horse on his leg so that it started bucking and Baroffio was thrown.”

“Again,” Wendt whispered. “The sprites are killing the strawmen. Why? It seems almost personal.”

Coghill hesitated in his distress. “There’s so much more going on here that I don’t understand—don’t know if I will ever understand. How did this horrible capacity to create strawmen originate? How did Lady Lissa acquire it? And why did she decide to unleash it on us? It’s—mind-boggling.”

“I agree, doctor, and I don’t know if we’ll ever have satisfactory answers to your questions. But when Efran gets Minka back—which I believe he will, shortly—I think we’re going to discover something . . . previously unseen,” Wendt mused.

“I hope to God you’re right,” Coghill said passionately.

“I hope to God, too,” Wendt replied with a wry smile.

At this time, DeWitt and Marguerite had entered Delano’s, where they found Coish working the counter while Jehan ran cases of ale and lager out to customers’ carriages. Although out of uniform, when they saw DeWitt, they bolted up to salute. He waved them down, but then they began spilling out anxious questions about the Captain and the Lady Minka.

“We’re working on it,” DeWitt assured them, “and part of what we need to do is talk to Madgwick.”

“Yes, sir; let me check,” Jehan said as Coish turned to the next customer.

After knocking on the door of a back room and sticking his head in, Jehan returned to the counter to tell DeWitt, “She says to come in, Administrator, Lady Marguerite.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Madgwick is our encourager.”

“She says we are hers!” Jehan said, beaming at her.

Marguerite was smiling as she and DeWitt entered the back room where Madgwick had a baby sitting up on her lap, clapping and laughing. “Oh, Madgwick! You can’t tell me that’s Ruth!” Marguerite exclaimed. Although she had not been here on the Lands when Madgwick and Delano had adopted this baby, she had seen her several times—the last time well over a month ago.

Madgwick said, “Can you believe it? She’s eight and a half months old, and finally growing hair! For the longest time, we wondered if she’d be bald. But it looks blonde, doesn’t it? Oh, please sit.” She gestured to two chairs at a small table, which they took. Madgwick was in her rocker.

Marguerite said, “Yes, she’s blonde, Madgwick. Now, I . . . suppose you heard about the—terrible situation today, with Lissa throwing Joshua off the roof, and—Efran blaming Minka—”

Leaning over to put Ruth on the floor with her toys, Madgwick said, “Yes. And Efran has gone up to Westford to look for her?”

Marguerite glanced at DeWitt, who replied, “Yes, Madgwick. He’s so mad at himself for having blamed her without thinking, that he suggested resigning his charter. It’s certain that he won’t be good for anything unless she comes back. Estes seemed sure that she will, but, we have no guaranties. I suppose we just came to hear what you think.”

Nodding, Madgwick rocked silently a moment, watching Ruth play on the floor. Then she said, “You don’t really have winter down here in the Lands like they do in Westford or Eurus. That’s very nice for growing things, and old people who hate the cold, and children who want to play outside all the time. But winter is useful—even the snow storms that cover your windows and chill your bones. Everything looks as though it’s dead, covered in heavy white shrouds, but it’s only—resting. Building up unseen reserves below ground.

“Storms like we had today look evil when you’re in the midst of them, but, they can provide a—clearing out, a new beginning which wouldn’t otherwise be possible. And then you see new grace spring up which you never imagined,” Madgwick said quietly.

Brows raised, DeWitt tilted his head toward Marguerite. “And there you have it.” He looked back to Madgwick to add, “But that’s only if Efran doesn’t give up.”

“Oh, he has reserves—roots—tucked deep underground which he hardly knows are there. It’s time he found them,” Madgwick said, and DeWitt nodded.

In Westford, Minka had been washing dishes for hours, until her own needs began to press her. On the kitchen mistress’ next sweep nearby, Minka caught her to whisper, “I’m—very hungry, mistress.”

She said impatiently, “You’ll get your meal at the end of shift.”

As she began to move off again, Minka pleaded, “And I need to—to go—”

Brusquely, she said, “The latrine stall is out back to the right. Make it quick!”

“Yes, mistress.” Minka stripped off her gloves to run out the back door to the right.

First, she was shocked by how cold it had gotten out here. Next, she looked to see that the “stall” was merely an open-sided structure with a roof and a bench with a hole in the seat over a hole in the ground. Shaking, Minka pulled down her pants and boy’s breeches to sit and evacuate.

Then her head jerked up as a man came out of the kitchen to dump a bucket into what was evidently the pig trough to the left of the door. When he looked over to her, she saw that it was Goggin. She was glad to be still wearing her apron, which covered her while she went and wiped herself as best she could with a handful of straw. He was still watching her.

Then someone called him back into the kitchen, so he had to leave. She quickly stood and buttoned her pants to run back into the warmth of the kitchen, as well. He met her with a fixed stare, so she said, “I need clean wash water.”

He didn’t bother draining the heavy wash tub; he merely lifted it to take it out and empty it, then set it back in place to refill it with buckets. He might have been trying to make a point which Minka missed entirely, as she discovered that her gloves were gone. So she began washing dishes without them.

Three Landers—two Polonti and one Southerner—entered the dining room of the new Porterhouse to pause and look around. The hostess seated them at a table in the middle of the room, telling them, “We carry Delano’s, and our menu for the day’s on that large board.” She jerked her head toward a prominent slate affixed to the wall on which the day’s offerings were written with chalk.

Connor said, “I believe we’ll all have the mild ale. I’ll have the stew. How about you?” he queried his companions.

Efran and Estes nodded; the latter added, “With bread, please”—which helped soak up excessive grease.

“Will do,” she said, moving off to the order window of the kitchen.

A waitress brought over their bottles and stacked cups. As the men scanned the large room, they opened their bottles to drink, ignoring the cups. From their different perspectives, they had a comprehensive view. And they did not see anyone who could possibly be her. Efran’s eyes were already glassy.



“She’s in the kitchen, then,” Estes whispered. He and Connor kept glancing around, especially at anyone who came out of the swinging doors to the kitchen.

Efran had stopped searching outwardly. Instead, he was thinking, *Why did I do that? Why, why must I say things that hurt her, when I love her more than my own life? I didn’t think for a minute that she was responsible for any of that. Why did I pour out such anger on her?*

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## Chapter 19

While Efran was occupied castigating himself, Connor and Estes kept a lookout on the comings and goings of the dining room. A man at a nearby table called, “Hiya! Why can’t we get cups for the ladies’ lagers? Ain’t you got a dishwasher?”

Glancing over, Connor saw a rural party—two men and two women—dressed up for a holiday. So he picked up his table’s stack of unused cups to take them to the vacationers. “Here you are, sir; we’re rubes who don’t use ’em,” Connor offered with an engaging smile. After all, he was a handsome man.

The ladies returned prim smiles and the complainer said, “Thankee, sir,” as he separated the cups to distribute them.

Nodding cordially, Connor passed by his own table on his way to the kitchen. He leaned over the swinging doors to say, “Heya, could we get cups for our table?” Minka froze, recognizing the voice.

“Dishwasher!” the mistress shouted from the back of the kitchen.

Minka nervously wiped her hands on her apron and scooped up four cups from the drying rack to run them to the patron. Without meeting his eyes, she handed them to him over the doors. Her new hair didn’t fool him at all. He whispered, “We only need three cups, but we’d welcome a fourth at our table.”

Still without looking up, she mouthed something, then ran back to her washing. Goggin was watching it all. Connor took the cups to his table, then dropped off the extra one to the rural party. The man raised it, laughing.

Returning to his seat, Connor blinked in confirmation to Estes. But Efran was looking off dully, drowning in self-condemnation. So Connor leaned over to tell Estes what Minka looked like now.

Shortly, their bowls of stew with a serving of bread arrived, and Connor handed the cups to the waitress. “We don’t need these, thanks.” She took them to drop them off at the bar.

While the Landers slowly ate, Minka washed mindlessly, thinking, *What am I doing? I can’t do this for long. How have I made anything better? Does he want me back? Does he forgive me?* Without answers to those questions—or at least some of them—she didn’t have the nerve to walk out of the kitchen and go sit with them—especially after what she had done to her hair. So she kept washing, despite the harshness of the soap.

The Landers stretched out their meal for as long as they could, but with twilight, the inn’s dining room began



filling up. The rural vacationers had left long ago. The waitress came over to ask Connor impatiently, “What else will you gentlemen have?”

“We’re done,” he said, standing to hand her three royals. As his companions stood, a Southerner at the bar glanced over, and Estes made eye contact with Teschner. He tossed a royal on the bar, then left shortly after they did.

Outside the Porterhouse, Estes went over to tell Teschner and his partner, Graeme: “Connor found her in the kitchen, but she’s not ready to come home yet. We’re going to stay at least overnight. Apprise the Commander and Administrator DeWitt.” His breath condensed in the cold air.

“Yes, sir,” Graeme breathed. “We’ll check back in the morning.”

“Good.” Estes said. As Graeme and Teschner remounted to ride off, Estes returned to his companions. “Connor, you keep watch out front here; Efran and I will keep an eye on the back kitchen door.”

“Yes, Steward,” Connor whispered. Efran was looking off vacantly.

Surveying his Captain and friend, Estes sighed. “Come on, Efran. We’ll watch for her.” He took his arm and Efran looked at him blankly.

As evening fell, they walked around to the back of the Porterhouse to wait just beyond the circle of lantern light. Although they were wearing jackets—no hats—they had to walk around or bounce lightly to keep warm. They waited quietly, just in case, though Estes doubted Efran knew what they were waiting for.

Meanwhile, Minka washed and washed, growing more tired and hungry by the moment. She thought about the abundance of good food at the Abbey, and how Efran was always pressing her to eat more. She had never known hunger. Now she did.

As she began to scrape uneaten noodles from a plate into the pig bucket, she stopped to bring two quick forkfuls to her mouth. A voice at her side whispered, “You’ll get in trouble for that.”

She startled violently to see Goggin standing over her shoulder. “And I saw you,” he added, leering. She said nothing, but it was hard to appear undaunted when she was trembling so hard.

Finally, finally, when she had all the dishes washed and rinsed, she threw off the heavy, wet apron in relief. Then Goggin came back over to hand her a dry piece of bread. “There’s your dinner. If you want more, you have to come to me. After you dump the slop for the pigs in the trough by the door, you’re done for the day.”

Recoiling at his breath, she ate the bread with a vengeance. Then she picked up the bucket with chapped, sore hands to haul it outside.

As she turned to dump it in the pig trough, she heard a quiet voice: “Minka.”

She turned with a gasp of relief to see Estes step into the circle of lantern light. Dropping the bucket, she started toward him—then Efran entered the circle of light, and she paused.

He only glanced at her, then looked quizzically at Estes. “Where?”

“Here. Efran, this is Minka,” he said.

“Minka?” Efran looked at the shivering, white-haired boy. “No, it’s not,” he said derisively.

Estes exhaled in frustration, but Minka’s face cleared. “It’s the hair,” she told Estes. “He’s always, only, loved the hair.”

Efran peered at her as she spoke, but she turned to pick up the bucket and reenter the kitchen. Estes looked at Efran in resigned disgust. “Sometimes I just want to beat you senseless.”

“Estes, was that—that—?” Efran stammered.

“She cut her hair, Efran,” he said as to a child. “You would have recognized her if you had ever let her cut it.”

In bewildered dismay, Efran stepped toward the door, but Estes held his arm. “Anything more will have to wait till tomorrow. Let’s get Connor and go on up to our room.”

“That was Minka,” Efran groaned in belated apprehension. Regardless of what he saw, he knew her voice.

“We’ll try again tomorrow,” Estes said, pulling him along.

As soon as Minka stepped back into the kitchen, she realized what a colossal mistake she had just made, in letting her pride prevent her going home: Goggin was right there to meet her. He and she were the only ones left in the kitchen, dark but for the coals glowing in the banked fire. “Where you gonna sleep?” he breathed at her. “It’s cold in here.”

While her teeth chattered for the cold and the fear, the kitchen mistress appeared at the swinging doors. “Goggin, you finish stacking these chairs!”

“Yes’m,” he said, turning at once.

As soon as he had left the kitchen to follow the mistress, Minka flew to the back door to look out—but Estes and Efran were gone. She shut the door again, then went to the cabinet where she had put her hat and jacket. They also were gone.

But then she noticed how roomy the cabinet was—although it didn’t look like it from the outside, it was a double cabinet, only partially filled with a few pots and pans. Minka quickly shoved them all to one end, then was able to crawl inside it, curl up and close the door from the inside. All the while, she was hearing Goggin’s rapid footfalls as he carried chairs across the dining room to stack them against the wall.

Minutes later, he rushed back into the kitchen. Minka held very still, listening as he looked everywhere (almost), even in the pantry. Cursing her roundly for leaving him frustrated, he promised, “You wait till tomorrow, Leyman. I’ll get you tomorrow.” Then she listened to him retreat to his bedroom, wherever that was.

When she was sure that everyone was out of the kitchen for the night, she slipped out of the cabinet to go foraging. She ate cooked carrots and potatoes, and a piece of barley bread. She wrapped a half-loaf of date-nut bread in a cloth for tomorrow, then rubbed some lard onto her hands to ease the chapping. Finally, she crawled back into the cabinet.

But she was too cold to sleep. And she marveled at how she had taken for granted the warmth of the Lands, when she knew very well how much colder it was here. Cautiously, she crawled out of the cabinet once more to

take Goggin's hat and coat off the rack. Without trying to put them on, she lugged them into the cabinet with her to scrunch under the coat. It was a poor substitute for the warmth of a man's side. Also, it stank. But because she had stupidly, proudly turned away the warm man who had come for her, she curled up in the cabinet again under the coat to fall directly asleep.

In the large room which Estes, Efran and Connor were sharing, they stretched out in their clothes, taking off only their boots. It was cold in here, too, without a fire. (Efran and Estes got the beds while Connor settled for the cot.) They left a solitary candle burning next to the room latrine.

Connor and Estes were almost asleep when Efran asked, "Estes, what did she mean by, 'it's the hair'?"

"What?" Estes reluctantly opened his eyes. Connor was also awake now.

Efran said, "She said, 'He's always, only, loved the hair.' Why would she think I loved her just for her hair?"

Estes sat up. "Because you never let her do anything with it, Efran! You wouldn't let her cut it, or pull it back, or do anything to dress it! That's not the behavior of a man who loves his wife!"

Efran groaned, "What do I—how can I ever—?"

"Change what you say to her!" Estes said loudly enough to wake the people in the next room. "If you truly love her and not just her hair, then tell her, 'You can do whatever you want with it.' Why does she have to run away to get the basic freedom to fix her own hair how she likes?"

Efran was silent for several minutes, then said, "I understand."

"Good," Estes grunted, flopping back down. Connor chewed on that a little, because he had been urging his wife Lyra to grow her hair out longer.

Shortly, two of the men in that room fell asleep (as did those next door whom Estes had wakened) but Efran was still thinking. As usual, Estes was right: Efran had been overbearing and unreasonable about Minka's hair. He wanted to believe that was because he just loved the way it looked and felt, and not because he was trying to control her. But it didn't become an issue until he hurt her, *again*, by something he said.

*Change what you say to her.* There it was again: he just poured out on her whatever was in his head or on his heart—

And he realized, *She is my receiver, my—receptacle. I pour out on her whatever is inside me.* No one had ever listened to him the way she did—she took in what he said and enlarged it. But her being his receptacle meant that she was all the more vulnerable when what he poured out was . . . caustic.

He remembered crying to Sister Therese the first time someone—a high-ranking church dignitary who had come to see her work among the poor of Eledith—called him a "filthy Polonti"—"*Why do you waste your time with these filthy Polonti?*" After the dignitary had left, taking his funding with him, she had explained to Efran what that person was: *A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.* [Luke 6:45] So when Efran spewed evil on Minka, that was just what was in his heart.

*Change what you say to her.* Was it that easy? That depended on whether he really loved her or not: *Love is patient and kind, and doesn't demand its own way.* [1 Cor. 13:4]

Efran lay awake a long time thinking about that.

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## Chapter 20

Very early the following morning, before sunrise, Minka was jolted awake by angry voices. She froze in panic until, first, she remembered where she was, and second, she realized that no one else knew where she was.

The voices belonged to, first, the kitchen mistress, shouting at Goggin to get the day's wood chopped, and second, Goggin shouting that Leyman had stolen his coat and left the filthy apron in its place.

The kitchen mistress shouted back, "You stupid lump, you don't need your coat to chop wood! Leyman probably took your coat because she was cold. So get the wood chopped, then we'll find where she's sleeping and get her up so you'll have your coat." Grumbling, he seemed to accept that, then Minka listened as they both went out the back door.

Cautiously, quietly, Minka opened the cabinet door to look around the dark kitchen. No one else was here yet. So she slid out of the cabinet, gathered up the coat, hat and bread, and gently closed the cabinet door again. She slipped out of the kitchen into the dark dining room, and from there to the foyer of the inn.

The day manager had just unlocked the front doors, as he was coming on duty. Minka watched him go back to his office, then she slipped out the doors and down the steps into the street, murky in the predawn. It was also very cold.

Clutching her burdens, Minka ran past Lovedahl's shop to stop just behind it, hidden from view of the inn. There, teeth chattering fiercely, she put the bread at her feet in order to shake out the coat and put it on. It was impossibly large on her, but that was what she needed now. She put the hat on her head, tilting it back so she could see, and placed the bread in a pocket.

With Jian's shoes still on her feet—as well as two pairs of his socks—she turned east on this road, walking into the sunrise. The next intersection was the main north-south road which would take her home to the Abbey Lands. Because it was so close to Westford, she just assumed that, after she had refused to leave with Efran and Estes last night, they had ridden back to the Lands. Then, if they decided to try again today, she would meet them on the road.

From the chicken coop behind Lovedahl's, Jian watched her put on the coat and hat and walk east until turning south on the main road. He followed a little ways just to make sure she got off all right, and she did.

Smelling ham, Efran opened his eyes. Connor looked over. "Ho, Captain's awake. Looks as though we'll have to share after all, Steward."

Estes grunted, "I'm trying to think of a reason."

Efran sat up. "I know what to do now."

“Good. Go get her out of that kitchen and carry her home?” Estes asked.

“Yes.” Efran smiled tiredly. “And I’m going to be very careful about what I say to her.”

Connor nodded and Estes exhaled, “I’m very glad, Efran.”

After they ate and paid their bill, they retrieved their horses from the stables. To kill time until they had reasonable expectations of finding Minka in the dining room or kitchen, they rode around looking at all the construction. Shortly, Elowen and Beardall (wearing inconspicuous clothing) arrived from the Lands to check on the search. Estes quietly told them that they’d seen her last night, and expected to bring her home soon. So the two left again with that report. And they missed her on the road going and coming, because she hid in the trees from anyone she didn’t recognize who was not wearing Abbey red.

Then about mid-morning, Efran and Connor walked into the dining room while Estes waited with the horses out front. There were only a smattering of diners here, with breakfast over and the midday meal not in full swing. So it took seconds for the two to determine that she wasn’t out here.

With Connor waiting by the entry, Efran traversed the dining room to push through the swinging doors into the kitchen. The kitchen crew stopped in mid-motion while he surveyed everything: the unmanned sink, the worktables, the stove and cooktops, even the pantries. He walked clear through the kitchen to the other door, which opened to a large storage room. Then he returned to open the back door and look out.

The kitchen mistress said, “She’s not here.”

Efran evaluated her, then turned blank eyes to Goggin. Pale, he blurted, “She stole my coat!”

Lowering his chin, Efran thought about that, then walked on out. The kitchen crew exhaled in relief and went back to work. Efran went out front to tell Connor and Estes, “She left.” And they all looked across the street at Lovedahl’s Beauty Treatments.

Connor went to the front door to knock, but called down to Estes and Efran, “There’s a note; it says, ‘Off to market for more supplies, will be back November eighteenth’—tomorrow.”

Efran put his head on one side, thinking, then said, “Pick the lock.” Connor pulled out a pin from his belt and did that. The three of them entered to quickly search the house and shop. No one was there.

As they reemerged onto the front porch, Efran was sweating. “Where would she go?”

“Back to the Lands?” Estes suggested.

“When she wouldn’t come with us last night?” Efran asked dubiously.

“She had all night to think about it,” Estes said.

Sick to his stomach, Efran looked down the street at all the shops under construction, all the men working who might find satisfaction in abusing a young woman, alone and vulnerable. “Connor, ride on down; see if she’s made it back. If she hasn’t, bring me a regiment. I’m going to tear down every building that’s going up until I find her.”

“Yes, Captain,” he said, swinging up on his horse. He turned east down Porterhouse Street, then south on the Main Road. Efran and Estes then turned their horses to begin walking them up the street, just looking.

But by that time, Minka had arrived at the gates of the Abbey Lands.

Along with the date-nut bread, she had eaten snow from days-old snowdrifts in shadows until all the snow had disappeared. She had shed the coat and hat miles back, because the closer she got to the Lands, the warmer the air became. Now she was fairly warm, for it was a long walk, especially with all the layers of clothes she was wearing, having no safe place to stop and undress. She was also hungry, having eaten all the bread hours ago.

To accommodate traffic, the gates were standing open. But the guards were still checking the back of every neck that passed through. The guard who checked Minka’s neck, Lambdin, looked at her in concern: “Are you alone?” She nodded.

She knew who he was, because she had heard all about his joining Efran’s service after bringing down his son Henris from university, who had also been admitted to the Abbey army. This had all happened about nine months ago. But Lambdin had not seen her often enough to recognize her now. He said, “Go on up to the fortress there on the hill; they’ll feed you and find a place for you.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, her eyes watering at the invitation given even to a stranger. He nodded, and she walked slowly up the street, looking at everything as though it had been months since she had been here, instead of a day.

A few women glanced at her, being so awkwardly dressed, with short, thin, white hair. Unsurprisingly, no one recognized her. At the corner of Main and Chapel Road, she paused. She needed to see the children, and assure them that she was all right, but it would be unreasonably cruel to pass by Auntie and Hartshough without a word. So she turned east on Chapel Road to go to the oyster house. On the way, she glanced at the notary shop: Ryal and Giardi deserved an early word as well, but not before Auntie.

The pair of Abbey guards at the front doors of the chapel watched her advance up the walk to ring the doorbell. She glanced at them, then: Heus on her right and Krall on her left. Heus, being relatively new, did not realize who she was. But Krall, upon meeting her eyes, dropped down to look directly in her face. “Lady Minka,” he whispered.

Hartshough opened the door, and she smiled tentatively at him. “I’m back.”

At this time, Connor was running his sweating horse up Porterhouse Street. Pulling up to circle in the middle of the street, not seeing whom he was looking for, he began shouting, “Captain! Captain!”

A number of faces turned to him, then Efran and Estes emerged on their horses from a side street. Connor waved something heavy at them, and they spurred to meet him. Connor thrust a large man’s coat at Efran. “Captain, I found that in the middle of the road just a few minutes’ ride down. But I kept going almost clear to the Lands, hoping to catch her.”

“This must be the coat that she stole,” Efran said in admiration, hefting it in one hand.

“She took it off when it got too heavy on the way,” Estes said.

Efran began, “Unless someone caught up with her, and—”

“Stop it, Efran!” Estes laughed in frustration. “She’s back at the Lands by now! What are we doing here?”

“Riding home,” Efran admitted with watering eyes. He dropped the coat on the street in front of the Porterhouse and the three of them turned toward the Main Road South.

While Hartshough leaned over Minka with a gentle, awkward hug, Krall was demanding, “Lady Minka, where is the Captain?”

She looked at him in surprise. “He’s not here?”

“No, Lady, he rode up looking for you,” Krall said.

“Oh. I thought he would be back by now. Is Estes here?” she asked.

“No, Lady Minka,” he replied, looking perturbed.

But she relaxed. “If Estes is with him, they’re probably right behind me.”

Krall whistled at a man on the street to send him up to Administrator DeWitt with the news, but Minka turned to Auntie coming up with outstretched arms. Minka hugged her tightly, crying. Then she wiped her face to demand, “Don’t you like my hair?” Marguerite could only laugh.

Men began thronging the street as word was passed that Lady Minka was back, and the Captain and Steward were on their way. Since Minka knew she needed to go right up to DeWitt, she pulled Auntie along with her. “Oh! But we have to stop to see Ryal and Giardi before we go up,” Minka said firmly.

“Of course,” Marguerite said, wiping her face with her free hand. “But I have to ask, darling—why did you cut off all your hair?” She was laughing and crying at the same time. A large and growing crowd of soldiers surrounded them.

Minka stopped at the corner of Chapel Road and Main to think about this. Ryal’s door was right here, and the crowd of soldiers overflowed into both streets. “Yes. Why? . . . I think because, since Minka died, I didn’t need it anymore.”

There was a shocked silence around her. Marguerite whispered, “No, dear, no. Why would you die?”

Aware of all the men listening around them, and their regard for Efran, Minka shrugged, “It doesn’t matter.” She turned to hop up the steps and open Ryal’s door. Since she did not know whether Efran would be glad at all to see her, she wanted to greet those who loved her for herself and not her hair. Ryal and Giardi were waiting on customers, with two more in line. So Minka, grinning, stood in line behind them. Marguerite entered behind her.

Ryal gave Minka a long glance, but Giardi looked at her in delight, crying, “I love your hair!” Minka fell onto her auntie to laugh.

While Ryal turned to Giardi for an explanation, they heard shouts and whistles up the street, followed by the wall gates bell clanging. The rhythm conveyed that it was not an alarm, but good news. The Landers outside Ryal’s door parted, although those inside the shop were less aware of the horses that had pulled up outside.

Then a tall Polonti entered the open door. His eyes, tired but intent, went straight to the boyishly dressed girl



whose sparse white hair was plastered down with sweaty road dust. She looked back at him almost fearfully. The customers in the shop backed away from them.

In doing so, someone accidentally knocked the book of *Annotations* off the counter. Soames stooped to pick it up, and the pages that fell out of the back of it.

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## Chapter 21

Efran drew up to Minka without a word, then sank to his knees before her, covering her chapped hands with his. She looked shaken. He wet his lips to say, "I've . . . been learning a great deal this last twenty-four hours about, how precious you are to me, and, how often I forget that. But, I am learning. And if you will forgive me, *again*, I will store up only good things in my heart, because everything in it goes out to you. And from now on, I want to pour out only good on you, to show you my love. Please forgive me, Minka, because I love you more than my own life, and I want to prove it by how I speak to you." He looked up at her, blinking back the tears.

In the stark silence of the shop, she asked, "Are you not angry about my hair?"

Some of the men listening almost fell down, and Efran did painfully laugh, "No, I'm not angry. You can wear your hair however you like."

"What if I want to keep it short?" she asked.

"However you like, as long as I can see you smile at me again," he choked out. Giardi and Marguerite, as well as a woman in line (and a couple of men who wouldn't want their names published) were openly weeping.

Still hesitant, she asked, "Can we go up to see the children, and Joshua?"

"Yes, although I probably need to check in with my administrator first," he said, shifting, because trying to have a conversation on one's knees was uncomfortable. He continued to clutch her red, raw hands.

But she didn't feel any pain because she was still trying to understand. "You looked angry when you saw me, without my hair."

He shook his head, then said slowly, "I believe I look angry when I am deeply confused about something important. I did not know it was you. Estes was kind enough to point out that if I had ever let you cut your hair as you wanted to, I wouldn't have trouble recognizing you when you finally did."

"That's a good point," she said, looking over to Estes standing in the doorway. "Thank you, Estes!"

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "You're welcome, Minka." Meanwhile, Efran, still on his knees, was pressing his forehead to her hands now, and looked close to passing out.

So she got down on her knees with him. "All right, I forgive you. It's not like I was ever obsessed with your hair or anything, or tried to tell you not to cut it, or made you pull it back when you couldn't see through it." Efran then fell over on his back, and a number of men fell off the steps, because a solid dozen of the Abbey stories

feature his hair in secondary plots. Moreover, she seemed to have forgotten what she was supposed to be angry about.

Then he pulled her over on top of him, and Ryal said, “Welcome home, Minka and Efran. Do you mind if I take care of the customers waiting?”

“No, Ryal, go right ahead,” Efran said, smoothing her wispy hair back from her face, her lips close to his. “I like your hair,” he murmured into her lips. “It’s different. But your heart is still mine.” He kissed her with feeling while customers and soldiers stood looking down at them.

“Next,” Ryal said dryly.

She pulled away to murmur, “We’re in the way. You take up half the floor.”

“All right,” he sighed, getting up. “Can I say that I don’t much care for what you’re wearing?”

“Yes, that’s acceptable,” she said, taking his hand for him to lift her to a stand. She paused. “But will it create too much confusion if I want to wear pants?”

“Not for me, and I’m the only one whose opinion matters. Besides yours,” he added quickly. She grinned at him, and he inhaled in relief: life was worthwhile again.

When they came down Ryal’s steps holding hands, they—and everyone else down Main—were briefly startled by faerie tree shoots breaking through old, dead wood to burst into leaves and blooms everywhere. In fact, buds and blossoms shot out so rapidly that the emerging flowers forced out those in full bloom. This created a shower of small white nutmeg-scented flowers by the hundreds of thousands across the Lands.

Landers who knew that these flowers were not only edible, but good for flavoring, ointments, and stomach relief gathered them by the bucketfuls. Children stopped what they were doing to pluck and eat them from the air, and local chickens went wild.

At the same time, the fortress rooftop bells were pealing odes to joy while half-hidden faeries sparkled in the air all over the Lands. The sounds of Arenivas’ harp seemed to be amplified by the singing tree, so that both were heard clear up to the hilltop. Seeing all this all at once, Minka looked to her auntie in awe. *Is this all for me?*

Marguerite replied, *Not just for you, darling, but for the Lord and Lady Sovereigns reunited in love. This is where the greatest power of your charter rests: that you live in love.* At that, Minka turned quickly to Efran, and he almost started crying again at the adoration in her eyes.

When they stopped beside Kraken, he snuffled her head thoroughly. “Yes, it’s Minka; don’t get your snot all over her,” Efran grumbled.

“I need to bathe,” she said, queasily touching her hair.

“Yes, that’s fine.” He resolved to agree with whatever she wanted from now on.

He started to lift her to the saddle, but she gripped his arm. “I want to ride behind you.”

“All right.” He mounted, reaching down a hand, and a man lifted her up behind his saddle. As they rode up the switchback, his hand on her arms clutching his waist, Minka looked over her shoulder at Ino in the form of

undulating waves of clouds rollicking over the whole sky. Beneath them were the outpourings of surely a million white flowers. Below them, the traffic on Main was at a standstill for the number of people flooding the street with their eyes above.

At the door of their quarters, Efran kissed Minka, telling her, "I'm going to report to DeWitt, then I'll meet you in the dining hall for the midday meal."

"I—don't want to walk in by myself," she said anxiously.

"Then I'll meet you in our quarters," he said.

"I'll be bathing in the third-floor room," she told him, still anxious.

"Then I'll come up to get you." He kissed her forehead, then had to wipe Kraken's snot off his mouth.

"I wish I hadn't chopped off all my hair now. I hate it when everyone stares at me," she muttered, opening the door. He bit back a pained smile, not daring to reply.

While he went upstairs to the second-floor workroom, Minka stood at her wardrobe in desolation. Her regular dresses were too plain for short hair and her pretty dresses too fancy for the midday meal. And she couldn't even conceive wearing pants, just imagining the raised eyebrows.

Digging deeper, however, she found the shawl woven with roses and long skirt of copper brown that she had bought at Flodie's. They had been in a trunk of clothes donated by Marguerite when she was still in Eurus.

Lifting these out, she found a pearl blouse to go with them, as well as her regular house shoes and another pair of gold hoops from the Treasury. Taking clean underclothes as well, she ran up to the third floor room with her head down, hoping not to meet anyone on the way. She didn't.

In the second-floor workroom, Efran dropped in exhaustion in his usual chair. Estes had already given DeWitt a fairly full accounting of their trip, but DeWitt looked over to ask, "How is she, Efran?"

"All right, even good," he exhaled. "Only, the last thing she told me was that she wished she hadn't cut her hair." He leaned back to cover his eyes.

DeWitt chuckled, "The good thing about hair is that it grows." Efran uncovered his eyes to consider that, and sat up again.

When he came up a half hour later to knock on the door to the third-floor room, he heard her murmur, "Efran?"

"Yes. Are you ready?" he asked.

She opened the door fearfully, then stepped back so he could get the whole absurd picture. "I feel like a child playing dress-up. How bad does it look?"

"You look lovely," he said sincerely. "I don't remember seeing you wear that before."

"I don't know that I have. Auntie had donated it to Flodie's. Should I put the shawl around my shoulders instead of my hips? Or just cover my head with it?" she groaned, leaning into him.

“No, I like the way you’re wearing it now. Minka? Just smile. When you smile, no one looks at anything else,” he said, holding her on one arm.

“I can’t; I feel so stupid,” she said in despair.

“What’s the use of doing something stupid if you can’t be proud of it? Raise your face and smile, Minka. Then we’ll see a dozen women walking down Main tomorrow with spiky hair,” he promised.

They went down to the nursery, but Joshua was not there. “I should have known; he’s hardly in the nursery anymore except to sleep,” Efran muttered, pretending that his heart rate hadn’t shot up. Minka nodded vaguely, trying not to see the heads swiveling abruptly toward her.

As they emerged onto the back grounds, the children spotted them immediately. They came running over to ask who the new girl was. When Toby said, “It’s Minka!” they all wanted to know why she had changed her hair. Hassie loved it; Jera cried, and Chorro was trying to remember what it looked like before.

But Efran was looking all around. “Where is Joshua?”

The children looked around as well. Noah said, “I haven’t seen him yet today, Efran. But we just came out a little while ago.”

“All right,” Efran said, pale.

Minka, squinting in the distance, asked, “Is that him on Soup?”

Efran’s head whipped around, and he began trotting, then running toward the horse training pens. When he realized he’d left her behind, he stopped, but she waved, “Go. I’ll catch up.” So he turned to run.

When she arrived at the pens, she found out why he ran. Joshua was on Soup by himself. Tess—the real one—was leading him, but there was no one walking alongside to steady him in a saddle that was too big for him. His face was tense.

Efran had hopped over the railing to come alongside the pony, stopping him. He didn’t lift Joshua off, however; he just let him sit there until he got his balance. Tess looked back. “Hey! He’s doing fine!”

“Tess,” Efran breathed. “Don’t—do anything with Joshua. I’m teaching him to ride.”

Earnshaw and Fennig came up to them. Other men who saw the Captain running were also approaching. Fennig said, “She said you wouldn’t mind, Captain. I thought she had talked to you.” His voice bristled with anger over her shading the truth, especially after what had just happened. But Tess apparently didn’t know about that.

Efran was trying to get his heart rate back down. While he didn’t blame her for Lissa impersonating her in order to take Joshua, he said, “No, I do mind.”

He had more to say, but she looked over to the railing. “Who’s the new girl?” Without waiting for an answer, she called, “If you’re going to pretend to be me, you’d better blacken that hair.” So she had heard something about it—but evidently not the part about her impostor throwing Joshua off the roof.

Efran was sticking to the point at hand. “Tess, the men have my instructions as to what to do with Joshua. You don’t do anything with him.”

“I guess I’ll have to teach my own how to ride,” she said teasingly. She was too happy to listen to any scolding.

Efran said, “You do that. Don’t touch Joshua.”

“I won’t. Lorient and I are going to have our own,” she exhaled, grinning. They had been married for about nine months now.

“Good. Congratulations.” He picked up Joshua to walk back to the railing where Minka waited. Joshua looked conflicted: he wanted to ride Soup, but he was glad to be with his father. “Are you ready to go eat?” he asked her, still rattled.

“Yes, actually, I’m hungry,” she half-laughed, pretending that she hadn’t heard Tess’ announcement. Minka was determined to not walk that road of sorrow over her barrenness anymore, again, ever.

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## Chapter 22

“I’ll look forward to not making you eat, for a change,” Efran told Minka. Hand at her back, with Joshua on his other arm, he walked her to the western door of the fortress, which short corridor led to the foyer, and then down to the kitchen and dining hall. As they passed the open door to the kitchen, she glanced in, shaking all over again at what she had almost gotten herself into.

They entered the dining hall to sit at the back bench as usual, but almost everyone else had already eaten the midday meal. So Wardly didn’t even see them for a few minutes. When he did, he came running. “Hey, Cap’n! What’ll you and yer friend have?”

“Whatever you’ve got left, Wardly. This is Lady Minka,” he said.

“Oh!” His eyes widened and she tried to smile at him. “Sorry about that, Lady Minka. You threw me, there.”

Settling Joshua on his leg, Efran answered, “That’s all right, Wardly; just bring her what she usually eats.”

“Sure, Cap’n,” he said, skipping off.

Shortly, he brought their plates: his of baked chicken and vegetables, hers of cobbler and rice. Seeing the deficiency, Efran separated out part of his chicken for her. “Take it just for today,” he whispered. “I know you didn’t have much yesterday. And you walked here all the way from Westford,” he said in admiration.

She took him in with full eyes. “On the way, I relived every step of the ride with Toby on Bastard while you walked alongside, leading him. You taught me how to find the North Star, and I used that to help Hassie when we lost the road,” she murmured.

“I’m glad you cut your hair,” he said. “I’m glad you forced me to see you differently, so I won’t ever take you for granted.” While he was studying her new appearance as a whole, Joshua was helping himself to the half breast of chicken on his plate.

The bench underneath them rocked from Ella sitting on her right. “Minka!” she exhaled. First, Ella grabbed her in a hug, which made Minka laugh. Then Ella pulled away. “I want to hear all about it when you can talk, but I saw you at the pen but didn’t know that was you!” Ella fell silent to scrutinize her hair while Minka watched, mildly wincing, and Efran started eating what was left of his chicken.

“I love it,” Ella said intently. “And if you wanted to shake everyone up, that did the job. That must be so freeing, to not have to wash and brush a mass of hair every single day.” Her own hair was long, past her shoulders. Efran glanced up cautiously, knowing that’s how her husband Quennel liked it. All Polonti women were proud of their thick, sleek hair; Efran didn’t know of any who would dream of cutting it short.

“I only did it yesterday,” Minka said tentatively.

“But aren’t you glad you did?” Ella cried.

She looked uneasy, but Efran said, “I am. I wasn’t at first, but I am now. It’s shown me a whole new side of her.”

Something meaningful crossed Ella’s face. “That’s good to know.” She kissed Minka’s cheek, then got up again purposefully.

Following the meal, Minka wanted to get away from people staring at her, trying to figure out who she was without asking. “Let’s go sit at the lake,” Efran suggested. Since the skirt Minka was wearing wasn’t good to ride in, they started walking down the new switchback while he carried Joshua. Kraken couldn’t have that, of course, so when he came thundering after them, Efran put Joshua on his bare back with a hand on the boy. Joshua rode like a veteran, hands on his thighs and face to the sun.

Emerging from the switchback, they walked to the lake. On the way, they waved to Escarra working in his garden. And when they arrived at the shore, Efran got Joshua down to play in the grass while Kraken rolled beside him. Then Efran and Minka sat on Ashe’s memorial bench to watch the light play on the water and listen to the faint hammering of new construction, the birds trilling in the faerie trees, and the rooftop bells ringing another ancient hymn. It was one of those that you recognize in your bones, from your forebears singing it untold years ago.

The faerie trees on the east and west edges of the lake were healthy and burgeoning, and the spent flowers made the ground white in the distance. Blossoms still drifted in the air here and there. She whispered, “I should have known—I should have stopped to consider what a terrible shock you’d just endured, of barely saving Joshua without any warning, with no second chance if you got it wrong.”

He slowly nodded. “That was a shock, until I realized—I didn’t decide which to catch, and I didn’t move myself toward the right one. I just fell, and happened to land underneath him. When I go up to the Hall of Memories—which I will whenever Sir Nomus gets that memory up—I am absolutely sure I will see someone’s silver hands, probably Nakham’s, pushing me to the right.”

“Oh, Efran, that is so comforting to know,” she whispered.

“Yes, and I knew it almost right away. I just had to be still to let it sink in. But that also means I had *no excuse* for pouring out such anger on you. I had no right to mar that deliverance with a temper tantrum,” he said grimly.

“And then I made it worse,” she murmured.

He snorted. “No, then you provided the corrective, whether you meant to or not.”

She twined her fingers in his shirt. “Efran, take me up now.”

“All right,” he smiled, knowing what she wanted. He got up to apprehend Joshua before he went swimming. The boy agreeably laid his heavy head on his father’s shoulder and patted his chest. While the afternoon turned golden with sprinkles of white, they walked up the switchback, Kraken following on his own.

Immediately, word flashed down Main like lightning that Lord Efran had a new girlfriend. Others who knew better said, That’s Lady Minka, Stupid. So there was great discord and several fistfights while white blossoms continued to drift down upon the Lands.

But Efran and Minka, reunited in understanding and forgiveness, gave themselves to each other in fresh love. Ironically, Efran’s experience with her new hair almost exactly paralleled her experience with his black spikes: the change intrigued and excited him, but he still preferred longer hair to play with.

The following day, November 18th, Ryal sent word to DeWitt, Estes, and Efran that three nobles had arrived from Westford, wishing to solidify their alliance with the Lands, especially regarding construction. Ryal asked, if possible, that they meet in his shop, because he knew they’d need forms notarized, but he and Giardi were inundated with demands for plots, leases and housing. Even Soames had to cancel the day’s Law class in order to assist them. Meanwhile, Tourse’s security force continued to make preemptive sweeps of the far east Lands.

After discussing it, the Fortress administrators decided to send down Efran and DeWitt. Estes had too much work to make up from the day lost looking for Minka, and DeWitt was authorized to make such decisions on his own.

So Efran and DeWitt just walked down the old switchback. Kraken was content to stay in back with the children. No one was needed to stand nearby to keep Joshua on his back; Kraken did that himself. The only difficulty they had was getting the boy seated to start with. When Kraken had tried to rise from the ground with Joshua on his back, he fell off. Neither of them told anyone about it. But for the time being, they had to wait for assistance for him to get on.

At Ryal’s, Efran and DeWitt walked in around a line of customers waiting, and Ryal glanced up to nod them toward the back room. So they went through the open door to see Lord Colquhoun, Lord McElfresh, and—Lady Cocci, dressed in another exuberant creation from Elvey’s preceding the Windry tornado.

As the two paused in surprise, Colquhoun stood. “Efran, DeWitt, thank you for meeting with us. I believe you’ve met Lady Cocci? She decided to honor Lord Baroffio’s commitment to an alliance.”

Efran gaped but DeWitt said, “Of course we’re acquainted with the lady. Thank you, Lady Cocci. We look forward to hearing your thoughts on what should be done.”

She said, “We’re offering complete cooperation with you in matters of defense; we shall warn you of any incursions through Westford and shall protect your agents and messengers. In return, we wish your help financing certain projects in Westford, including an Elvey’s outlet and a performance hall.”

Efran froze halfway down to a chair but DeWitt sat amiably. “That’s an admirably straightforward and interesting proposal, Lady Cocci. I’d like to hear what amounts you desire for these projects and on what time frame.”



From there, she and DeWitt talked for the vast majority of the time while Efran looked blankly out the door.

In the fortress, Minka rose and had breakfast brought to her quarters, since Efran was not there to sit with her in the dining hall. She was grateful to be back in a place of warmth, safety, and abundance, but conflicted as to how to return to normalcy. And while she wanted to hide, she knew that would only impede everyone from getting used to her new appearance. So she put on one of her most recognizable work/riding dresses along with a pair of Dallarosa's earrings and turned into the corridor with the intention of going out back.

The children were in class now. When she stopped by the nursery to get Joshua, she discovered that he had begun going to class with them. He couldn't be expected to do the work, of course, but he preferred their company to that of the few babies in the nursery, and was content to play quietly while the big kids read and worked on their slates. Besides, Nakam was there to play with, as well. But they both learned quickly that they had to be quiet or get taken out.

So Minka backtracked up the corridor to stop in the library and greet the Librarian. He was back to full form and very pleased to see her; moreover, he said nothing about her hair. "Good morning, Lady Minka! May I say how grateful we all are that Lord Efran brought you home so quickly."

"Thank you, Librarian; I feel like I've been gone for weeks." She glanced over to Nibor's corner to see her stylus moving in the lantern light.

"Oh, dear, Lady Minka, I doubt that any of us could abide that. But since you are here, may I offer you something to read?" he asked.

"Yes, that would help me, I'm sure. I need to take it out back so everyone can see my hair," she said dismally.

"Then let us find you something engaging. You enjoy poetry, do you not?" he asked.

"Yes," she agreed, head raised.

He turned to extract a small volume to hand to her. "Try this, Lady Minka."

"Thank you, dear Librarian." She took it, glancing down at the plain brown cover, but turned out of the library without opening it.

Exiting the back door onto the grounds, she paused to glance at the door sentry. "Hello, Arne."

He bowed with almost teary gratification. "Welcome home, Lady Minka."

"Thank you, dear Arne," she laughed, briefly gripping part of his large arm. "You're a rock."

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said, looking off in satisfaction.

Without looking around to see who was nearby, she progressed to the original bench under the walnut tree, that facing the fortress. She was struggling with feelings of—displacement, of presumption in returning to this wonderful place after she had ruined her hair. She wasn't sure she belonged anymore. With a sigh of anxiety, she sat to open the book at random:

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
    If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:  
    Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,  
    I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
    Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
    My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
    So I did sit and eat. [George Herbert, "Love (III)"]

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## Chapter 23

Minka pondered this verse with tears in her eyes, and thought: *Love looks past our faults when they are all we can see.*

"Minka!" She startled so violently at the command that she dropped the book. Ella was standing before her with Quennel at her side. Ella demanded, "Didn't Father say that he was glad you cut your hair?"

It took Minka a moment to understand the words she heard because she could hardly believe her eyes: Ella's hair was cut short, chin length. It was cute, and not nearly as short and boyish as Minka's cut was—plus its color was unchanged—but Quennel was glassy-eyed beside her.

Finally, Minka stammered, "Y-yes, he said he was, but not at first. At first he didn't even recognize me."

"But last night he said he was glad, and it showed him a whole new side of you," Ella quoted accurately.

"Yes," Minka admitted, wincing at Quennel's stricken face.

"Well?" Ella demanded of Quennel. "Do you love me less than Father loves Minka?"

"No," Quennel gasped. "I just—didn't know—and—"

"Father didn't know, either. But it's done now. So you can accept it or not." With that pronouncement, Ella stalked back to the training pens, and the men standing around discreetly looked away.

“Oh, dear.” Minka lurched up to begin trotting to the back door, then skidded to a stop and returned to pick up the book. Then she began running again.

In the lower corridor, she met Rondi coming toward her. Rondi stopped with a gasp, grasping her arms. “It’s true! I didn’t even know—but you did!” she said in wonder. Then: “I love it.” Her voice had a note of determination that Minka recognized.

“Don’t do anything hasty!” Minka pleaded. Rondi’s light brown hair was even longer than Ella’s had been. Rondi stood back with a hazy smile that made no promises.

After an hour of pleasant negotiations, DeWitt made some final notations with his quill on the last of several papers scattered around the table. “All right,” he said, “I’ll draw up a rough draft, let you look at it and see how it suits you. I’ll try to have it for you by tomorrow, but that depends on what may crop up.” He looked at Efran as he said this, who blinked back at him in near-catatonic boredom.

Forgoing anything that might be needed of Efran for now, DeWitt asked their guests, “Are you staying down here or going back up to Westford tonight?”

“I’m staying,” Cocci said, standing. “Lady Elvey is hosting me in a suite tonight. Meals in,” she noted.

“That’s very nice, Cocci,” DeWitt said. “And how can I reach you?” he asked Colquhoun and McElfresh.

Colquhoun glanced at his fellow. “It appears that we’ll also get rooms for the night. We’ll let you know where.”

“Very good,” DeWitt said.

As Efran made indications of preparing to stand, Cocci said, “Oh, I forgot.” She leaned down beside her chair to bring up an attaché case which she extended to Efran. “Lissa left a batch of letters from someone special—you, I suppose. So I thought you’d want them back.”

Efran eyed her, open-mouthed. He had never written Lissa letters, not even one. “Did you look at them?” he asked, taking the small case.

“No. Why should I?” she asked. When Efran had no reason to offer, she went on out. Colquhoun and McElfresh left at that time as well.

DeWitt stacked his notes together. “I’m going to take these up to the workroom to get Estes’ input before I write out a draft. Are you coming?”

“Shortly. I’ll just glance through these, first,” Efran said wearily.

“Right. Thank you for the use of your back room, Ryal,” DeWitt said on his way out.

“You’re welcome,” Ryal said absently. He was intently studying an old, fragile page that Soames had just handed him. “You found this in the *Annotations*?” Ryal whispered.

“Yes, almost hidden in the back. You know how I look at Addenda,” Soames almost laughed. He would have, but for the importance of the find.

“It’s unquestionably genuine.” Glancing at Efran in the back room, Ryal said, “He’s got something of immediate concern in front of him. Take this up to Estes and DeWitt.”

“Yes, Lord Ryal.” Soames put the fragile paper into a folder and left the shop. Before going up hilltop, however, he took the page to study it further at a table with a mild ale in Croft’s outdoor dining area. When the full implications of it finally sank in, he hastened up the switchback without a horse.

Arriving at the workroom, he told DeWitt and Estes, “I found an interesting Addendum in the *Annotations*—”

Consumed at the moment by the tentative agreement with the nobles of Westford, DeWitt said, “Excellent, Soames. Be sure to cover it in Law class.” Estes, reading DeWitt’s notes, paused to look up and nod.

“Yes, sir,” Soames said, turning out again. So he took it back down to the shop, and when Ryal was free, they leaned on the counter to discuss it thoroughly (since Efran was taking up their back-room table).

Meanwhile, Efran was thumbing through the correspondence. There appeared to be about 20 letters, with the most recent on top. Digging to the bottom of the pile, Efran pulled out what must be the first letter, dated May 7th, 8149—six and a half years ago. He began reading:

“Greetings, Lady Lissa.

“No, I have no objection to hearing from strangers, especially readers of my books. I am very pleased that you enjoyed *The Secret Places of the Abbey Hill*, which I consider one of my best efforts. It is the third of a trilogy on that subject.

“I was very sorry to hear of your heartbreak in relation to your Westfordian Captain, but it may be for the best. Soldiers are notorious womanizers, and I’m afraid, from what I have heard even here in Crescent Hollow, that particular young man is one of the worst. So you may consider yourself better off due to your parents’ intervention.

“In answer to your question, yes, there are many arts that truly do rejuvenate, replicate, and even regenerate life. But these skills are most difficult for a novice to master, especially a young person such as yourself. So please allow me to suggest that you simply put your Polonti Captain out of your mind and live your remaining years, which will certainly be very many, to the greatest enjoyment that your family’s wealth will provide.

“Please consider me, if you will, your

“Uncle Villin”

Efran was now fully awake and somewhat alarmed. Surely the writer couldn’t be who it sounded like. But if it were, it would explain a great deal. Efran dug in the pile for the next letter from “Uncle Villin,” which was dated May 14th—only a week after the first. Considering the distance between Westford and Crescent Hollow, that indicated great interest on the part of both correspondents.

“Dear Lady Lissa:

“I am honored that you so quickly acquired the two books leading up to *The Secret Places of the Abbey Hill*. But, yes, as they were preliminary works, they do not have further information on what you seek. Yes, I am afraid that the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea is uninhabited at this time, and when I attempted to view the interior several years ago, I was unable to gain entry. However, I did not expend much effort in the task, as I did not wish to damage anything. It may be necessary to wait for the bequest to be granted. If you wish more information on that, you should inquire of the Westford Notary Ryal. He is very knowledgeable and willing to share information. However, anyone seeking the bequest may be in for a stringent interview.

“Regarding your other questions, this is not something that can easily be discussed via correspondence. May I suggest that the next time you and your parents are in Crescent Hollow, you visit me at Viotto? My butler Bilhorn makes appointments for me.

“Respectfully,

“Uncle Villin”

Efran took up the third letter of June 2nd, which consisted mostly of some awkward flirtation on the uncle’s part. But then he wrote, “I was disappointed, but not surprised, that you were unable to get much information from the notary regarding the Abbey. So he claims to be unable to access it himself? I find that questionable, but ultimately irrelevant. However, his warning about the wolves in the area is to be heeded. I very nearly lost a horse the last time I attempted to view the Abbey.

“Are you really planning a trip to Crescent Hollow, then? I shall be more than delighted to receive you and your parents. I have plenty of room to accommodate you at Viotto, but if your parents prefer, the Elegance Inn is nearby.

“Incidentally, while I certainly have nothing to hide from them, some unguarded expressions of mine may be misinterpreted. If you do desire a meeting at some point, it may be best to not share my letters with them. Instead, showing them that I am a published author may be all the introduction that is needed.”

Efran mulled that over, then reached for the fourth letter. That one, dated June 20th, and the fifth letter of July 8th contained nothing pertinent to Efran’s concerns. However, he squirmed at the “uncle’s” free expression of interest in a young woman: “You would be justified, perhaps, of mild repugnance upon regarding my age, but my merely joining with the smooth flesh of youth imparts a vigor that will surprise you, and, I am sure, create such a response of—”

“Yeech.” Efran crammed that letter back into the case and pulled out the next, the sixth letter. He didn’t immediately notice the time lapse between the fifth and sixth letters until he began reading it, then he saw that almost two years had passed. It was dated July 1st, 8151:

“My dearest Lissa,

“I certainly understand the necessity for your trip back home, although I confess to be jealous of your suitors. Your obsession with this Polonti Captain disturbs me. I trust that there is no lingering desire for him, so as to mar the hatred? Forgive my inquisitiveness; I simply have uneasy feelings about him. I fear he must be dealt with. However, that falls to me. Your desire for revenge upon him is understandable, due to his shocking treatment of

you after your parents questioned his fitness. Yes, ‘brutal’ is a good word for him. At any rate, I am glad for his departure, however it was achieved. That should make you safe. Do not fall back into the quicksand; leave his punishment to me.

“Now, regarding the replications: your experiments are most impressive, especially as to the realism and likeness of your figures. Your special status is no doubt useful here, but please allow me to make two small points: before you put the mannikin to use, you must improve its stability with the use of poplar joints, especially in the neck and back. True, it is a fickle and time-consuming process, but essential. Also, you must somehow procure sufficient amounts of *genuine* troll hair. Hair from swine, horses or wolves simply does not suffice. If you still feel that a detailed critique is unnecessary, I shan’t perform one. Please don’t get thin-skinned about perfection in the arts.

“Deeply desirous of your return,

“Villin (Use no other name for me.)”

By now Efran was sweating. He was surprised to discover that there were only two more letters; what he had mistaken for correspondence were pages of drawings of human figures. There were renderings of Lissa’s father and mother in various positions, as well as himself, Thurlow, and other people Efran did not recognize.

After glancing through these, Efran picked up the next-to-last letter, dated August 4th, 8153.

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## Chapter 24

Villin’s next-to-last letter to Lissa, that of August 4th, 8153, began:

“My darling Lissa:

“You may have heard by now that your Polonti Captain has indeed acquired the bequest and charter of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea. This is not the fatal setback it may appear to be. I have been studying the Abbey fortress and its hilltop for decades, and my preparations are almost complete. Patience, dear; I would rather you do no more experiments with the replications until I have secured the Abbey. Especially please do not toy with reanimation—initiates far more experienced than yourself have incurred disaster attempting it. Also, take care for the meddling sprites. They seem to be attracted to my experiments, and their bumbling curiosity is a nuisance.

“Anxiously awaiting your September visit,

“Your Villin”

With slightly trembling hands, Efran picked up the last letter, dated January 5th of this year, 8155. That was days before the first appearance of snobbles in the caverns. Efran read:

“Dearest Lissa:

“It has begun. Within a week at the most, the Abbey Fortress, its charter and its power will be mine. When all is secured, I will bring you there as my Lady Sovereign, and we will rule forever. I mean this literally, my dear, and I state it as a true fact: you will rule by my side forever.

“At this time, however, I must insist that you hold off on all experiments. As we have been united, the least little hiccup in your exercise of power could affect my designs. Your questions regarding the specifics of reanimation alarm me. But yes, of course I know the answers, to wit:

~~“You must not die by your own hand. That would render all further efforts void.~~

~~“Your death must somehow leave most of your body intact, for you will be reanimated with whatever injuries you sustained in death. Fire is particularly injurious to the process.”~~

~~“Yes, reanimation provides for immortality.”~~ [Villin had struck through these lines.]

“Again, I forbid your pursuit of this art—first, because we will never need it. Also, it requires human blood, the spilling of which attracts attention that I can ill afford at this time. Therefore I have stricken the answers above.

“I command your patience, my dear. Obey and I will be yours forever,

“Villin”

Thinking hard, Efran put that letter down with the others on the table. Then he stood to walk out of Ryal’s shop. Ryal called after him, “Efran—?”

“Be right back,” Efran said, hopping down the steps to start up Main. He began at a walk, then found himself trotting, to the irritation of those he passed.

One of those he brushed past was Leila, who shouted after him, “Efran! Why did you let Minka cut her hair?”

He turned to trot backwards. “She wanted to.”

“It looks terrible!” Leila pronounced, but he was off and running now. His destination was Coghill’s house, in between Lowry’s and Barracks A.

Entering abruptly, Efran paused at the front desk, which was empty. Then he looked back to one examining room, where a shadow moved.

Efran went to the door of that room to see Coghill looking at some bottles and beakers in exasperation. Efran panted, “Coghill, do you have Lissa’s body here?” She had been shot and killed two days ago.

“Yes, over in the next room. I was waiting to see if Lady Cocci would claim it, but she hasn’t yet,” Coghill said, distracted.

“Let me see it,” Efran said.



Coghill glanced at him warily, but led him into the autopsy room. There was only one body here, covered with a muslin sheet on a high table. “I haven’t cut her open, since we already know how she died and that she’s not a strawman,” he said. They both stood over the raised table as the doctor lifted the sheet. Efran looked down at her pale, still form with a hole in the upper chest.

Efran put a hand to her neck, then her chest. Yes, she was quite dead; there was no hint of a pulse. Yet, there was no discoloration normally seen in a corpse at this stage. . . .

“That’s strange,” Coghill said.

Efran had momentary heart palpitations. “What is?”

Coghill lifted her limp hand. “That almost looks like dried blood on her fingers. Delio washed her thoroughly after she was brought in dead, but—” He suddenly looked back to the examining room. “I’ve been doing some research on blood from various patients. The beakers and jars containing blood were—vandalized some time last night. I don’t know how anyone got in; I lock up everything at night—”

He and Efran suddenly looked at each other without breathing. Coghill posed, “Could . . . *she* have been the one behind the strawmen?”

“There’s no one else left,” Efran said, never thinking to tell him about the letters. They looked down at her again, and Efran asked, “You have a crematorium out there, don’t you?”—in the yard.

“Yes,” Coghill whispered.

“Fire it up, please, doctor. Quickly,” Efran said.

Coghill went out to the yard, calling for his helper Emmens to load up the crematorium with wood and oil. The structure looked simply like a large, dome-shaped stone oven, about eight feet tall, except that it had a composite masonry loading door that latched securely via an iron bar. Also, there was an opening in the top of the dome to let in air and allow for the addition of fuel, as necessary.

Emmens came out to the yard with the casual air of preparing for a cremation scheduled next week. Efran glanced down at the wheels on the autopsy table, then took hold of the leading edge to drag the table out of the house to the yard. Emmens looked over in offense at the violation of protocol.

Coghill came out then to see Efran unlatch the oven door and look in. It was clean and empty, except for a layer of fine ash on its concrete floor. Efran went around its exterior, noting the iron ladder ascending the side. Separated by a space of several feet—as the oven got very hot—was the wood pile. He pulled the canvas cover off the pile to bring up the first of numerous armfuls of wood which he tossed in through the oven door.

Glancing back at Coghill, Efran said, “Get your oil and alcohol—everything you’ve got, doctor—to make this burn like Hades.”

“Yes, Captain. Emmens, go get the oil,” Coghill said tensely.

“Yes, Doctor,” Emmens said, moving away.

As the wind kicked up, Lissa’s leg suddenly flopped off the table from under the sheet. The three men jumped;

Emmens began running to the shed for oil and Coghill turned quickly into the house. Efran stepped up the loading of wood into the oven while keeping a wary eye on the partially covered form.

When he had the oven half full of wood, he paused for Emmens to splash about a quart of oil inside it. "More," Efran breathed.

"We load the body, then add the rest," Emmens said uneasily. They both looked back at it.

Exhaling, Efran went over to the table to gather the sheet around the corpse and lift it to the door of the oven. He tripped on an edge of the small fireproof rug in front of the door, whereupon one hand swung free from under the sheet to catch on the side of the opening. He had to stop and wrestle it off while Emmens wiped sweat from his face with his sleeve. It was a cool day.

At this time, Coghill came out with a jar of medical alcohol. Watching the Captain struggle to load a two-days-dead body into the oven, he set the jar on the ground and gasped, "I'll go get the fire."

Efran finally got the body shoved in atop the wood to close the door and latch it. Taking up the jar of alcohol, he began climbing the iron ladder to the top of the oven. "More oil," he directed Emmens, who ran back to the shed. Efran dumped the alcohol in through the top opening, then leaned down for the half gallon of oil that Emmens extended up to him from the lower rungs of the ladder.

"That's all of it," Emmens told him.

As Efran emptied this into the oven, Coghill brought out a candle, which the wind promptly extinguished. Sweating, Efran said, "Get me a flint and firesteel."

"No, hold on," Coghill said, turning back to the house.

Then Efran and Emmens both heard something shift inside the oven. Eyes widening, Emmens scrambled back into the house, emerging at once with a bottle of brandy, which he tossed up to the Captain. He glanced at the firm lettering on the bottle that read, "EMMENS personal store." Snorting, Efran dumped it in, and they watched the door of the oven shiver a bit. Efran looked down into the opening to see the white sheet move.

Coghill then emerged from the house with a lit firepot. Efran came down the ladder to take the firepot up just far enough to toss it into the opening. Then he had to back down quickly at the *whoosh* and blast of heat from within. The flames shooting up through the opening caused him to miss a step and slide down the curved exterior of the oven. As he hit the ground beside the door, he looked up at its shuddering from something pounding on it from the inside: *Bam! Bam! Bam!*

Coghill and Emmens stood back in terror while they watched the door's iron latch creak against the strain. Due to the pressure on the latch from inside, the bolts securing the back plate began pulling away from the exterior of the oven.

Efran scrambled up to shove on the outside of the door, wincing at the heat. When one bolt (of four) popped out, Efran turned to plant his feet on the ground and press his back against the door. But it was too hot for him to press hard or long, so he pulled up the small rug from between his feet to hold it to the door and fling his back against that. Flames were still shooting up through the top opening, blackening the brick around it.

At every blow from within, Efran braced the door with his whole body. As he raised his head against the rug, breathing hard, he saw five small men sitting on the edge of Coghill's roof. They wore three-piece tweed suits in

various colors, all with matching caps. And they were cheering Efran on with huzzahs and exhortations to hold out.

They were mostly unified in this effort, although one muttered, “Still, Pullaway, he had a hand in the demise of poor Gotobed.”

“Gotobed broke the rules of his own game, Carryon!” Pullaway snapped. “The Abbey lord does a great service for us here.” He turned to shout to Efran, “Be strong, O friend of Sprites!” The others echoed this encouragement, so Carryon raised his voice with them.

Efran squinted at them while he jammed his boots into the dirt and pressed his spine to the warm rug against the door. Coghill and Emmens could do nothing but watch, nor did they appear to hear the sprites.

After another eight or ten shuddering jolts, the pounding began to weaken. Efran, breathing heavily, did not let up from the outside. The three men looked at each other while the pounding faded, then ceased. Still, Efran kept his back pressed against the door for another four or five minutes.

Finally, trembling from the exertion, he stepped away to look at the door. The rug remained welded into the masonry. They could still hear the fire crackling in the oven, but nothing else. The height of the flames had subsided below the opening, to be overtaken by a dark, oily smoke, attended by the odor of burnt human flesh.

Then their eyes were drawn up to a murky form emerging from the hole. Efran backed up to get a better view, and they watched blackened bits of something crawl out of the top opening.

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## Chapter 25

Emmens fell down with a cry, covering his head, and Coghill grabbed Efran’s arm, gasping, “There are—stubs of hands, and—bones of the arms, all black—and a head! But—it’s fallen off! It’s rolled down by itself! There’s nothing left of the face!” For some reason, he felt the need to narrate what he and Efran could both see. They watched the head loll a few feet in front of the oven. Emmens was still hunched up in a ball on the ground.

Coghill and Efran both looked quickly to the top of the oven again. There, blackened and debris-riddled bones squirmed up over the edge. But with the ligaments, muscles and flesh having been burned away, the bones separated so that half of the skeletal remains fell back into the oven, while bits and pieces of the upper half inched blindly along the top before falling down to the ground at the base of the oven. There, they not only continued to burn, but shifted futilely, searching for cohesion.

Efran heard a hollow voice, then, which he recognized: *You stupid, impetuous girl, I told you not to! I warned you! And now you’re just immortal debris, fool.*

“Not on my Lands,” Efran breathed. “As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I forbid your residing in any form on this ground.”

There was a white-hot flash from somewhere above—Efran and Coghill covered their faces; Emmens, having raised his head at the lord’s order, now had to duck it again. Immediately, the searing light found all the tiniest living particles in, on, and around the oven.

When the light had vanished less than an instant later, the men looked up to see small piles of fine white ash which quickly disappeared. The immortality bestowed by a dark art had been annulled, canceled, and vacated, with no trace of its practitioner remaining.

Emmens got to his feet. The three stood speechless until Efran raised his eyes to whisper, "Thank You." A lazy white curl of smoke ascended from the oven.

Turning to pat Coghill on the shoulder, Efran said, "We're done here." And he turned back into the house, followed unsteadily by the doctor and his assistant.

Meanwhile, five little men were huddled together in excitement before the crematorium. "Did you get it, Pullaway? Have you got it?" one asked, trembling.

"Every last little bit, Benext," Pullaway said, baring sharp teeth. And he opened his hands to reveal a mound of fine white ash. He nodded crisply, causing his flat cap to flip off his head of curly black hair. Another sprite caught the upside-down cap and held it for Pullaway to open his hands over it, depositing in it all the ash.

Then he clapped his hands for the cap to leap back upon his head. And the five sprites joined in a circle, arms over each other's shoulders, to sing, "Power! Power! Power o'er dark altior!" They vanished, laughing.

By this time, Efran had exited Coghill's house to turn up the street back toward Ryal's. There was no commotion, no panic nor mild concern over the latest cremation of Coghill's. Some people Efran passed spoke to him, which he acknowledged with a nod but no comprehension.

He arrived at Ryal's shop to see that their customers had all been attended to, for the time being. Ryal looked up from the remaining forms on the counter to ask, "What happened?"

Efran said vacantly, "Ah, Coghill cremated Lissa, but she didn't want to do it, at first. Then she decided to go ahead with it." Ryal and Giardi stared after him as he went to the back room. There, he looked down on piles of ashes littering the work table.

Following him in, Ryal gestured. "And—what is all this?" He picked up the seared attaché case.

Taking the case, Efran swept the ashes into it. "Letters to Lissa that Cocci brought," he said, brushing off his hands. Then he dropped the case into the trash basket and patted Ryal's shoulder, smudging his shirt. But Efran took Giardi in his arms for a gentle hug.

As he turned out of the shop, Ryal began, "There's something more you need to know—"

But Efran didn't hear him. Trudging up the switchback, he heard the fortress dinner bell ringing. And he looked up to see Kraken loping down to him. Efran stopped to wait for the stubborn animal to reach him; when Kraken did, he snuffled Efran's smoky hair. Humans were unaccountable, especially this one.

Efran grabbed his mane to launch himself up onto his bare back, and Kraken carried his rider at an easy lope up to the courtyard. There, the gate guards were peering down to the end of Main. Mohr observed, "Noticed some interesting fireworks down there next to Barracks A, Cap'n."

"No, just a cremation," Efran assured him. He went on into the fortress, but prevented Kraken's following: "Go on to the back grounds; we'll be out after dinner." Kraken obeyed.

First, Efran had to stop by his quarters to wash up and put on a clean shirt. He then bypassed the dining hall, noting the usual hubbub within, to go to the nursery for Joshua.

But Felice met him at the half-door empty-handed. “Quennel picked him up already, Captain,” she said.

As she was evaluating him, about to ask something, he forestalled it with, “That’s good. Anything else isn’t my fault.” She laughed in surprise.

Still breathing unsteadily, wiping his mouth, Efran entered the dining hall. The first thing he saw was Thurlow, one foot on a bench, leaning over a table of men. They were listening to him in degrees of receptivity ranging from deeply skeptical to eagerly enthusiastic. Efran could hear him say, “You won’t find a design like the gabbots anywhere on the Southern Continent. But when I am able to get them produced in volume, it will change the means and methods of transport forever. Moreover,—”

“Efran!” Minka’s voice cut through the sales pitch, and he looked down at her. Having kept his place open on the bench to her left, she was studying him with wide eyes. “You reek of smoke, again. What happened?” she asked.

He didn’t answer right away, taking in those big eyes surrounded by wisps of angel hair. Sitting, he said, “I like your hair. It draws attention to your eyes.”

Those eyes softened in adoration. Ella, on his left, said, “What about mine, Father?” The children were crowding around them by this time.

Belatedly, he turned to look at her. “Yes, you have nice eyes, too, Ella. I’m glad you don’t wear makeup.” He was still breathing erratically.

Barking, groaning laughter erupted around them. She smiled. “Thank you. Now what about my hair?”

“Your hair.” Efran focused on it, then. Quennel, on her left, was so distracted by the change in this particular feature that he never noticed Joshua, on his leg, helping himself to Quennel’s pudding.

After a moment, Efran realized that her hair was not pulled back, but cut. He studied it with absolutely no opinion at all. Finally, he said, “It looks very nice, Ella. It must be more comfortable to work in.”

“Yes, it is!” she crowed. Quennel raised his afflicted face to the heavens, but kept quiet.

“How about mine, Efran?” a girl across from him said.

Disturbed by all the tests (which were, in their own way, more taxing than what he had just come through) Efran looked at her with no clue as to who she was. She had short hair that was something of a cross between Minka’s and Ella’s, curled behind her ears but with a fringe on her forehead. He said the only thing he could say: “That’s very pretty.”

Minka, perceiving his ignorance, said, “I told you he’d like it, Rondi!”

“Yes, very much!” he protested, trying to hide his surprise. “What does Mathurin think?” he asked.

Rondi blushed deeply; Mathurin, next to her, did, too. But he got out: “To tell you the truth, Captain, I didn’t notice for looking at her eyes.”

Minka stated, “Good answer. Honest but flattering.”

Justinian then stopped by their table with a young woman whom none of them had seen before. He began, “Dearest Min—” and then stopped, eyes fixed on her head, generally. Minka grinned at him. His eyes then went cautiously to Ella, whose grin was more of a dare.

Rondi looked up. “Lord Justinian! We’re doing something new. What do you think?”

With a frozen smile, he said, “The Abbey women prevail again, I see. How characteristic of you. Ah, permit me to introduce Lady Caova. She’s named after a stimulant”—later known to the world as *coffee*. The lady herself, with mounds of golden hair piled atop her head, was staring intently at the daring women, her eyes roving from one short cut to another.

Smiling evilly, Minka said, “Welcome to the Abbey fortress, Lady Caova. Imelda, who did Ella’s and Rondi’s hair, is right behind Firmin’s here.”

“Really,” Caova said with a determined look the women recognized.

They were not the only ones to read her intentions. While Justinian was struggling to express his appreciation for something he did not admire at all, Efran almost fell backward off the bench for laughing.

At this time, Escarra was sitting on Ashe’s stone bench beside Cavern Lake, looking over the trees far to his left at a golden and purple sunset in progress. He was tired, but it was the tiredness from hard work in his garden, which felt good.

Taking in the glory of the sky, he thought about his latest visit with Madgwick. What she was teaching him helped him understand Delano’s prayer over Ashe as he lay dying, and the sudden light in Ashe’s eyes as he saw Someone beyond description.

And now Escarra believed it. The God who died for His creation lived beyond the sunset, the sky and the stars, and Ashe was with Him. *So I will wait for Him to bring me up to live with them. I am one day closer. I will wait.*

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on November 18th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

“Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” [1 Thess. 4:13-14](#)

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Strawmen* (Book 28)

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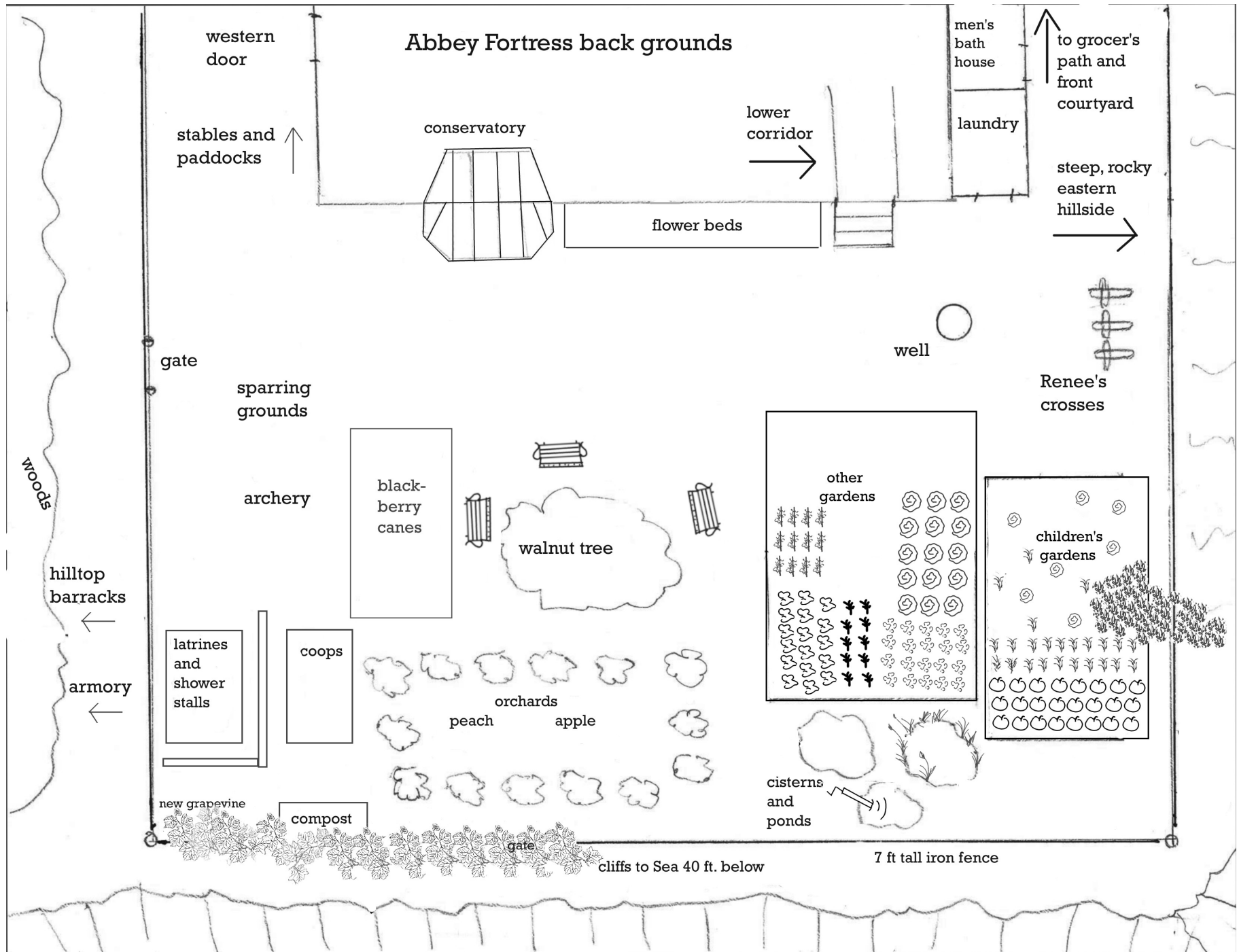
altior—ALL tee or	Graeme—GRAY em
Arbaiza—are BAZE ah	Gyldenbollokes—GILL den bull ux
Arenivas—air en EEV us	Hartshough—HART soh
Arne—arn	Heus—rhymes with the noun <i>use</i>
Averne—ah VURN	<i>hoopuni</i> —hoo POO nee (fraud)
Baroffio—bar OFF ee oh	hors d’oeuvres—awr durvz
Barrueta—bare ooh ET ah	Imelda—eh MEL dah
Beardall—BARE duhl	incognito—in kog NEE toh
Besiana—BES ee an ah	Ino—EE no
Bortniansky—bort nee AN ski	insigne—en SIN yeh
Bozzelli—bo ZELL ee	Ionadi—ee YON ah dee
brogue—brohg	Ipock—EYE pock
Bullara—bu LAR ah	Javier—JAY vee er
caova—kay OH vah (coffee)	Jehan—JAY han
Capur—KAH pir	Jian—JEE un
Challinor—CHAL en or	Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
Chataine—sha TANE	Justinian—jus TIN ee un
( <i>les</i> ) <i>cheveux</i> —lay she VOH (hair)	Kele—kay lay
Cocci—COH chee	Koschat—KOS chat
Colquhoun—CALL kwan	Kraken—KRAY ken
Conte—cahnt	Leila—LYE la
Cordelia—cor DEEL yah	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
Cyneheard—SIGN herd	Leneghan—LEN eh gan
Dallarosa—dal ah ROW sa	LeVisay—leh VEE say
De’Ath—dyath	Leyman—LAY mun
Delano—deh LAN oh	Lilou—LEE loo
Delio—DEE lee oh	Lowry—LAHW ree
Deneau—deh NO	Lyra—LEER ah
diva—DEE vah	macabre—mah KAH bruh
Eavenson—EV en sun	Madea—mah DAY ah
Efran—EFF run	Marguerite—mar ger EET
Eledith—ELL eh dith	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Elowen—EL oh win	McElfresh—mak EL frish
Elvey—ELL vee	Melott—meh LOT
Enon—EE nun	mezzo—MET soh
Escarra—ess CARE ah	Milo—ME low
Estes—ESS tis	Minka—MINK ah
Eurus—YOUR us	moiwahine—mo wa HEE nee—queen
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	Mumme—mum
Eymor—EE more	Nibor—NEE bor
Faciane—fah see ANN	Nomus—NO mis
Felice—feh LEESE	Nyarko—nuh YAR koh
Figle-Stickel—FIG uhl STICK uhl	olfactory—owl FAK tur ee (sense of smell)
Flodie—FLOW dee	( <i>la</i> ) <i>pisse</i> —lah piss (urine)
Frapin Cuvée—FRAH pen COO vay	Pleyel—PLAY el
Gevorgyan—geh VOR geh yan (hard g’s)	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)	Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee
Goss—gahs	Routh—roth (rhymes with <i>moth</i> )
Goulven—GOHL vin (hard g)	( <i>la</i> ) <i>salive</i> —lah SAH leeve (saliva)



Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Strawmen* (Book 28)

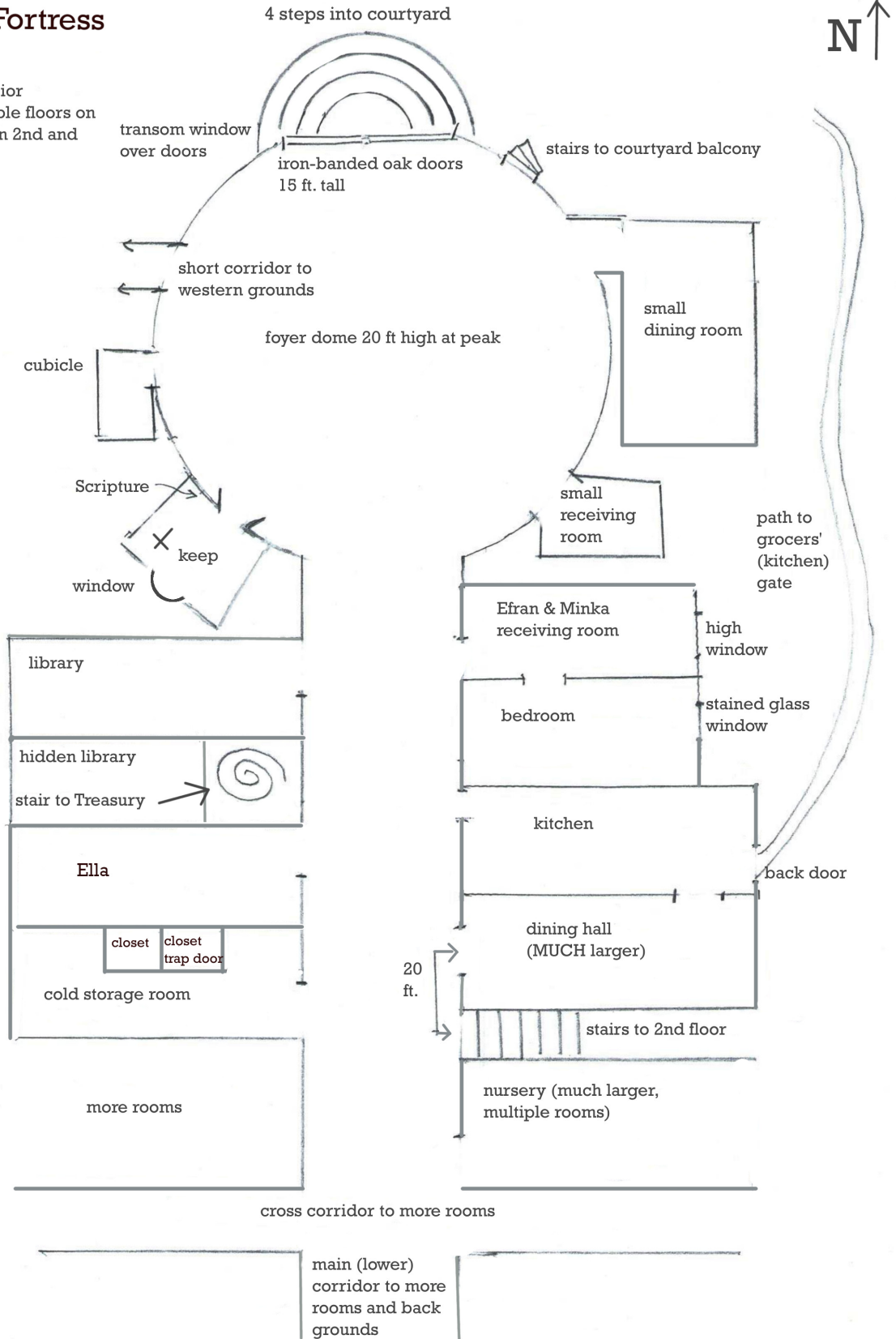
© Robin Hardy 2024

(*le*) *sang*—luh sahng (blood)  
Serrano—suh RAHN oh  
sommelier—soh muh LEE eh  
Stephanos—steh FAHN os  
Stites—stights  
Suco—SUE coh  
Surchatain—SUR cha tan  
Surchataine—sur cha TANE  
Sybil—SEH bull  
Teschner—TESH nur  
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE  
Tiras—TEER us  
Tomer—TOH mur  
Trina—TREE nah  
trough—troff  
Ure—YOUR ay  
verbena—vuhr BEE nah  
Verlice—ver LEESE  
Verrin—VAIR en  
Viglian—VIG lee en  
Viotto—vee OH toh  
Whobery—WAH bry  
Windry—WIN dree  
Wyse—rhymes with *vice*  
Wystan—WIS tan

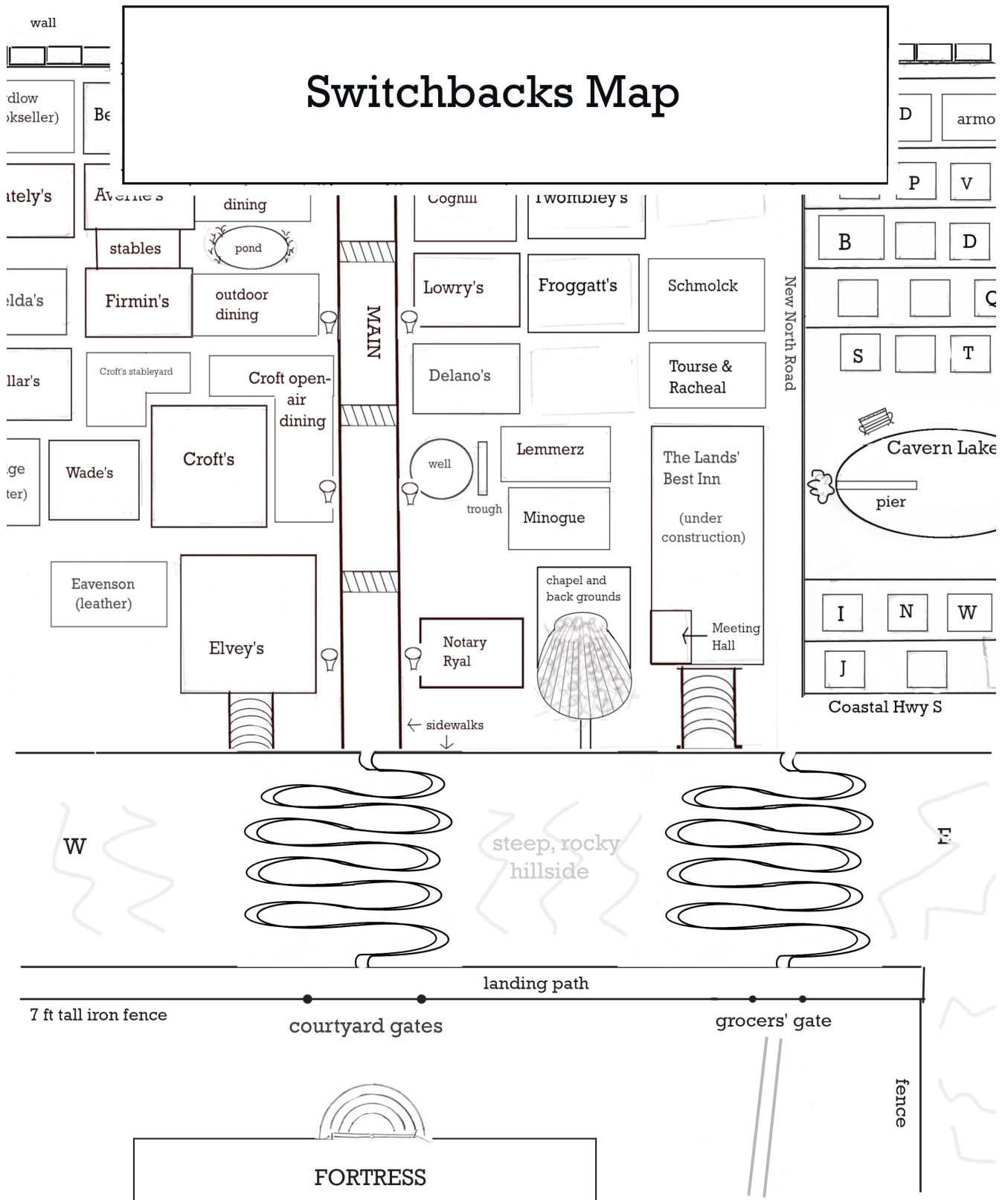


# Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



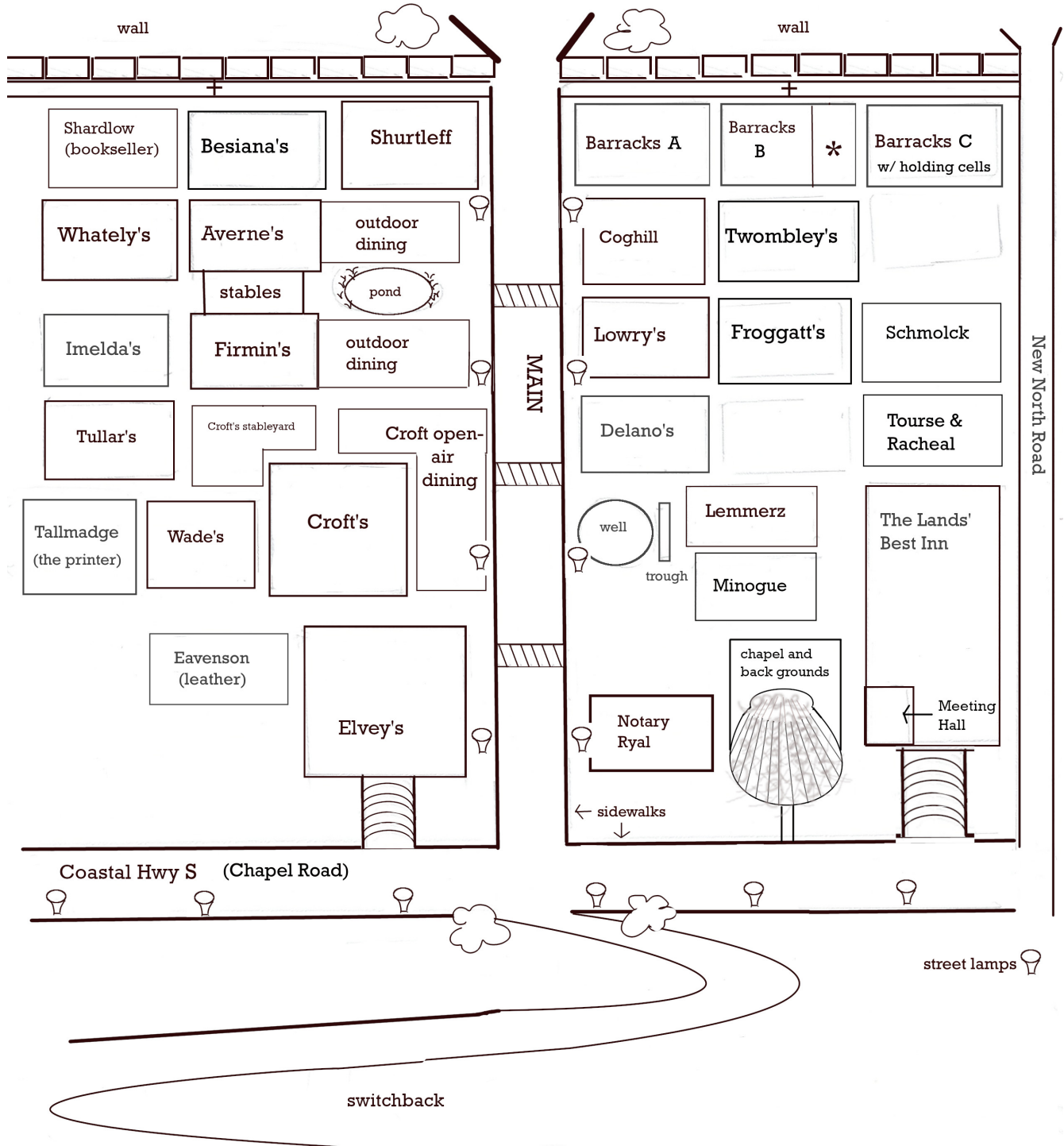
NOT TO SCALE

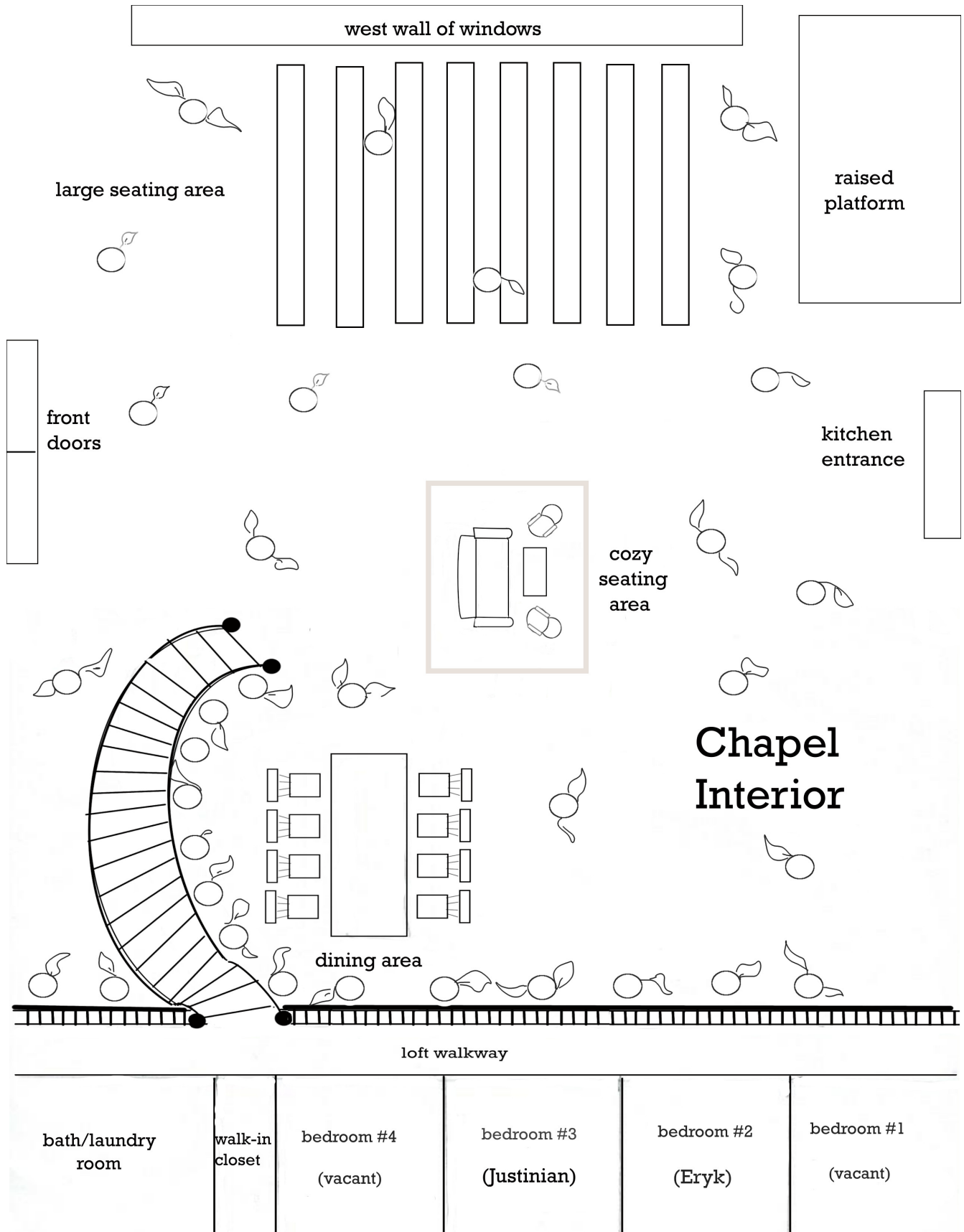


# Abbey Lands Main Road

\* infirmary and mess kitchen

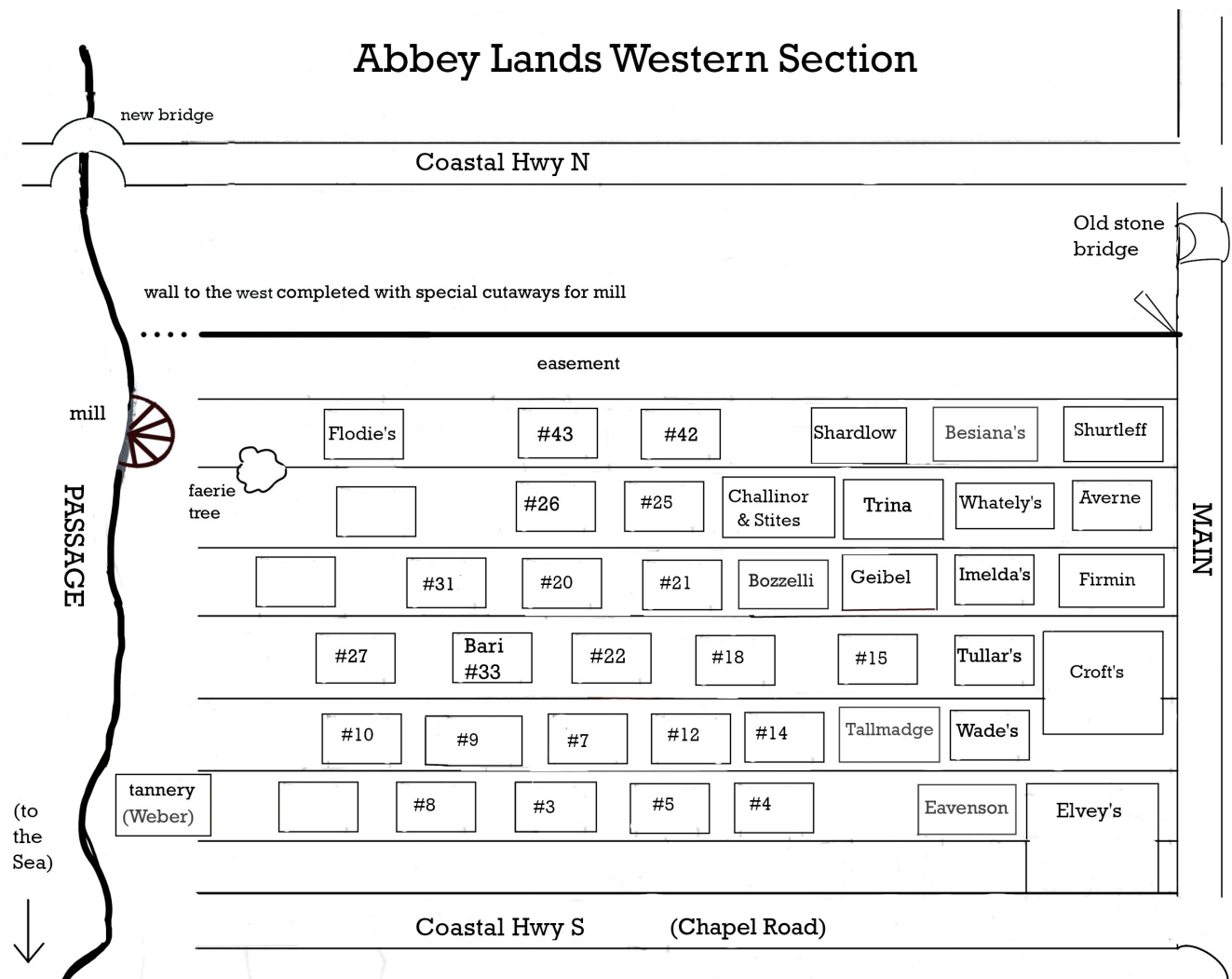
+ easements







# Abbey Lands Western Section



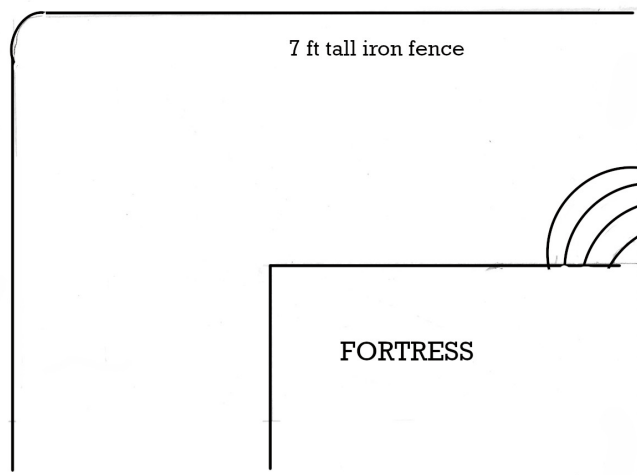
(to the Sea)  
↓

rocky NW hillside



switchback--4 bends on west side, 5 on east

- KEY
- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
  - 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
  - 5 - Good Spices
  - 7 - The Greenery
  - 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
  - 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
  - 10 - Gorsch Weaving
  - 12 - Woolens by Bess
  - 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
  - 15 - Fine Porcelains
  - 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
  - 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
  - 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
  - 22 - vacant
  - 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
  - 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
  - 27 - Nares' house
  - 31 - Melchior & Geneve
  - 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
  - 43 - Dallarosa & Enon



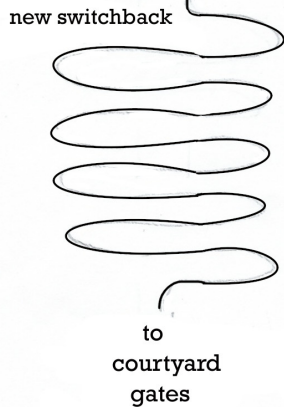
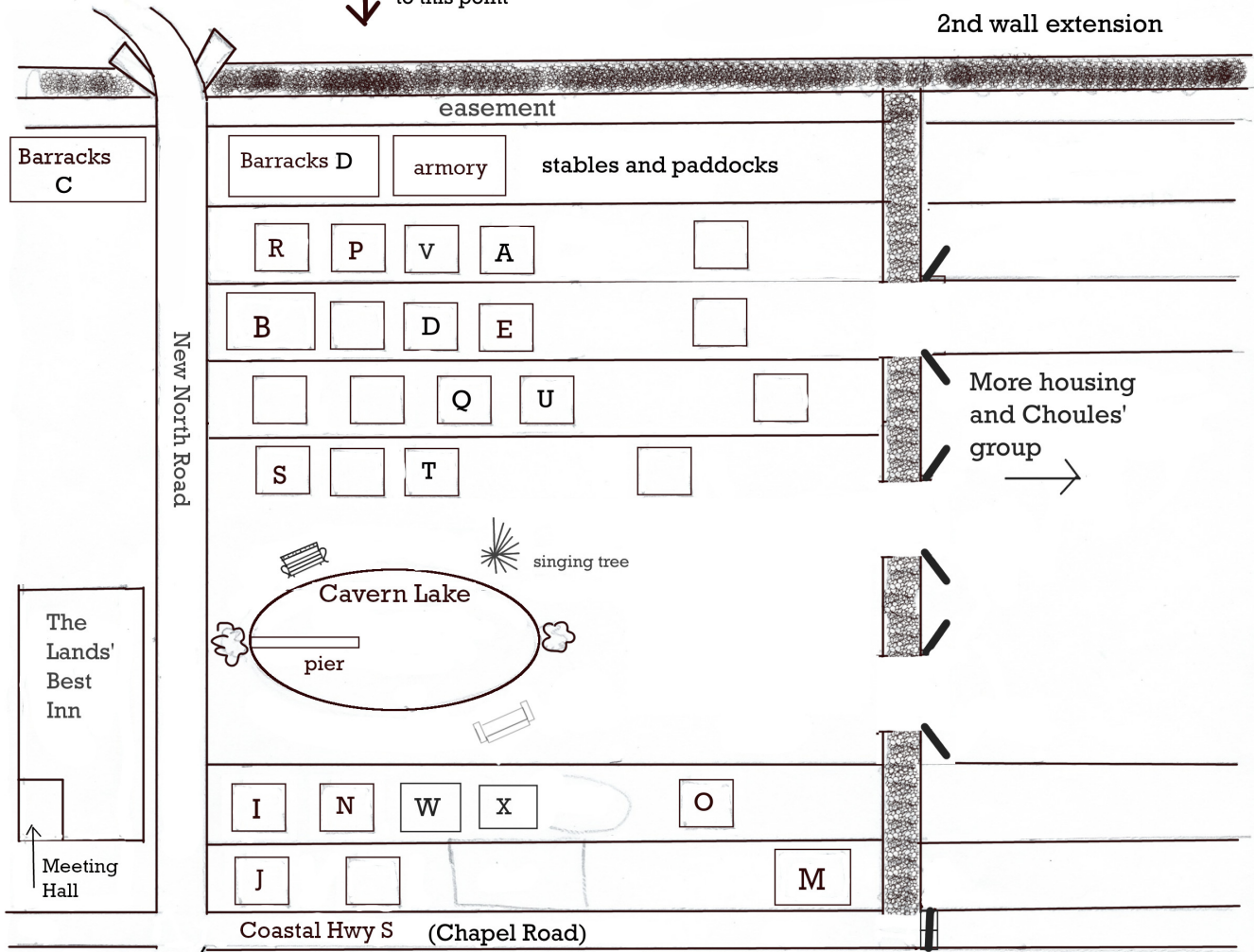
woods



road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

# East Central Abbey Lands

↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point



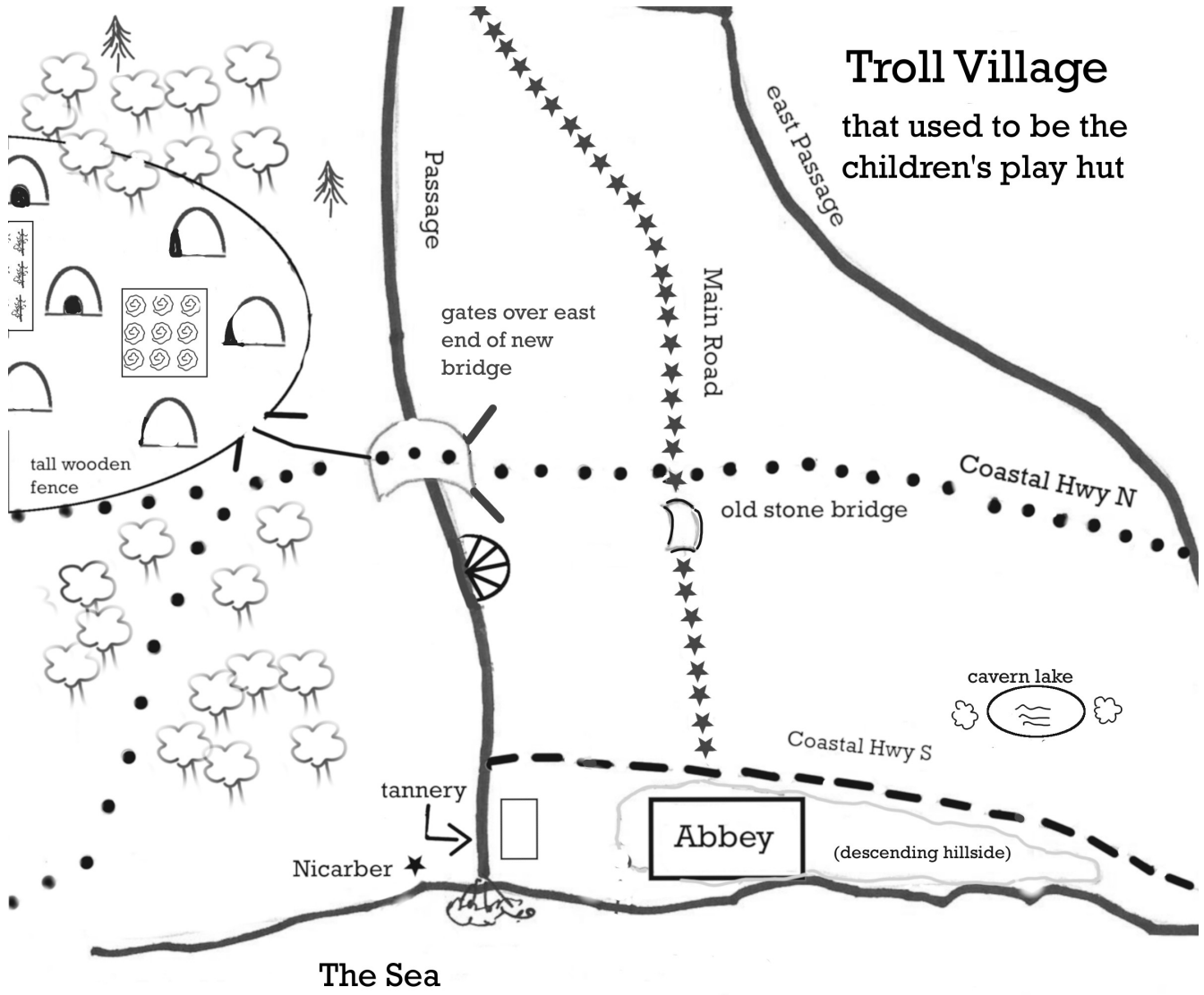
- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring's House
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office

- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry & Eryk
- W - Barrueta & Colletta
- X - Tambling's fam & Escarra

barricade →

# Troll Village

that used to be the children's play hut







Lissa's Cremation (Book 28:  
*Lord Efran and the Strawmen*)  
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



The internet is a scary place, as I discovered when searching for “funny laughing men” to represent my sprites. Nonetheless, from left to right are [Carryon](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Getaway](#)<sup>2</sup>, [Benext](#)<sup>3</sup> (in his own hat), and [Pullaway](#) (in [this](#)<sup>4</sup>). [Efran](#)<sup>5</sup> looks a little stiff trying to hold the crematorium door shut, but you can't imagine how difficult it was to find the correct posture of someone doing so (i.e., without their hands in their pockets). The best I could find was [this](#)<sup>6</sup>, but he looks pretty relaxed for someone trying to keep a dead body burning. (And yes: the stand-in for Efran is the same model I've used twice before.)

The [crematorium](#) is not one of the [Fahan Beehive Huts](#), as some claim, but was apparently constructed in part by [O Dowd Stone Masonry](#) in Ireland, who says in a caption to the photo on his Facebook page, “Here is one I was involved in back in 2010/2011 during a stone carving and cutting course I done in Fas with Tom Little, Fenit co.Kerry.” I would love to see it in person.

The door to the crematorium came from [here](#), the fence [here](#)<sup>7</sup>, and the fire [here](#). And now I'm going to either pass out or go for a walk.

Robin Hardy  
June 12, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed by [Pezibear](#) on Pixabay; wearing [this](#) cap (photographed by [Puşcaş Adryan](#) on Pexels)
2. Photographed by [2happy](#) on stockvault; wearing [this](#)
3. Photographed by galleries
4. Photographed by [Ozzy Delaney](#) on flickr
5. Photographed by [Leonardo Hidalgo](#) on Pexels
6. Photographed by [RDNE Stock project](#) on Pexels
7. Photographed by [TheUjulala](#) on Pixabay