

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

Book 27

Lord Efran and
the Villalobos

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Late in the afternoon of October 18th, Abbey scouts arrived at the Lands from Featheringham. Commander Wendt sent them to be fed in the conference room of Barracks A as usual, but before he could send a man to Efran to tell him, his Second Gabriel came to the door, laughing, "Come see this, Commander."

Wendt turned out of the room in mild irritation, as he disliked jokes on duty. But he stepped out of the barracks anyway. The newly returned scouts Eustace and Mohr regarded each other, then left their dinners waiting to go look as well.

The first thing they saw was Captain Efran riding his black horse Kraken bareback at a slow walk down the center of Main Street. Further, he stopped in the middle of the second crosswalk to look back at something. When he was satisfied, he nudged Kraken forward and looked back again.

Carts pulled over for him, and pedestrians lined the sidewalks on either side of the street to watch a tin cart roll behind him up Main all by itself. It carried one rider, Toby, who was grinning as he waved to spectators on both sidewalks. He was not powering the cart in any way, nor guiding it; he was just there to demonstrate that the self-powered cart could carry *some* weight. The engineer Gerard, who had modified and greatly enlarged Toby's toy cart, was walking alongside to guard against mishaps.

The rest of the hilltop children (and their guardians) followed on the sidewalk, cheering Gerard for the successful prototype and Toby for manning it. Minka, Ella, and Rondi followed the self-moving cart on their favorite horses to make sure that no one crowded it from behind. They also were waving to spectators, some of whom watched the girls as much as the tin cart. But all three of these young women were special to the Captain, whose eyes flicked over those waving to them as well.

When the cart approached the wall gates, it slowed as the coiled spring powering it unwound. Gerard then helped Toby out and disengaged the spring coil from the axle. Then he could lift the front of the cart to drag it over to rest at the side of Barracks A. There was a smattering of applause, at which Toby waved again.

Efran dismounted to congratulate him and Gerard, who said, "Thank you, Captain; obviously, there's more to be done on it, and it may turn out to be nothing more than a novelty. But it's interesting just the same."

"I think so, too, Gerard," Efran said. "Was it a fun ride, Toby?"

"Yes! We should have a couple at the next Faire," he said, still receiving congratulations from a few spectators.

Minka came up to hug his shoulders before throwing herself gleefully on Efran. "Your men will make flying carts next!" she predicted.

"Oh, now you're getting wild," he said dismissively, hugging her. "Thank you, Ella, Rondi," he nodded to his daughter and adoptive daughter, still on their horses.

"That was fun to watch!" Rondi said, who enjoyed everything.

"I want to ride one next," Ella said as a challenge to Gerard.

“Oh, at the Faire? We’ll make a cart that can hold ten and fling you all up into the air,” Gerard promised.

The children, who had collected behind Toby, began demanding places in this cart—“As long as Efran is there to catch us coming down,” Calix stipulated.

“Doesn’t he always?” Hassie demanded. All of the children agreed that this was so, and Efran exhaled.

Shortly, he had their bodyguards escort them back to the hill. Ella and Rondi rode up with them, but Minka wanted to stay with Efran. “The dinner bell will be ringing within the hour,” she warned him.

“I’m never late for dinner,” he noted, smiling.

Wendt asked, “Meanwhile, do you want to hear the latest report from Featheringham?”

“Yes,” Efran said, starting towards the barracks door. As Minka was still in his side, he slid his arm down to take her hand. Wendt glanced at her in mild reluctance; he thought he might know something in this report which he’d rather she not hear. When Marguerite had abruptly awakened three nights ago, he woke as well, finding that he had to comfort her.

Eustace and Mohr had already returned to their seats to finish their dinner. The lower barracks Captains Towner and Stites had also come into the conference room to hear their report. But Wendt did not summon the hilltop Captains Rigdon and Chee so close to dinner; he’d just let Efran tell them what they needed to know.

As they all settled around the table—and Minka greeted everyone there—Mohr reached into his jacket to pull out a wrinkled parchment. Handing it to the Commander, he said, “It’s so helpful that they post these notices on the public boards that we can just rip off and carry away.”

“Obviously, that’s why they’re there,” Wendt said, looking over the parchment. He paused—as he feared, this might be difficult for Minka to hear. But she was here, and there was no ready way to shelter her from the news.

So he began reading: “To all Hollowans, from Surchatain Borgnino, Grand Councilor Golliher, and esteemed Councilors Galvao, Wigal, Treml, Sroufe, Squitieri, and Bazzle:

“As we have hoped and prayed, the murderer of our dear late Surchatain Purewal and numerous esteemed Councilors as well as the valuable notary Dileonardo and others has been found dead of arsenic poisoning by her own hand. Thus the late Windish’s wife Malaga has carried out his murderous plans at the cost of her own life. We are extremely grateful to Sheriff Hobert, whose diligent investigation uncovered the late killer and the circumstances of her own demise.

“In other news, the Market District merchants are offering a bounty of 50 royals for each monkey killed. Carcasses must be presented to the fruiterer Ruttle for payment.”

He stopped reading to look at Minka. Efran was already watching her, as were other men at the table. She was pale, breathing unsteadily, eyes glassed in disbelieving shock. “Malaga?” she barely whispered.

She stood unsteadily. As Efran started to rise, she put her hand on his shoulder. “No, you—needn’t bother about me. I’m just going to ask Auntie, and, the Commander needs you here. I’m all right; I just want to understand, and, I promise to be up to the dining hall at the dinner bell.”

He nodded dubiously, and Minka composed herself to walk to the door. She paused before Wendt to ask,

“Marguerite knows something, doesn’t she?”

“I think so,” he said quietly.

“Yes, thank you.” She hesitated as though about to say something else, then went out.

Efran sat back, pensively tapping the table. To no one in particular, he said, “I’ll find out later what Marguerite had to tell her.”

“Yes.” The Commander sighed, then put the parchment aside. “Well, then. Now that the Faire’s over, Administrator Tourse wants the gates shut and manned over the eastbound coastal highway, which seems overdue. He also had suggestions for patrols that I think we need to look at. Mohr, you and Eustace are dismissed to rest up. Thank you for your report.”

“Commander.” They stood to salute, then departed. Efran looked after them as though he were about to spring up to follow—not them, but someone else.

Minka rode the dun mare blindly up Main; fortunately, the horse knew to stop at the crosswalks when her rider failed to notice the brightly colored women occupying them. Arriving at the chapel, Minka gave up her horse to one of the soldiers while another opened the doors for her. She entered to look up vacantly at Hartshough.

Before he could bow, she put her arms around him to ask, “Is Auntie out back?”

“Yes, Lady Minka. She is waiting for you,” he said.

“Thank you,” she whispered, pulling away. Then she went through the hall and the kitchen to the back patio, where Marguerite sat watching the late afternoon sun descend into early twilight on her left. She looked back at her great-granddaughter, extending a hand to her as she sat.

Almost humorously, Marguerite invited, “Tell me about it.”

Minka fell into a chair and opened her mouth. At that moment Verlice, dressed to the hilt in Elvey’s finest attire for men, appeared at the door of the kitchen. “Well, Mother, you’ll be interested to hear that I—”

Minka rose from her chair to put her hands to his chest—not aggressively, but firmly. As he looked down at her in surprise, she said slowly, “You . . . are not lord of the chapel. You must approach your mother respectfully and wait for her to give you permission to speak.”

He opened his mouth in umbrage, but her large blue eyes regarded him with such authority that he altered what he was about to say to, “Hmph. Well then, I’ll talk to you when you’re free, Mother—if you permit, of course,” he added tartly. Then in imitation of Justinian, he placed his tall hat just so on his head and turned out.

Minka sat again at the table to take Marguerite’s hand, asking, “Am I out of line? He means no disrespect, he just—” She struggled, then said, “We cannot let them run over us. Wendt doesn’t do that, does he?”

“No, he’s most courteous,” Marguerite said.

“I knew that,” Minka said decisively, glancing aside. “I knew that because Efran copies him, like the boys copy Efran. Auntie. . . .” Minka was trembling now. “Why—why couldn’t Malaga break free of Windish?”

Holding her hand, Marguerite sighed, “I think because that’s how she saw to get what she wanted. It seems that she thought to . . . surpass him instead of run away from him. We tried to show her a different way, but, she wouldn’t stay with us long enough for it to take hold.”

“She wanted her house back. That’s what she most wanted, and that’s how she saw to get it, isn’t it?” Minka asked, studying her.

“That’s part of it, perhaps,” Marguerite said. “We get too attached to structures, looking for our forever home. But nothing on earth is forever. We have to look higher.”

Minka thought about this, then said, “Auntie, I’m so afraid of—letting myself descend to—to—”

“Keep looking up at what is above, and Who is above,” Marguerite said, smiling. “Your feet follow your eyes.”

Minka leaned on her arm, sighing, “If I can follow you, I’ll be all right.”

“I hope so, but the dinner bell is about to ring,” Marguerite said mischievously.

Minka stood. “I’m gone. Thank you.” She hugged her Auntie tightly, then turned out of the chapel to find the mare waiting for her. She mounted but paused, hearing music.

Looking over to the north shore of Cavern Lake, she saw the roving harpist, Arenivas, sitting on a newly installed bench to play his strings. Listening intently, she heard what sounded like accompaniment from either the faerie trees or the small singing tree down here. Whatever it was, it blended beautifully.

With a sigh, Minka began ascending the new switchback at a trot, kicking the mare to encourage her to go a little faster. Glancing up to the attentive guards in the fortress courtyard, Minka heard a sharp whistle to her right. Startled, she looked over.

And there on the easternmost bend of the third level of the old switchback was Efran, sitting on Kraken. Efran nudged him to the edge of the bend, which Kraken jumped to pick his way over the rocks and rubble in between the two switchbacks. Then he jumped lightly onto the new switchback, where Efran walked him over to meet her.

Minka gaped at him, then cried, “I was going to beat you to the dining hall!”

“Good luck with that,” Efran grinned, imitating Jonguitud. Laughing, Minka reached out to him. He caught her hand to kiss it, then they walked their horses up the rest of the way together. Before he could go into the fortress, however, Kraken bumped him to let him know that he had a small rock stuck in his hoof from crossing to the new switchback.

So Efran had to wait for a stablehand to bring a hoof pick to pry it out. Minka kissed him. “I’m going to wash up to wait for you in the dining hall.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “All right, you beat me this once.”

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Chapter 2

When Efran got to the dining hall, he found a plate of beef and artichokes along with a mild ale waiting for him. Minka and Ella moved apart to make room for him to sit. As he did, he glanced over at Joshua on Quennel's knee. When Joshua made no attempt to come over to his father, Efran asked, "You good, Joshua?"

"I good," he said, intently spooning up whatever it was he had in a small cup.

"All right. That had better not be dessert, when I see beef and greens still in your bowl," Efran said idly.

Joshua and Quennel looked at each other cautiously, then Quennel whispered something to him while delicately withdrawing the custard cup. Efran pretended not to see any of this.

Minka was talking to Graeme on her right, gently probing for gossip. Obliging her, he glanced around the hall and said, "Bullara's moved out of his room so Barrueta won't know where to find him. The location of his new room is a tightly guarded secret. And, one of the maids took him to Imelda's to blacken his pink hair so he won't be so visible."

Efran offered, "He can always divorce her."

Graeme laughed, "He could, Captain, right? But he just can't see going to all that trouble when hiding constantly is so much easier."

Everyone around them laughed, but Rondi said, "I understand his point of view. I was always afraid of the notary in Crescent Hollow; I only saw him when bad things happened. I never knew a notary could be a hero until I met your Lord Ryal."

Minka grinned at her. "I will tell him that."

"Eight or ten people will have told him that before you get out of Law class tomorrow," Efran predicted, head down.

"That won't stop me from telling him myself," she grinned at her husband.

Chewing, he grinned back at her. "Because you like to talk? You haven't touched your plate."

"Because I want the apple crumbly," she said. "The beef is good, but they have big, sad eyes. I feel that they're looking at me as if I were a troll, asking, 'Are you going to eat me?'" There was light laughter down the row of tables.

Efran looked back toward the kitchen, lifting his chin. "Apple crumbly over here please, Wardly. Yes, for the lady. The apples don't have eyes."

There was more laughter as she handed her plate of beef to Graeme, who handed it to Kaas next to him, who immediately dug in. "Thank you, Lady. I'm akin to trolls," Kaas said.

Yet more laughter. Minka said, "No, you men earn your beef. I've seen how hard you work."

“Not Kaas, you haven’t,” someone down the next table said.

Kaas raised up. “Who—?”

At that time, the children swarmed the back tables. Ivy, finding Efran’s leg free for a change, climbed into his lap to put her arms around his neck and plead, “Efran, when can we go see the new dragon babies? They hatched days and days ago!”—about three days ago, actually. Joshua was watching her from Quennel’s lap in curiosity tinged with jealousy.

Efran winced, “I don’t know, Ivy—Gevorgyan is a very protective mother—”

“He’s afraid she’ll *eat* you,” Elwell told her.

Ivy raised up to aim a fist at him, but Efran coaxed her arm back down. “No, no, just that she may want you to leave her babies alone—for now, anyway. Let’s see what happens when they start coming down from the nest.”

Because the children couldn’t go see the babies right now, they lost interest and began roaming out to play before bedtime. When Ivy bounded off Efran’s lap, Joshua decided to go back to his father, who had finished his dinner. So Efran took him on his arm and helped Minka rise from the bench.

They went out to the back grounds to enjoy a balmy October evening on the hilltop. The red and yellow dancing lights—*hulu kukui*—were playing on the horizon again tonight, and again the Lands’ doctors had to warn women away from wearing silver jewelry for a while.

Minka and Efran with Joshua stood at the back fence to look at the colored lights rising into the nighttime sky on one hand, and the nearly full moon shining over the Sea on the other. Efran asked quietly, “Did you talk to Marguerite about Malaga?”

“Yes,” Minka whispered, pressing into his side. It could get windy up here, and even though it wasn’t cold, she shivered. “Even after Windish died, he dragged her down, and she never could understand that there was a better way to get what she wanted,” Minka murmured. “I’m remembering what Tourse said about Lady Nierling, how we—walk into the light or slide back into darkness; there’s no standing still.”

He thought about that for a while, then asked in a bare whisper, “Do I drag you down?”

She pulled away a little in dismay. “Oh, no, Efran, no. Your dedication to the Abbey holds all of us up. And, I like what you told Ryal—how he’s the only one keeping you from becoming a tyrant because he defies you on behalf of the Law. Your deference to him, and to Commander Wendt, helps keep you right.”

He pulled her back into his side. Joshua was asleep on his other shoulder. “I don’t like being a lord,” he admitted. “I’m a barely adequate Captain. I just want to fight.”

“Being a lord just means you have more weapons to fight with. And more men,” she observed.

He raised his hand from her waist to brush back her hair in the moonlight. “I can accept that.”

The following morning, October 19th, Efran was lounging in the second-floor workroom, his feet propped up on the conference table, while Estes, DeWitt, and Pieta worked quietly at their separate tasks. Mostly, Efran was waiting on Minka to get out of Law class. The kitchen administrator Goyne came in and out, as did Koschat on

errands for DeWitt. Tomer came to the door, saluting. “Captain, Commander Wendt asks if you’d care to interview the messenger from Surchatain Escarra of Eurus.”

Efran blinked at him, then slowly sat up. “Surchatain Escarra. Of Eurus. His messenger came—that was four days ago. I forgot all about him.” Perturbed, he looked over to his administrators.

DeWitt was too involved with his worksheets to remark on Efran’s absent-mindedness, but Estes said, “Messengers have to be prepared to wait. There’s plenty here to do, as long as they have enough money. But if you’re bored, you might as well go on down, see what he has to say for the new Surchatain.”

“All right.” Efran cautiously rose to go with Tomer down to the courtyard, gesturing, “Go tell the Commander I’ll be right there.”

“Yes, Captain.” Tomer climbed back on his horse to ride down the switchback with the message.

When Kraken came trotting around to the courtyard gates, Efran told him, “You have to get geared up; I may have to ride around with visitors.”

To Kraken, this did not seem a compelling reason to put on all that restrictive leather, but just so his human wouldn’t take another horse, Kraken snorted and trotted back to the stables. Meanwhile, Efran was thinking: trolls had been ransacking Eurus for months; in fact, they had occupied the throne and the councilors’ seats in early August until the dancing mania swept them away several weeks later. That was the last anyone in the Lands had heard from Eurus until days ago, with the appearance of this messenger, or messengers.

When Kraken trotted back in saddle and bridle, Efran swung up on him to kick lightly. As they headed down the old switchback, Efran grabbed the pommel. “What—? You’re bucking! Stop bucking!”

Nah, just trying to get it all settled right, Kraken grouched.

“Well, stop it,” Efran grumbled back at him. The driver of Minogue’s meat cart glanced over nervously, wondering what he was doing to irritate the Captain.

Arriving at Barracks A, Efran entered to see the Commander, his Second Gabriel, and Towner at work. They looked up, and Efran said, “I finally remembered about the messenger from Eurus. I suppose his coming means that we can finally send scouts up that way, doesn’t it?”

Wendt said, “Yes, Efran, we sent Caswall and Fennig three days ago.” He was mildly preoccupied with a list on his desk.

“Three days ago. Good that someone’s on top of this kind of thing,” Efran said distractedly. While Gabriel glanced up laughing, Efran added, “Now where’s the messenger?”—as though the man should be waiting in the office for Efran to show up.

Wendt looked over to Gabriel questioningly. “Isn’t he staying at Firmin’s?”

“Yes, Commander. We’ll send someone to bring him here, Captain,” Gabriel replied, looking for a free man.

“Don’t bother; I’ll go find him,” Efran said. Leaving the barracks, he caught Kraken playing in the water trough, of course, so turned his head and climbed up on him.

Efran walked him down Main past Shurtleff's and Averno's. Coming to Firmin's, Efran glanced over the outdoor dining area. At this time of the morning, it was practically empty, except for a young man, a Southerner, sitting at a street-side table with a mild ale. He was watching everything, so shortly noticed the Polonti on the black horse studying him.

He stood as Efran walked Kraken over to the seating area and said, "I am Captain Efran. Are you from Eurus?"

"Yes, Captain; I am Ashe, sent from Surchatain Escarra. Once the trolls were cleared out of Eurus, he was installed to the rulership in late September." Respectful and cautious, he spoke with a fairly refined Eurussian accent.

"When and how were the trolls cleared out?" Efran asked with a vague smile.

"Um, around the third week of September. In the midst of destroying Eurus, they seemed to stop and rush out in the middle of the night. [Efran thought, *Yes, we rode up to Wirrin Valley the night of the twenty-fourth.*] When they were still gone over the next few days, the city leaders came together to reform the Council and the army before the trolls returned. But—they haven't come back, so, we're trying to rebuild," Ashe said tentatively. He was young; Efran judged him to be in his early twenties.

"That's good. Is your horse here?" Efran glanced toward the stables in back.

"Yes, sir." Ashe moved out from the table, reaching over to leave a few silver pieces on it.

"I'll wait for you here, and we'll ride around to talk," Efran said.

With a gesture of assent, Ashe turned to trot toward the shared stables between Firmin's and Averno's. Efran dismounted to leave a royal on the table, augmenting the paltry tip.

While he was waiting, Lilou came out to clear tables. Seeing him, she rushed up. "Efran! Sit down. What do you want to eat?"

"Nothing right now, Lilou; I'm waiting for your Eurussian guest, Ashe. Has he been behaving himself?" Efran asked.

"Yes, but he doesn't seem to be carrying around much money for a Eurussian. He's behind on his lodging bill," she grumbled.

"Ah." Efran took the remaining royals, four of them, from his pocket to hand them over. "Tell Gudgeon to forward the rest of his bill to the Fortress."

"Thank you, Efran." She accepted the money in relief, then saw the royal among the silvers on the table. Taking those as well, she said, "I'm sure glad you stopped by, so Ionadi and I wouldn't be paying for him."

Efran scowled. "If anyone shorts you, Lilou, come tell me. The Fortress will make it good."

"I just knew you would," she said, hugging his waist briefly. Then she turned to run inside with the payment.

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Chapter 3

Efran watched Ashe bring his horse around from the stables. It was a decent animal, but not the quality he would expect from the messenger of a Eurussian Surchatain. The trolls must have done a great lot of damage up there. Remembering the scorched exterior of the palace, Efran winced: that was his own doing.

As Ashe approached, Efran swung up onto Kraken. “Let’s go ride around. It’s a shame that you weren’t here for the Faire,” he observed. It had ended October 1st.

“Actually, we did have a few people down, and when they came back describing it, the Surchatain decided we needed to establish relations with you,” Ashe said. He was still looking everywhere as they began walking their horses south on Main. Stopping abruptly at a crosswalk, he blinked at the two women crossing—specifically, at their unique and eye-catching dresses (which were more modest than they had been, thanks to Verlice’s efforts).

Efran muttered, “I’m very glad to have Eurussians visiting instead of attacking.”

Studying the white fortress at the top of the hill, Ashe said, “Attacking? I don’t think so, Captain.” He regarded the burst of green atop the fortress, then lowered his eyes to note all the uniforms they passed—most were red, but some were dusky blue.

“It’s a long story,” Efran said. In fact, had past Eurussian Surchatains been less eager to repeatedly expend resources attacking the Lands, they might have held out better against the trolls.

Having safely negotiated the last crosswalk, the two turned east on Chapel Road. After passing the notary’s shop—which Ashe noticed in particular—he gazed at the chapel with its profuse greenery cascading down from the cockle-shaped roof. The Lands’ Best Inn, sprawling across six plots next to it, was in the final stages of construction of the upper floors.

As Efran and Ashe turned their horses up New North Road to reach the lake, Efran glanced to the east end of Chapel Road to see Tourse’s men closing the gates. From here, Efran could not see if the barbed wire had been replaced over the road at the end of the barricade. If it hadn’t, the houses and businesses within that second wall extension would want some means of protection that still allowed traffic in and out on the coastal highway.

But since that was not Efran’s job, he merely looked across to the lake. “Here we are.”

Ashe eyed the tranquil, shimmering water almost in despondence. “We had a pond behind our house until the trolls came. It was the only house I’d ever known, the house I was born in.”

“Did they get your family?” Efran asked quietly.

“No, but they got my father’s employer Parsifal. Good old man, too slow to run,” Ashe said, heartsick.

“Parsifal. The notary?” Efran asked.

Ashe looked startled, but said, “Uh, yes.”

“Your father worked for him?” Efran asked.

“Yeeess,” Ashe admitted, looking deeply conflicted.

“Then Ryal may know him. What’s your father’s name?” Efran asked.

Ashe did not answer right away, his transparent face showing deep distress. Efran stopped Kraken to evaluate the young man. “You might as well go ahead and tell me. Save time, and some pain, possibly.” Efran was bluffing about the torture, but it was fine if Ashe didn’t know that.

Ashe looked away to exhale, “Escarra.”

Efran paused in surprise. “Your father is the new Surchatain?”

Ashe glumly nodded. “And of course I wasn’t supposed to tell you, so within minutes I blurt it out.”

“What was he doing for Parsifal?” Efran asked.

“He was the assistant notary. After the trolls had wiped out three-quarters of Eurus and then died or left, the most prominent survivors came together as a Council. But none of them wanted to draw attention to themselves as Surchatain, so they selected the only one left who had a passing knowledge of the Notary Rules: my father,” Ashe exhaled.

“Does he rule, then?” Efran asked.

“HA!” Ashe bleated. “No, he’s just a figurehead. He didn’t want to do it, but didn’t have any choice. So his first task is to establish relations with you so they could figure out how to get into your Treasury.”

Efran had to throw back his head to laugh. “It’s good to hear a familiar refrain. So, what I’m going to do is take you to Ryal. We’ll make introductions, and get the Commander and my Fortress Administrator down to figure out what to do with you.”

Ashe looked sick. “If I don’t come back, they’ll punish my father.”

“Oh, no worries. We have an excellent record of rescuing figureheads,” Efran said, turning Kraken. Ashe followed in tentative hope.

On the way back to Ryal’s, Efran asked, “Who did you ride down with?” Ashe shook his head, and Efran paused. “You rode down by yourself?”

Ashe nodded. “No one would ride with me, and I had to go.”

Efran regarded him almost in respect. “That takes courage, to make such a long ride alone.”

“What else could I do? They’ve got my father,” Ashe said.

“What about the rest of your family?” Efran asked.

“My mother died years ago; my two sisters are married, but they and their families left Eurus early on. We—my father and I—don’t know where they landed,” Ashe said.

Efran jerked his head. “All right. Let’s go talk to Ryal, first.”

After tying off their horses out front, Efran walked him up the steps to enter Ryal’s shop. He was at the counter with Giardi, sorting new plot forms. “Hello, Efran. Who is this?” Ryal asked. Giardi looked up, smiling.

“Lord Ryal, Lady Giardini, meet Escarra’s son Ashe,” Efran said.

Ryal looked interested. “Would that be the Escarra who works with Parsifal?”

“Yes, sir, he did, but, Parsifal was killed by trolls,” Ashe said, still grieving.

“Oh, that’s terrible. Is your father the new notary, then?” Ryal asked.

Before Ashe could answer, Efran leaned on the counter. “Try again, Ryal. Have you heard the name ‘Escarra’ in another context?”

Ryal looked mystified, but Giardi gasped, “The new Surchatain of Eurus? *That* Escarra?”

“Giardini wins,” Efran said, rising to smile on her.

Ryal gaped at Efran and his visitor. “This young man is the son of the new Surchatain of Eurus?”

“Yes, but, lower your voice. No one is supposed to know,” Efran said, glancing to the door behind him.

Ryal began sternly: “Efran, if you’re trying to put one over on me—”

“No, no—not only is it factual, but we have to get Commander Wendt and DeWitt down here to figure out what to do.” Efran leaned out of the door to give instructions to messengers.

“Bring Ashe back here,” Ryal said, opening the door to the back room. As Efran brought in his new protégé, Ryal added, “Welcome to the Abbey Lands, Ashe.”

“Thank you, sir,” he replied. He was no longer so dismayed at letting the truth slip out.

(By this time, Efran had forgotten all about Verlice’s housekeepers, Velie and Picco, whom he’d brought back to the Lands with Verlice’s family. But the housekeepers were no longer here at Ryal’s, having been lured away to the service of a family who had adorable young children.)

Shortly, the Commander and his Second arrived. Efran gestured them to the back room. “Commander Wendt, Second Gabriel, meet Surchatain Escarra’s son Ashe.”

The young man stood. Not knowing how to show respect toward them, he made a short bow. Meanwhile, Wendt and Gabriel were both staring at him. Wendt demanded, “Escarra sent his *son*?”

“Not exactly, but that will be explained when DeWitt gets here. Ashe is going to be very helpful to us,” Efran said. Before taking his place in the back room, Ryal was instructing Giardi as to where to archive certain forms.

At the Commander’s direction, Gabriel left to inform others while Wendt sat with Ashe to begin extracting information from him. When DeWitt arrived shortly thereafter, Ryal pulled up an extra chair for the five of them to sit at the back table. First, Efran told them about Ashe’s inadvertent revelations.

Moments later the doorbell tinkled, and Minka appeared at the door of the back room. “There you are! I’ve been looking for you ever since Law class,” she told her husband. Meanwhile, her large blue eyes swept the table to land on the visitor.

Ashe rose abruptly to bow to her, transparently captivated. The men around him lowered their heads or compressed smiling lips. Efran said, “Minka, this is Surchatain Escarra’s son Ashe. Lady Minka is my wife, Ashe,” he added pointedly.

“Oh.” The young man’s face fell in disappointment.

Minka cried, “Oh, don’t worry! I’ll find someone for you! You’re such a nice, intelligent-looking boy, it will be easy. I promise.”

The men smiled outright; DeWitt took off his glasses to clean them on his shirt, hoping to distract from his stifled laughter. Efran exhaled, “Minka has a new pet.” He stood to look for another chair, gently remonstrating, “Don’t you have enough pets to take care of?”

“What?” She looked at him in offense. “Efran, that’s like saying you have enough children! Besides, this is just a temporary job.”

Efran contradicted her quietly, “He’s not here to get a girl.” Ashe’s face registered immediate disagreement. Wendt sat back, amused.

“Hmph! Well, that’s just stingy of you,” Minka rebuked him, and he started swaying. She reassured Ashe, “Never fear. I won’t let you down.”

As she started to turn out, Wendt said, “Please stay a moment, Minka, before you take care of that. I want you to hear our discussion.”

“If you like, Commander,” she said cautiously. Efran pulled out his chair to seat her at the table, then found another for himself against the wall. She glittered back at him, “Thank you.” His acknowledging glance was conflicted but smiling.

Efran let the Commander fill her in on what they knew of Ashe and his father’s situation so far, all of which Ashe confirmed. Then Wendt asked him, “Is your father in danger, then?”

“Oh, yes, regardless what I do, but especially if I don’t come back with information that will help them,” Ashe said.

DeWitt said, “Just to clarify, are they still thinking to get into the Treasury?”

“Yes, sir,” Ashe said helplessly.

“Making us kill more innocent men,” Efran grunted from the wall.

Ryal offered, “I can’t imagine how to address that issue, but it seems the greater urgency would be to get Escarra out of Eurus.”

Ashe rose up in hope. “Can you?”

Efran leaned his head back against the wall, grimacing, “That’s so difficult, when he’ll be guarded.”

“Hold it,” DeWitt said. “She’s wearing her devious face.”

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Chapter 4

All the men looked at Minka, who was indeed smiling tightly at the wall, eyebrows raised. Wendt asked, “What are you thinking, Lieutenant Commander?” Ashe looked at her in bewildered awe.

She merely noted, “Efran came up with the solution to get Marguerite, Hartshough and Justinian out of Eurus when we didn’t even know they were in danger.” That was about five months ago.

Everyone looked at Efran, and the hope in Ashe’s face was almost painful to see. Efran groaned, “Faerie help. That didn’t work out so well with Solace.”

“That’s not who you called to help Auntie,” she reminded him.

Wincing, Efran banged his head (with the steel plate) back on the wall a few times, then uttered, “Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin, we would have a word with you, please.”

Immediately the two faeries appeared in the middle of the table and Ashe fell out of his chair backwards. Sir Ditson, in his elegant golden-brown fall suit with top hat (copied from Justinian) bowed to the half of the table facing Efran while Sir Nutbin, in his monocle and plaid vest, tail twitching in excitement, sat on his haunches to bow to Ashe’s side of the table. The young man got up on his knees to look at him face to face.

Sir Ditson expanded gloriously to pronounce, “We are utterly ecstatic and over the moon, Lord Efran, to finally be summoned again to provide aid after—may I say—our most successful extraction of those three essential persons back to the Lands. To waste no time, we have immediately permitted your visitor to view us. Now, we await your specific instructions regarding our next highly anticipated task.”

As Efran opened his mouth, Sir Nutbin interjected, “And may we thank the enchanting Lady Sovereign and Lieutenant Commander for her kind recommendation.”

With a pursed grin, Minka said, “You’re most welcome, dear Sir Nutbin; now let us hear what the Captain requires.”

Efran shot her an acknowledging glance as he told the two faeries, “The Surchatain of Eurus, an unwilling figurehead by the name of Escarra, is certainly in danger if his son Ashe here can’t return with information about the Abbey Treasury, which he won’t. So we want to see if you can get Escarra out from wherever they’re keeping him—in the palace?” Efran asked Ashe.

Regaining his seat, Ashe said, “Yes, Captain, he’s there with guards around the clock, but not in the Surchatain’s suite—that’s reserved for Grand Councilor Gyldenbollokes—”

“Who?” DeWitt laughed.

“Yes, sir, Lord Gyldenbollokes is—was—the premier jeweler in Eurus until the trolls destroyed his store. They put on all his jewelry just to rampage in it, and ruined or lost most all of it. Of course, people who picked it up off the street kept it, so, the lord’s entitled to the Surchatain’s suite, you see,” Ashe shrugged.

“Perfectly understandable,” Wendt said dryly.

Efran asked Ashe, “But, your father is somewhere in the palace?”

“Yes, sir, most likely in the Surchataine’s suite, except if another Councilor wanted it, which is likely,” Ashe said in some confusion.

“Describe your father,” Wendt said.

Ashe shrugged. “He’s a gentle man of sixty—I was his last child. He’s got a messy head of gray hair that won’t ever lie right—”

“I understand,” Minka said sympathetically, and Efran had to lower his head, biting his lip.

Ashe continued, “Anyway, outside the notary shop, or his own garden, he’s lost and confused. He won’t survive long, because he doesn’t understand what they want of him. He’s just—a harmless old man.” Ashe wiped away tears in embarrassment.

“Can he ride?” Efran asked.

“Yes, sir,” Ashe said, collecting himself. “If your faerie lords here make him know that they’re taking him to me, he’ll do whatever’s necessary.”

Sirs Ditson and Nutbin shot up at least four inches at the imputation of nobility. Ditson swept off his hat to the young man. “We shall safely extract your father from the palace and deliver him to rendezvous with his traveling companions, Chatain Ashe. Where shall that be, Lord Efran?”

Ashe looked baffled at the title given him, but everyone looked at Efran, who crossed his arms over his chest. He thought out in reply, “There’s a stand of shagbark hickory trees a few miles south of Eurus, near the turnoff to Featherstone—or where Featherstone used to be. Let’s have men waiting for you two and Escarra there. How many we should bring is an open question—two men are best for mobility, but four are better for defense. How many soldiers are guarding him, Ashe? How likely are they to pursue?”

Ashe looked off in deep consideration. “Most of the soldiers—what few are there—are of no account, but they have a special guard called the Villalobos. There are five of them; they’re trolls who defected from their troops in order to serve humans in exchange for meat—often, human flesh, which is what they prefer. They’re—” Ashe was momentarily at a loss to describe them.

“They’re inhuman, but that’s obvious,” Ashe laughed weakly. “But, there’s a special evil about them—the kind of creature that causes pain for the pleasure of it. And they wear gold—”

“—Wrapped around their arms,” Efran said almost dreamily. “And they use gold to make necklaces of the hands of their victims.” The others watched him in shock. He went on, “Yes, they were at Wirrin Valley the first time, when Captain Gores led us in the defensive attack. When we came on the scene, we saw lesser trolls fall away,

calling for *Villalobos*. We thought it was a meeting place. But then other trolls came out from behind the house with blood covering their faces and fronts and hands. And we engaged them without knowing how. . . .”

Minka went pale. “No, Efran.”

He looked to her with eyes full of something in the past. “This is an overdue reckoning. I thought that reckoning would come when we rode to Wirrin Valley for Verlice’s family”—less than a month ago. “But the Villalobos weren’t there; they were nestling down in the palace to guard the Councilors in exchange for human meat.”

The room was silent as Efran continued sifting pieces of the past. Giardi was watching from the door to the front room with tears in her eyes. He suddenly left the back room; she stepped away for him to go to the front door of the shop. The back room was so quiet that they could all hear him tell a soldier outside, “Send to both the lower and hilltop barracks—I want volunteers who remember Villalobos.”

There was a murmured assent, then Efran returned to the back room. Minka, shaking, stood to put her hands on his chest. “Efran, why does this fall to you?” she whispered.

He smiled down at her. “It’s my charter to rescue children.” She looked at him with drawn brows, so he explained, “A gentle old man forced into a rôle in which he’s certain to be killed is as much a child as a thirteen-year-old set up for the same. But, more than that. . . . I can’t fight evil everywhere, but when it’s thrown in my face, I’m allowed to go meet it. But more than *that*, I now know how to fight them. Half of us died almost ten years ago because we didn’t know what to use against them. With all the troll fighting we’ve done, now I know.”

She fell on him, twining her hands in his shirt. Holding her, he looked over to the faeries, who seemed almost glowing with purpose. “So, Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin, I and a group of men will leave early tomorrow for Eurus. When we arrive at the hickory stand in the late afternoon, you will extract Escarra and bring him down to us. Let the Villalobos follow you, for we’ll put Escarra on a horse with an escort and send them south. The rest of us will meet the trolls.”

“As you command, so we will do, Lord Efran,” Ditson said. He and Nutbin bowed, then disappeared.

A moment later, Wendt asked, “What kind of equipment do you need, Captain?”

“Short clubs and sawtooth knives, Commander,” Efran replied, smiling.

“No protection?” Wendt asked dubiously.

Efran shook his head hazily. “What I learned from both battles at Wirrin Valley . . . if they get hold of you, no amount of armor will save you.”

Standing, Wendt said, “We’ll have the weapons waiting for you at the gates.”

“Thank you, sir.” Efran looked back down at Minka. “I think it’s time for the midday meal.” She closed her eyes, pressing her head to his chest. He invited, “Ashe, come on up and eat with us.”

“Yes, thank you, Captain,” he said, getting up. Ryal and DeWitt rose as well to return to their duties.

In the dining hall, Efran and Minka sat at their usual back bench with Ashe sitting across from them. Joshua had already been fed and was playing outside with Nakam and the other children.

Ella and Quennel had also eaten; she was back at the horse training pens with Tess and he had returned to the archery practice field to instruct the soldiers in *aiké* shooting.

But other soldiers, drawn by Efran's call for volunteers, came over to meet Ashe and hear details of the mission. They flocked around Tourse as he sat across from Efran, next to Ashe, to ask, "What is this about the Villalobos, Captain?"

Mouth full, Efran nodded to Ashe: "Explain." So Ashe turned to the men around him to tell them about the savage trolls guarding his father. He told them about his father's helplessness, and what Ashe himself understood of the faeries' part in it.

When he had told them all he knew, they looked back to Efran. He said, "That's why I want only the men who fought under Captain Gores to come, so they'll already know what doesn't work against the Villalobos. Also, it will be helpful to have those who are familiar with that hickory stand outside Eurus."

Krall, qualified on both counts, said, "Captain, for a man that old, we need a carriage following to meet his escort at least halfway back."

"Ah. Good point," Efran said.

"That stand darkens early," another qualifier, Shane, said. "And like all trolls, the Villalobos have poor eyesight—I only survived Wirrin Valley by fighting in the shadows. So we'll want to wear black, including hoods. Also odor guards, to help prevent their locking onto us by smell."

"Jasmine," Stephanos noted.

"Leather gloves. I still have scars from their blood burning me." Ori showed them the puffy skin across the side of his right hand and wrist.

"All that," Efran said. "Tourse, I'm leaving it to you to pick the men, see to the carriage and assign the escort. Also, let Commander Wendt know what gear we need so he can have it ready. We leave at first light tomorrow."

"Yes, Captain." Tourse rose from his chair.

Efran looked up to ask, "Sir Ditson? Sir Nutbin? Did you hear?"

There was merely a shimmer in the air as Ditson replied, "Yes, indeed, Lord Efran, and we shall have the target ready for extraction upon your arrival. Shall we render him invisible when we reach you?"

"Not to us," Efran said warily.

"Yes, Lord Efran." And the shimmer vanished.

Efran was calm and resolved when he and Minka climbed into bed that balmy October night, but she was still shivering.

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Chapter 5

When Minka awoke in the darkness to find Efran gone in the early hours of October 20th, she threw back the covers, lurching out of bed. He'd left a candle burning on the small table of the outer room, so she was able to find her robe to throw it over her nightdress before running out to the foyer.

Eustace, at the door, paused before opening it. "It's still dark out, Lady Minka."

"Have they left yet?" she gasped.

"Let's look." He opened the double doors to let her out into the courtyard. There were only intimations of sunrise in the east. Running up to the gates to look down Main, lit with lanterns, she saw a dark group of men pour out of the wall gates to ride due north, disappearing over the old stone bridge. A black carriage surrounded by four men, also in black, followed at a slower pace. This expedition comprised sixteen men in all.

The gate guard Gaul said, "They've been waiting a long time for this, Lady Minka. They'll get it done, and come back."

"I know," she whispered, gripping his arm. Then she turned back up the steps into the fortress. She crossed the foyer to enter the dark keep and drop at the foot of the crucifix, illumined only by moonlight.

All on strong horses, Efran's party rode silently up the northbound road. Close to the Lands, there was some oncoming traffic of merchant carts, for which Efran's men parted to pass on both sides. Despite their intense desire to get to the reckoning place quickly, Efran would not let them run; he understood the necessity of conserving their strength.

He called a halt in late morning, when they reached a brook running through the woodlands. As they dismounted to let the horses drink, rest, and graze, Connor came up to Efran to observe, "It's strange to see no trolls rush out from the trees."

"I know," Efran half laughed, eating a bit of jerky. "I just took for granted that the purge worked."

"I couldn't sleep last night, reliving that nightmare at Wirrin Valley," Connor whispered. "So if I drop off my horse coming back, leave me lying there; I'll make it in due time."

Efran raised his eyes to the north. "It is a strange feeling—almost stepping back in time to tie up loose ends, or rewrite part of a story. It just has to be done. Oh, and don't let me forget about the old gentleman we've come to rescue."

"That, too," Connor winced. Shortly, the party remounted to ride on.

Noting the party's progress northward, Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin decided to check on their object of extraction. So they cloaked themselves to fly. On the way to the palace, they observed the sullen, wary Eurussians attempting to clean up their shops, homes and streets from an extended period of troll occupation. Sir Ditson moaned, "Oh dear, oh dear, my good Nutbin, what a mess those creatures have left. Oh, and the stink of rotting troll corpses is almost paralyzing these poor people."

“We can obliterate the remainder with little fires here and there, if you think that will not endanger our objective, my dear Ditson,” Nutbin observed, nose twitching. For the stench almost made him woozy himself.

“Let us do just one or two, dear Nutbin, for we must be careful not to betray our presence nor leave tracks to the palace,” Ditson said.

“Agreed, my dear friend. I am grateful that you remind me of our duty,” Nutbin said.

So as they flew, they ignited the worst of the oozing, fetid piles on which flies and gnats swarmed to lay their eggs. Since these were faerie flames, they were quick-burning and white-hot, incinerating the noxious messes in seconds to leave piles of fine white ash that blew away at the lightest breeze. But the faeries were careful to leave a random pattern that ultimately led away from the palace.

That done, they and the whole city were able to breathe a little easier, and the two flew a direct course back to the palace. They entered the front doors around a pair of weary, jumpy guards who nonetheless lifted their heads in faint perception that something had passed by them. So Nutbin threw out a small casket of royals that broke open on the steps before the men, appearing to have fallen from a window above.

The guards startled, stared at each other, then ran down the steps to survey the broken casket and coins. Looking up, they saw no one at any window nor balcony above; looking around, they saw no one so much as crossing the street. So they quickly gathered all the coins and the casket to exit a side gate of the front courtyard.

From there, the two faeries began going from room to room on the first floor looking for their object. They quickly found Grand Councilor Gyldenbollokes in the Surchatain’s suite, lounging in the bath with a young maid. So Ditson created a diversion by having the image of the girl’s husband appear, roaring, “There now I’ve found you, Mintz, and what d’you think I aim to do about it?”

With much splashing and screeching, the girl leapt out of the tub while Gyldenbollokes, attempting to follow, fell on his face and slid six feet on the wet floor before coming to a stop against the privacy partition, which fell over on top of him.

Ditson and Nutbin hovered near the ceiling to watch for the Villalobos to respond to their master’s shouts, but only regular human guards showed up. They gazed around in confusion as the Grand Councilor vented his wrath in a wet robe and the girl disappeared out of a side door into the garden.

So the faeries departed that suite to sweep the rest of the first floor, finding only servants pretending to work and a few other Councilors genuinely plotting the overthrow of Gyldenbollokes. Ditson whispered, “It appears we must look on the second floor for friend Escarra, my dear Nutbin.”

“So we shall, good Ditson,” Nutbin replied, and they swept up the stairway.

Immediately upon arriving at the second floor, they looked to the end of the corridor to see a pair of great, ugly trolls standing on either side of the last door. The trolls raised their lumpy, warty heads covered in wiry hair crawling with vermin. Their huge, fleshy noses quivered, and one uttered, “Faerie stink.” Massive shoulders hunched, heads turning from side to side, they began lumbering down the corridor, tracking the intruders.

The faeries flew straightway into the open door of the nearest room. Here, they blew open the glassed windows to fly out, reclosing the panes behind them. Then they flew around the outside of the palace until coming to the window of the room that had been guarded.

Still invisible, they hung outside the window to look in. There, they saw a man with frizzled gray hair working at the window, looking back over his shoulder once or twice. In the room behind him were two more large, ugly trolls asleep in deeply cushioned chairs.

On the table at his elbow were the remains of a mantle clock from which the gray-haired man had removed two items hidden within it: a key and a slender metal file. Keeping an eye on the sleeping trolls behind him, he used the file to finish smoothing the shank of the key where the ridges had been. He wiped away the metal dust, then inserted the new skeleton key into the lock on the window panes.

He had the window open when a massive, clawed hand reached over his shoulder to grip his wrist, forcing him to drop the key. The old man froze without looking up, and the troll raised his claws to the man's face.

But the door to the room opened, upon which the man and the trolls looked over. One of the door guards said (in troll speak), "Faeries stinking up place. You see no faeries?"

"No, stupid, no faeries here dumb goat," one of previously sleeping trolls said.

The other late sleeper said, "But stupid man tries to break open window. We break his head."

The door guard said, "You hurt him, you get hurt, you stupid head."

"Look see what stupid man do," the one who had caught him urged.

While they were arguing thus, Nutbin caused the clock, the file and the key to disappear and Ditson reclosed the window. So when the four trolls and the prisoner looked at the window, there was nothing amiss and nothing in his hands. "Stupid bonehead dumbum goat!" The door guard whacked the observant troll a few times. "You hurt him, we get no meat!" And since the trolls already had the notion that there was a "faerie stink" about, Ditson and Nutbin had no need to cloak the scent of their work.

So the chastened troll sank back in his plush chair and the door guards returned to their duty, slamming the door. But the prisoner looked out the window at the little man with copper-colored hair under his top hat and the squirrel with the monocle, both smiling at him with thumbs up.

On the grounds far below, another troll, larger than the other four, was looking up at the window where the two faeries hovered. He grunt-laughed, "Unh, unh," then walked away to help himself to the meat shed.

Over the next several hours, Escarra talked quietly with his soon-to-be rescuers through the window. His troll guards, assisted by faerie lullabies, resumed their nap. After Ditson had mentioned Ashe, Escarra asked anxiously, "You've seen my son? He is well?"

"Not only well," Ditson assured him, "but instrumental in orchestrating your release with Captain Efran."

"Captain Efran? This is the Lord Efran of the Abbey Lands?" Escarra asked.

Nutbin said, "Yes, indeed, good sir, and he is personally leading this mission. Shortly, you will be in a carriage bound for the Abbey Lands, and the four trolls who menace you will be chastised."

Holding up a hand with fingers spread, Escarra said, "But, there are fi—"

"What's this?" Nutbin said, ears standing taut and tail twitching. "Lord Efran and his men have arrived at the

rendezvous point. We will return directly, good Escarra.”

As the pair disappeared, the notary’s assistant looked anxiously out the window. “God speed,” he breathed.

Almost immediately, Ditson and Nutbin appeared among the shagbark hickory trees where the men were setting up. The horses were watering at a little brook running south through the trees. Kraken raised his head to keep an eye on his human.

Arne was telling Efran, “Conte and me think it best to go ahead and load the old gent into a carriage closer here, Cap’n, rather than make ’im ride a horse for any distance. We’re aiming at a nice spot about a half-mile south.”

“Good, Arne. I’m sure you’re right.” At the faeries’ appearance, Efran turned. “Ah! Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin—Have you found him?”

They bowed, and Ditson assured him, “Yes, Lord Efran, and we’re merely waiting on your word.”

Checking the progression of the late afternoon, Efran said, “Have him here in a half hour.”

“It’s good as done, Lord Efran. With the trolls hot on our heels, we assume?” Ditson said.

“Yes. All of them,” Efran said.

Ditson swept off his top hat. “There are four that will be pursuing us, Lord Efran. And we’re off!”

As they disappeared, Efran frowned. “But, Ashe said there were. . . .” He spread the fingers of one hand, thinking.

“Hood and odor cloak, Captain,” Tourse said, bringing up both items. Efran put them on.

Shortly thereafter, Ditson and Nutbin were at Escarra’s second-floor window again. Nutbin said, “Are you ready, sir? The time is at hand. Captain Efran is awaiting us.”

“Yes, but—” Escarra stood, looking back at the two trolls who were awaking.

As he gazed dubiously at them, the window at his elbow flew open and the faeries pulled him through. Falling, Escarra cried out in surprise. The trolls jumped up to lean out the open window, watching him land lightly on his feet to begin running away.

They pulled back from the window, roaring, and rushed the door to run into the door guards, also roaring. So the four of them ran down the stairs and out the front door, roaring.

Here they stopped to sniff the air. “Faerie stink!” “Human with faeries!” they bellowed, and ran in the direction their noses led them.

After they were gone, the fifth troll came around the corner, smiling with black lips over broken, rotting teeth. “Stupid, stupid. All stupid. All dead.” And he began walking in the same direction.

In the gloaming, Ditson and Nutbin whisked the most recent Surchatain into the darkness of the hickory stand. He gasped as black shapes emerged from the trees all around him. Muffled, Efran said, “Thank you, Ditson, Nutbin—take him directly to the carriage a half mile south; ride with him to see that there’s no interference.”

“As you command, Lord Efran,” Nutbin said.

They began to take Escarra away, but he planted his feet. “You are Captain Efran?” Escarra breathed, gazing at the black mask. All he could see were the purposeful, slightly humorous brown eyes.

“Yes. Ashe sends his greetings, sir. Get going,” Efran said, and the faeries whisked him away. Efran whistled lightly, and five mounted men peeled away from the trees to provide a rearguard for the carriage. Then the Captain and eight men, all survivors of Captain Gores’ fight against the trolls at Wirrin Valley, spread themselves among the trees to wait.

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Chapter 6

It took only minutes for the first two trolls to rush recklessly into the stand. Koschat swung his club into the face of the first, then swiped his sawtooth blade across the throat, heavily protected by folds of leather. When the troll merely staggered back, Koschat rammed the blade into the base of his throat through the leather, and the troll fell, spurting noxious blood.

The second troll, seeing the ambush, roared. He reached out to grab Goss, who turned to stone. Before the troll could stomp him, Ori and Tourse pulled him to safety behind a tree. Meanwhile, Teschner looped a garrote over the troll’s head from behind and rapidly twisted it until he crumpled.

The other two trolls leapt out at them from a different point of entry, but were floundering in the darkness. By now, Efran and his men were hampered by it as well. The trolls could attack any figure nearby and be assured it was an enemy, but the Landers had to take care not to damage their own.

The suffocating jasmine helped here, as the only ones gasping and choking were trolls. So Efran’s men quietly slipped up on them with clubs raised, but they had to make sure that a blow landed on the head for it to be effective. Meanwhile, Goss was throwing himself again and again into the nearest tree until the stone veneer on his arm began cracking. Then merely flexing his arm burst the veneer off it altogether. Connor found him and held him still to break the stone off his head.

After ineffectively clubbing the third troll on both shoulders, Stephanos hit his head with such force that both club and skull broke apart. But the fourth troll grabbed him, turning him to stone. Glimpsing the gnarly hand coming, however, Stephanos shot an arm around him to catch him in a stone vise.

So Shane leaned over to grab the troll by his wiry hair only and jerk down, breaking his neck. But then Shane had to quickly shed his black clothes to keep the lice from crawling all over him.

The men stood still, panting. “One, two, three, four,” Tourse counted. “Isn’t that all?” he asked. Efran took off his hood to peer into the darkness, listening. While the rest of the men helped Goss and Stephanos break out of their stone shells, Efran moved away to better hear quiet sounds around them.

His head jerked up as a ring of fire erupted around him, completely enclosing him with the fifth troll—the leader. The smart one. Kraken ran out of the trees to rear before the flames as if to jump them, but they roared up so that he fell over.

Efran's men gathered around the ring, shouting. By design, they could see and hear over the fire as the great troll spread his black lips in a grin. "And this is Efran, from Wirrin Valley. These hands are your Captain's." He fondled the second pair of shriveled hands fastened in a chain of gold draped across his broad chest.

The men cried out in anger beyond the flames. Efran did not look at the ghastly tokens; he would not allow himself to be provoked. This battle was ordained. *Lord God, you brought me here for this. Show me what to do; show me how.*

The troll said, "So your men will know, I am Wikt, who killed your captain. And I will kill you." This looked likely, for all he had to do was push Efran into the flames. Not only would he turn to stone, he would be baked alive in his shell.

Sure enough, Wikt swiped at him. Efran jumped back almost into the flames, feeling the searing heat. He fell forward to scuttle on his hands and feet around the troll. Realizing that he needed to keep Wikt talking to distract him, Efran said, "Then you'll burn alive as well." Sweat was dripping down his head. The fire was hot, and getting hotter.

Wikt laughed, "I call up the fire, and when you are on fire, I put it down. Then I call it up around your men. You all die." Again he reached out to lumber toward Efran, trapped against the wall of fire.

Efran fainted right and then dove left. Wikt's right hand swung toward him, and his claw brushed Efran's black shirt, shredding the odor cloak. But since Wikt's claws didn't touch Efran's skin, he was unchanged. He rolled to gain his feet, facing Wikt.

As the two circled each other, the men tried to breach the flames, but couldn't even get close. Buckets of brook water thrown on the ring merely evaporated to steam. Someone tried to throw a club over the fire to the Captain, but the flames reached up to incinerate it.

"How did you get the power to ring fire?" Efran gasped. Talking to delay the inevitable wouldn't work for long; the ring was closing in on itself, getting smaller and smaller.

"Trollbrunnen give it me," Wikt said, spreading in pride. "Your Lands will meet him soon. He comes to you." Again he swept a hand toward Efran, who fell back so that his head grazed the fire. In scampering away, he rolled in the dirt to snuff his smoking hair. Then he scrambled to his feet while his brain worked.

The men beyond the ring were silent: Wikt did not know that Trollbrunnen had come to the Lands to die there? At that moment, Efran knew he would win this battle, and he knew how.

Wrapping his arms around himself, Efran turned his head slightly and plowed into Wikt's chest straight on as hard as he could. The impact sent them both into the ring of fire. While Efran turned to stone as he fell, Wikt landed under him, trapped. There he was ignited.

Since part of Efran's stone head and shoulder had landed outside the ring, his men were able to pull him completely free of it. Wikt—his wiry head, his tunic, his battle tokens—was all aflame. His incapacitation prevented him from putting down the flames, but as he burned, they lowered of their own. While the men were otherwise engaged, the ring of fire died out.

Tourse and Krall ran over with buckets of water from the brook to cool the stone around the Captain, dousing him thoroughly so that the water hissed up. Meanwhile, the others were breaking the stone off him in chunks. As they uncovered his head, he breathed, "Woo! Hot."

“Are you burned, Captain?” Connor asked.

“No, just—rare,” Efran gasped. The others laughed in shaken relief. Kraken came over to snuffle his singed hair, and Efran reached up a dusty hand to stroke his nose.

“All right.” He stood shakily, with help, to kick off the rest of the stone cover. “We need to catch that carriage; make sure they’re . . . well away.”

“Medium well, Captain?” Tourse asked blandly.

Amid the groans, Efran said, “Well done, Tourse.”

More groaning. They all had to wipe their faces for a minute, then Efran laid a hand on Tourse’s shoulder and said, “Mount up.”

“Yes, Captain.” This they did in great satisfaction. As the moon rose to illumine the clearing, they glanced back to see the remains of the smart troll, Wikt, die down to smoldering ashes in a ring of blackened grass. A light breeze blew the fumes of his cremation away.

On Kraken, Efran raised his tear-streaked face to the starry sky. The others paused on their horses as he choked out, “God of heaven, again You have saved us. May Captain Gores and his Red Regiment ride beside You in glory.” And the men watched a meteor streak across the night pavilion.

Efran lowered his head, breathing, “We’re done here.” The nine spurred to a gentle lope.

Shortly thereafter, as they were passing a favored stopping point on the northbound road, the party reined up at a familiar whistle. Two men on watch, Conte and Detler, ran out into the road, arms waving. So the nine turned back to enter the campsite while the banked fire was rekindled. Including the occupant of the carriage, everyone woke at the appearance of the Captain and his party.

While the erstwhile Surchatain climbed down from the cushioned seat, the seven soldiers that had brought him here clustered around their Captain to hear about the defeat of the trolls. Efran, looking for food and drink, let his men tell it. But he paused as Ashe’s father came into the circle of firelight. “Hello, Escarra. I’m glad to see that you made it this far. Five more trolls are dead. Do you know if there are others?”

“Five. You got the leader, too? This Wikt?” Escarra asked.

“Yes, and I lost some hair doing it.” Efran reached back to feel the metal plate under the skin and thinned hair on the back of his head.

Escarra said, “Oh, I wish to hear it all. That’s—astounding. He was a bad one. But, as for more, I don’t rightly know. I never saw others.” He looked unsteady, so Truro sat him beside the fire, handing him a mild ale.

Efran also received a plate of mash, which he devoured, and a mild ale, which he downed in almost one draught. “Have you seen Sirs Ditson and Nutbin?” he asked those around him.

Arne replied, “Yes, Cap’n; they stopped to check on us; then went out to see that the road was clear. Now, sir, it’d be grand to hear about yer snuffin’ the bad un.” Efran glanced up in amusement at the rebuke, but kept quiet so the others could relate what they saw. The specifics were hazy to him now.

When everyone lapsed into exhausted silence, Efran lay down where he was. “Whoever can stay awake, stand guard. We’ll get back to the Lands some time tomorrow.” And he was out. Once Kraken was unburdened of his saddle and bridle, the men had to make room for him to lie down beside his human.

Arne and Beardall took the next watch while the rest of them stretched out around the Captain. Escarra also lay down among them, rather than in the carriage. But he did not sleep for a while. In disbelieving wonder, he looked up at the stars through the treetops.

A few men woke at daybreak, October 21st, to begin pulling together gear for their departure. Efran woke shortly thereafter, bleary eyed. Then he got up to wash in the same brook downstream of where they had stopped south of Eurus. Kraken followed him to drink and play in it as well.

Within another hour they were southbound again. But Escarra did not want to ride in the isolation of the carriage; instead, he asked to sit in the driver’s seat to watch and listen. So the men agreeably loaded up the carriage with their provisions and gear while Escarra sat between Arne and Teschner. The latter was needed to answer questions about the Captain, the faeries, the Abbey Lands, and their battles with the trolls. Arne could have answered many of these questions, but Teschner was more articulate and Arne enjoyed hearing it all again as he drove the carriage southward.

When they approached the old stone bridge late in the morning, the wall gates’ alarm bell began ringing in welcome. Escarra sat up to gape at the white fortress on the hill, as all first-time visitors did. Although the great tree on the rooftop obscured the bell tower, he knew it must be there, for he heard the rooftop bells trilling among the brassy clanging of the gates’ bell.

A crowd began gathering at the gates; Kraken, snorting, loped ahead of the carriage to lead the party. Efran watched Minka ride down Main on Rose, and the faerie trees on either side of the gates burst into blossom, showing off hundreds of small, white nutmeg-scented flowers.

Escarra almost stood from the seat when he saw Ashe running down the sidewalk toward the gates. “Whoa, now, hold on,” Arne remonstrated, pushing him back down with a beefy hand. “Yer son’ll appreciate yer arriving untrampled.”

“Yes, sir,” Escarra gasped. Teschner grinned at Arne’s preening at the respect.

The crowd of a hundred, at least, barely made room for the carriage and mounted men to enter the gates. Efran and his party saluted the Commander, who stood on the steps of Barracks A to watch in satisfaction. Minka clasped her hands to see her husband well and whole while the object of their mission was attempting to climb down from the high seat to his son, bouncing beside the carriage.

When Escarra hit the ground, he grabbed his son by his shoulders to shake him, crying, “You did it, Ashe!”

His son laughed, “No, Father, I’ve just been waiting for you here! Just waiting!”

Many more soldiers and observers began pouring down from the hilltop to create a roadblock at the main gates, so regular traffic had to be routed to the smaller northeastern gates. Efran dropped from Kraken just in time to catch Minka, who had thrown herself at him, heedless as usual. She wasn’t crying, only exulting, “Oh, Efran, you came through for us again, as always, only you’re not even hurt!”

She kissed him vehemently while bystanders smiled, then she pulled back to say, “Now I know that—” She broke off again with a quizzical look. “What happened to your hair?”

There was a burst of laughter around them, and he hugged her tightly. “Minka notices everything.”

She was trying to respond when Gabriel said, “Commander Wendt wishes to know if you could stop by the conference room for a chat, Captain.”

“Yes,” Efran said, looking back to the carriage. Escarra stood beside it embracing his son, and both looked to be crying and talking at the same time. “Almost like me and Minka,” he murmured, then said, “Yes, we need Escarra and Ashe, Ryal, DeWitt, Estes, and—who else? Ah, let’s get Connor and Tourse, who were with me, and Conte, who drove the carriage partway. And the Captains, of course. I need commendations for everyone who came. Oh, and Sirs Ditson and Nutbin did a right professional job of extraction, as Minka knew they would.” He smiled down at her, and she glowed at him.

“We’ll get out the invitations, Captain. And an early midday meal, perhaps?” Gabriel asked.

“Yes, definitely,” Efran said, attempting to smooth back the singed ends of his hair.

Seeing that, Minka ran her hand over his head, murmuring, “It’s been *burned*. What—?” Feeling the back of his head, she turned him forcibly by the shoulder so she could look at it. “Efran!”

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Chapter 7

Efran leaned down to look Minka in the eye. “Aren’t I all right?” he demanded. She grudgingly nodded, so he said, “Then what do you care what my hair looks like? It’s not spikes, is it?”

“No,” she said warily.

“So there.” He straightened in pursed-lip victory while she wondered if she’d been conned.

Escarra finally made his way over to Efran through the crowd to grope for his hand in an attempt to shake it. He began, “Captain Efran, I am—am—”

Efran glanced at Ashe standing beside him, about to burst. Disliking scenes, Efran said, “We’re very pleased to have you here, Escarra, you and Ashe. My Commander wants an accounting, so please both of you come on into the conference room here.”

Nudging them toward Barracks A, Efran found their way blocked by a great black body. So he stroked Kraken’s neck. “Look, you’re still geared up. Go get all that leather off; get yourself groomed and fed, and I’ll come look for you.”

After pausing to snuffle Escarra, who patted his nose fearfully, Kraken turned toward the barracks stables, which were nearer the present location of his human than the hilltop stables. Also, he could still break out of the barracks stalls.

With Minka in hand, Efran led his guests into the conference room, where the summoned were beginning to gather. There was a lot of chatter as the attendees sat themselves around the long table and looked up at mess helpers bringing in plates and ales.

Wendt finally said, “All right, everyone, thank you for coming. I’ll make introductions, but first I’d like to acknowledge the indispensable help of our Abbey Lands faeries Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin.” He paused, but they did not appear. So he looked questioningly to Minka. “Ah, Lady Minka, do you know—?”

“What?” she said, startling up to look at a point over Captain Chee’s head. “Oh. All right. Commander, they say they are very grateful to have been given the opportunity to serve, and appreciate your—appreciation, but, they don’t wish to detract from the performance of the other men, especially Captain Efran’s heroism in defeating Wikt in the ring of fire.” She said that last part carefully, studying her husband.

He glanced down to remind her, “Am I all right?”

“Yes,” she admitted darkly. “Just don’t do it again.”

“I’ll try not to,” he conceded.

“Very well,” Wendt said, amused. He went around the table making introductions, but had to allow a few minutes for Ryal and Escarra to express their gratitude for this long-awaited meeting. Then Wendt said, “Well, then, Captain Efran, you have the floor. Tell us what happened.”

Efran deliberately looked off with, “Tourse.”

“Yes, Captain,” Tourse said, briefly lowering his head at Efran’s shucking off the task of narration to him. But he gave a succinct account of their actions, including the faeries’ extraction of Escarra from the palace. Tourse paused to tell the former Surchatain, “We won’t take time right now, but we’ll want your observations about everything you saw.”

“Yes, of course,” Escarra said. Beside him, Ashe just sat and breathed in gratification.

So Tourse covered their fight with the first four trolls, and then the Captain’s unexpected challenge in the ring of fire. “He called himself Wikt. He claimed to remember the Captain, and claimed credit for killing Captain Gores at Wirrin Valley. He may have; he probably was there. But those weren’t the Captain’s hands on his chain,” Tourse told Efran.

“How do you know?” Efran asked quietly.

“I bound his body to return him to Westford,” Tourse said. Efran nodded, closing his eyes.

Tourse sat back to continue, “Interesting that he claimed to have received the gift of ringing fire from the Trollbrunnen, and that he was on his way to us,” he told the Commander. “Wikt may very well have received it as he said, but, I am skeptical for no reason other than that Wikt did not know the Trollbrunnen had already visited us, and died doing it. The—imparting of such a gift usually comes with a mental connection.”

“Yes,” Wendt said, and several others concurred.

As Tourse went on to describe the Captain’s battle with Wikt in the ring of fire, Minka hunched down in Efran’s

side. He draped an arm over her. And when Tourse described his knocking Wikt into the fire, she covered her head. The table was silent as Tourse related how they were able to drag the Captain out and break him free while Wikt burned.

Minka sat up, then. “That was the only way to get out alive,” she whispered.

“Yes,” Efran said.

“How did you know?” she asked.

“It was shown to me. I saw it as though watching it in the Hall of Memories,” Efran said, studying her affectionately. She nodded, exhaling.

Following, Conte briefly related their taking Escarra in the carriage out of the hickory stand before the trolls arrived. They met no other trolls or aggressors on the way to their designated stopping place, where the Captain and his men arrived later. For such a dangerous task, it went quite smoothly. And for that, Efran credited Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin. His men credited him.

Connor said, “If Wikt had killed the Captain, we would have followed, then Wikt would have tracked the carriage to do away with the rest of us—and take Escarra back to Eurus.” The poor man shuddered, and Ashe put an arm around his father’s shoulders.

“So, another successful mission, Captain,” Wendt said. Efran looked off with moist eyes at his father’s praise. The Commander continued, “My question is, are there more trolls?”

Escarra looked blank. “Those five were the only ones I ever saw, sir.”

“So we don’t know,” Wendt acknowledged. “Well, there’s much more I want to know, but I think we need to let our guests settle in. DeWitt, can we simply provide Escarra and Ashe room and board at Firmin’s for the time being?”

“Yes, of course,” DeWitt said.

“And tip money for meals,” Efran added.

Estes smiled. “Yes, Efran, we’ll see that Ionadi and Lilou are taken care of.” Efran glanced at him in acknowledgment.

And that was it. Efran received the requisite shoulder pats for a job well done, then Minka climbed up on Rose and Efran took Kraken bareback up the switchback to the fortress.

Arriving on the hilltop, Minka relinquished Rose to the stables; Efran slid off Kraken to walk with her around the western side of the fortress to the back grounds. Kraken followed, of course.

The children thronged their adoptive parents, demanding to know if he had taken care of whatever it was that he needed to do. Efran, distracted in watching Joshua toddle over to him almost as fast as the bigger kids, bent to pick him up and bounce him on his arm. He said, “Yes, we brought Ashe’s notary father down to keep Ryal company, and killed a few bad trolls.”

Alcmund complained, “Efran, we haven’t been down to see our trolls in weeks and weeks! We need to see how

they're doing!" The other children jumped up and down around him, joining in this demand.

Exhaling, he looked at Minka, who said, "Well, you *did* mention trolls."

Accepting responsibility for this slip of the tongue, Efran put out a call for off-duty men to accompany them. Shortly, four presented themselves: Routh, Mohr, Javier, and Salk, who had been warding Joshua this afternoon. Efran sent word up to Estes and DeWitt that he and Minka were taking the children to the play hut, then they set off around the western side of the fortress again. Efran put Minka on Kraken bareback to walk beside her with Joshua on his arm.

As they walked down the switchback, Hassie cried, "Oh, I see Jongitud's babies playing around their nest! Can't we go look at them?" And the other children forgot about the trolls to express support for this suggestion.

"No, no—not till Mother gives her permission," Efran said, still rattled by the memory of her claws descending on Minka when she was holding one of those babies. "So, if you're not interested in going to see the trolls anymore—" The children corrected him loudly, and they resumed their trek down the switchback and up Main.

Exiting the wall gates, Efran told the guards, "We'll be at the play hut"—nodding to the unseen hut on the other side of the Passage. The guards saluted in response.

On the way, Elwell asked dubiously, "You're not going to hurt *our* trolls, are you, Efran?"

"Oh, no—our trolls have been a big help, actually," Efran assured him.

Toby reminded Elwell, "Efran already told them they can stay there. He won't go back on his word." Elwell accepted this reassurance.

They crossed over the new bridge spanning the Passage and went down the dirt path to the playground gates, standing partly open. Efran pushed open the gates, and they looked into the silent, empty grounds.

The children gazed in desolation while Efran went to the door of the hut to push it open. Minka slid down from Kraken to follow, looking under his arm. The cooking fire in the center of the hut was cold; the pot over it empty. But Minka looked at some trollish gear sitting up against one wall.

The children and bodyguards crowded into the doorway. Jera cried, "Our trolls are gone!"

"Where did they go?" Chorro asked in dismay.

"We hurt their feelings," Ivy said, eyeing her brother in accusation. Noah raised his shoulders innocently.

Minka said thoughtfully, "They had something to do."

"Why do you say that?" Efran asked. Joshua laid his head on his father's shoulder.

"You see all the things they left," she said, going over to pick up some old, dented tin plates and forks missing a few tines. "Oh, Efran—they're collecting dishes to share their dinners with us."

"I hope not," he winced.

She looked slightly pained at the prospect of having to turn down a direct invitation. "It's the thought that

counts.” She replaced the dinnerware where she had found it.

Calix asked, “Do you think they’ll come back?”

“Yes, I think so,” Minka said. She went over to pat the patch in the wattle-and-daub wall. “They’ve done such a nice job fixing things up.”

“All right, then, we’ll check again later.” Efran led the children back out, closing the playground gates behind them. The children showed no interest in staying here to play without the trolls. Efran started to put Joshua down with the intention of lifting Minka back up on Kraken, but she took his arm instead, wanting to walk with him. So Kraken had to follow them riderless.

Reentering the gates to Main Street, Efran told one of the guards, Tiras, to let the Commander know that the play-hut trolls had gone off to do something. As the children’s soldiers herded them into a manageable line on the sidewalk, Hassie said, “Since we can’t see the trolls today, we might as well ask Jonguitud to see his babies.”

Fearing that Jonguitud would accommodate them, Efran said, “We’ll take you to Froggatt’s instead. Each child can spend up to ten pieces for a toy.” The children cheered, running ahead to the new location of Froggatt’s Indispensable Everyday Needs right behind Lowry’s. Their bodyguards ran after them, except for Javier, whom Efran sent to Barracks A to get at least four royals.

With the bodyguards supervising the children’s invasion of Froggatt’s, Efran stopped outside on the sidewalk. Joshua, worn out from trying to keep up with the big kids, was almost asleep on his shoulder. Minka paused outside the shop with them. Studying his vague scowl, she murmured, “Efran?”

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Chapter 8

“Yes, I’m . . . wondering what the trolls are up to. Why they left the hut,” Efran murmured.

Minka glanced off. “You don’t suspect them of anything, do you?” She wanted everyone to be loyal to him.

“No, not at all,” he said. “I just want to know why. They can’t readily leave a message for us.”

“Maybe our faerie scouts can find them,” she suggested.

He considered that, then said, “Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin, I’d like a word with you, please.” When they did not appear promptly as usual, he repeated in concern, “Sir Ditson? Sir Nutbin?”

They finally did appear, sitting disconsolately on the windowsill of Froggatt’s. Ditson, hat in hand, said, “Yes, Lord Efran. We are here for your discipline.” Nutbin was drooping so, he appeared to be just empty squirrel skin.

Minka’s mouth dropped open in dismay; Efran asked, “What? Discipline for what?”

Still unable to raise his face, Ditson said, “For our failure to alert you to the fifth troll, the most consequential one, who very nearly caused your death, and that of all the others, and ours, and the Lands itself.”

His inconsolable grief made Minka cry, “Oh, no, Sir Ditson!”

But Efran laughed, “Not at all. You did exactly what I told you to do, and did it well. Your bringing Escarra right away made for our success.”

The two drooping heads raised up minimally. “Truly, Lord Efran?” Ditson asked.

“Yes, of course. If you had dallied about long enough to find out there *was* a fifth troll, that would have thrown off the timing for everything that came after. I told you to bring Escarra, and that’s all. Wikt surprising me with the ring of fire just insured that I was able to kill him,” Efran said. Minka nodded earnestly, and the faeries brightened.

“But I will correct you on one point,” Efran said, so the three others attended warily. “Don’t ever dissect a successful mission, for you can’t know everything that made it so. Just do your part, which you did.”

“You are truly gracious, Lord Efran,” Ditson said, sweeping his top hat in a bow, while Nutbin’s tail filled out in exuberance.

Efran said, “No, just experienced. Also, I have another assignment for you—”

Nutbin burst out, “Speak and we obey, Lord Efran.”

At the point of attempting to do that, Efran caught himself from showing impatience, and said, “Our friends the trolls have left the play hut for some reason. I’d like to know why, and where they are.”

“We shall discover this with all haste, Lord Efran.” Ditson bowed, and they vanished.

After the moment required to adjust to their rapid turnabout, Minka exhaled. Taking Efran’s free arm, she said, “It’s so good of you to encourage them.”

“No, not really. I’m just experienced with failures, like I said. Or, was trying to say.” He turned as children began emerging with their bounty from Froggatt’s to show him, thus waking Joshua.

The following day, October 22nd, Efran was summoned to Ryal’s while Minka was with Ella, Rondi, Soames, the Librarian and numerous soldiers in Law class. This summons was surprising, certainly unusual, so Efran responded at once, taking Kraken down bareback. With no reins to tie him off to the post, Efran told him, “I don’t know how long I’ll be; go get you water at the barracks trough, but if you get in trouble, you’ll have to get geared up from now on.”

Threats, threats, Kraken snorted, trotting off. Efran expelled a breath in exasperation, then mounted the steps to enter the shop under the firmly attached bell, which tinkled as expected. Ryal and Giardi were both attending customers, but Ryal glanced up to nod at him. Complacently, he leaned against the wall to wait.

When Ryal had finished with his customer, he gave the form to Giardi to file, and she smiled at Efran. He did his best to make her laugh, but she was immovable when helping a customer. So Efran looked at Ryal, who was gesturing, “In the back room, please.” Efran got up off the wall to follow, and Ryal closed the door behind them.

“Have a seat, Efran. Thank you for coming so promptly—as you can tell, I wasn’t expecting it. But I spent

several hours yesterday talking with Escarra, and thought you should hear what I gleaned,” Ryal said, a little distracted.

Efran sat at the small table to wait quietly while Ryal sat and sorted his thoughts. “First, Escarra is not a doddering old man. Besides the fact that he’s twenty-two years my junior, he quite capably took over for Parsifal when he became too impaired to do the job. It was something like what you experienced with Lightfoot, only, Parsifal was not poisoned, he just became senile, as happens with us old men—”

“Not you, not ever,” Efran said, expressionless.

“Thank you; I pray not,” Ryal acknowledged. “Regardless, the point is, Escarra carried on the notary work through the troll invasions—first, because Gopnik loved the ornate proclamations, which only Escarra could produce, with Parsifal’s signature. This signature alone Gopnik and his Grand Councilor Foulsham considered essential proof of the trolls’ rule, so made him sign everything—nonsense decrees requiring the decapitation of all chickens, wish lists of taxes paid in livestock, and so on.”

Ryal paused in aggravation, and Efran smiled slightly. “When Parsifal could no longer control the quill to sign, Escarra began to forge his signature on the documents because their lives depended on it. But I will tell you he confessed this to me at once, and was grieved to have done it.”

“Makes no difference,” Efran said with a brief shake of his head. “The whole court was illegitimate.”

“True,” Ryal said. “And the dancing mania cleared out those trolls, as you know. Strangely, Escarra and Ashe were only briefly affected. Escarra said that when Ashe came dancing into the shop, Escarra became afflicted as well. But then he said, ‘I’ve got no time for this nonsense,’ and gripped the counter until he made himself stop. Then Ashe stopped as well.”

Efran groaned, throwing back his head. “Had I only found my way to your counter, that would’ve saved me hours of nonsense before Kraken and Toby found me.”

“Perhaps not. Giardi and I only stopped when you did,” Ryal replied. Efran waved, and Ryal continued, “Regardless, as you know, troll invasions in and around Eurus continued sporadically through all that. Parsifal was taken, but Escarra believes he died of a heart attack, because afterward, Escarra found his body simply dumped in the street. If there’s sufficient meat, trolls disdain old people and skinny people, you see.”

Efran nodded in comprehension. Ryal went on, “So Escarra buried him in the backyard of the shop, in the garden that the old man loved. Incidentally, Escarra and Ashe evaded the trolls simply by hiding under the counter whenever they came in. The trolls would run around the shop, looking in every room, but never thought to look behind the counter.”

“So we need to set up notary counters at the front gates for the next troll invasion,” Efran said thoughtfully.

Ryal bypassed the quip with, “Hopefully, after the purge and the killing of Trollbrunnen, they’re played out. Escarra said he did hear reports of numerous trolls returning north to the Fastnesses.”

“As the prophet told them to do,” Efran said.

“Yes. So, that brings us to Gyldenbollokes and his Council, who took the only notary left to set him up as Surchatain so they could finish off what generations of corrupt rulers began and the trolls continued,” Ryal said.

Efran glanced aside, squinting. “What do you mean?”

Ryal leaned forward on the table. “We don’t know what state they’re in after you relieved them of their figurehead, but Escarra and Ashe both believe Eurus is at the breaking point of civil war. The small merchants and working class are done being ruled by the wealthy and corrupt. The day before yesterday, Escarra watched from his second-floor window as groups of men began gathering with arms around the palace, and realized that his only hope was to escape at once. Then he saw Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin at his window. Apparently, your faeries breaking Escarra out, followed by angry trolls, interrupted a coup on the cusp of overthrowing the regime in power.”

They stared at each other for a moment, then Efran said, “I’d better go tell the Commander.”

“Yes. And whatever you do, stay out of Eurus,” Ryal said.

With a nod of assent, Efran got up and left.

Exiting the shop, Efran started down Main, whistling for Kraken. Then he saw the Commander walking up Main from the barracks, evidently heading home—the chapel next door to Ryal’s—to have the midday meal with his wife, Marguerite. Wendt saw him and gestured to his home. Kraken passed him loping up Main. Instead of stopping for pedestrians in the crosswalks, he just darted behind them.

Efran then looked up the main switchback to see Minka standing at the courtyard gates, looking down at him. As Kraken gained his side, snuffling him, Efran patted his neck and pointed up the switchback. “Go get Minka; bring her down to Auntie’s.”

Snorting, Kraken began loping up the switchback as Minka began descending in a crab walk—the fastest way to get down without falling. When she saw Kraken ascending without Efran, she paused. And when Kraken reached her, he went down on his front knees to indicate what she was to do. She glanced down at Efran, who stood watching, then she grasped Kraken’s mane to climb on his back.

He turned on the switchback to begin loping down again. Efran stepped forward in concern, but Minka had both hands clenched in his mane, with her legs high and tight on his shoulders. So Efran waited where he was.

Wendt drew up beside him, and Efran glanced over to say, “Ryal’s been telling me what he heard from Escarra yesterday, and instructed me to tell you. Go on home—if you wish, Commander. Minka and I’ll be right there.” He had to correct himself when telling his Commander what to do. Efran wanted to continue regarding his rank, but sometimes Wendt didn’t make it easy.

“Good plan, Captain,” Wendt said, resuming his walk home. Efran watched him for a minute, then turned as Kraken stopped beside him so abruptly that Minka fell off. Fortunately, she fell right onto Efran, who caught her without difficulty.

“Oh,” she gasped lightly as he held her. “That was the scariest thing I’ve ever done—recently,” she gulped.

He put her down lightly on her feet. “Oh, really? What have you done that was more scary?” He put an arm around her shoulders to walk her toward the chapel. Kraken complacently walked on his other side.

She paused to think before deciding, “Nothing.”

“Nothing? Not even being turned into a spider?” he asked.

“No, because I didn’t know I was a spider. That was one of the more heartbreaking things I’ve ever done—to watch you grieve me when I was standing right there—but it wasn’t scary,” she said, analyzing.

“It was for me, especially to see you all made up as a faerie,” he said. “Now that I know you’re faerie, it’s not nearly so scary because you make a point to act like you’re not.”

She almost stopped walking. “What do you mean? I’m acting like I always act. I told you that nothing would change, because I’m the same,” she said, distressed.

“Yes, you are,” he said, conciliatory. Then he changed the subject. “Ryal told me what he learned from talking to Escarra yesterday, and instructed me to tell the Commander. You probably saw that he’s on his way home, so I’m going to tell you and Auntie as well.”

“Give me the short version,” she said.

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Chapter 9

Efran told Minka, “We got Escarra out right before there was to be an attack on the palace. He was sitting at his second-floor window watching armed men come together when Ditson and Nutbin showed up. They saved his life and interrupted the attack long enough to get him away.”

She looked up at him with wide blue eyes. “Do you know what happened after that?”

He shook his head, lips tight. “Only that the last of the Villalobos died in a hickory stand a few miles south of Eurus.”

“Yes, I know about that,” she said, twisting a hand in his shirt, as she did when anxious.

“Hush, now; that’s all taken care of.”

When they arrived at the chapel doors, Hartshough opened them at once. “Good afternoon, Lord Efran, Lady Minka. The Commander and Lady Marguerite request your presence at the dining table.”

“Thank you, Hartshough.” Efran led Minka in, then paused at the trees which had spread aggressively around the hall. “What happened?” Efran asked. They could only get glimpses of the table for the trees.

“Only that Bozzelli stopped by, hoping to use the chapel for another performance, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said.

“Oh, no. Who now?” Efran asked. He nodded to Wendt and Marguerite as he pulled out the chair at her right for Minka. She hugged her auntie before sitting herself.

“A group called the Delightful Death-Defying Dancers, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said.

Minka stared while Marguerite laughed. Efran paused halfway down to his chair to utter, “No.”

“So the chapel faeries have replied, Lord Efran. Shall I bring your plates, then?” he asked Marguerite.

“Yes, Hartshough, thank you,” she said.

Efran took up the ale sitting at his place; Minka had her preferred mineral water. The Commander said, “We’re sitting here to make sure our voices don’t carry outside. What’ve you learned, Efran?”

“A lot,” he exhaled, replacing the ale. Over the next half hour, as they ate, he related all that Ryal had told him. He ended, “I shouldn’t be surprised, because the unrest in Eurus has been simmering for years. But they never had the leadership to do anything about it. Now they do, it seems. I wish I knew who or what is leading them, but I don’t want to risk any men, sending them into that cauldron.”

“No, we need to wait for reports to filter down. More refugees will come,” Wendt said.

Minka gasped, and they all looked at her. She was staring at Marguerite: “You’re wearing earrings!”

“Yes,” Marguerite laughed, touching the small beaded loops. “They were a gift from Faciane, and I couldn’t bear to refuse them. She’s been working with Dallarosa making jewelry.” She did not add that Faciane, her ex-daughter-in-law, had stopped working at Averno’s because Verlice continually dropped by in his fancy suits from Elvey’s.

Touching the small gold hoops at her own ears, Minka said in distress, “I keep forgetting to change mine out when I have fabulous earrings from the Treasury. And the cuff!” She looked at her bare arm in dismay.

Efran sat back, laughing. “Wear them or not; it’s all right. Minka? I didn’t give them to you to make you feel guilty.”

“I know. But they’re so pretty.” She looked again at Marguerite’s earrings, then her face, which comforted her.

At that time, Hartshough opened the front door again, this time to let in Justinian. After weaving his way around the trees, he stopped by the table. “Hello, all.” They greeted him, and paused, as he looked uncharacteristically serious. Settling a pensive gaze on Efran, he said, “May I talk to you for a moment?”

“Yes,” Efran said, rising from the table. Justinian nodded to the stairs, which they ascended at a trot. Minka rose slightly from her chair to see the top of the door to Justinian’s room open and close again, but only partway.

Minka sat back down to forcefully dig into the apple cobbler which Hartshough had placed in front of her. “Oh, this is wonderful! You’re such a wonderful cook, Hartshough!” she called after him.

He appeared at the kitchen door to bow. “Thank you, Lady Minka.” Then he returned to his stove.

“Yes, it’s truly wonderful.” Her eyes flicked up the stairs, but she returned her attention to the wonderful cobbler in front of her. Marguerite and Wendt continued eating quietly. “He is such a treasure,” Minka asserted as if contradicting a contrary opinion. Her large eyes glanced up again. “I’m certainly not going to eavesdrop. That would be shameful.” She took a drink of water and finished off the cobbler while half the serving of meat still sat on her plate.

She sat staring at her empty bowl, then suddenly rose from the table. “Excuse me,” she said mechanically, turning to quietly run up the stairs. The couple remaining at the table laughed silently.

In shame and guilt, Minka edged up along the wall to the crack in the door. Justinian was asking Efran, “When did you know that you were in love with Minka?”

“When?” Efran looked back two and a half years. “In the henhouse. Right away, that first day. She was so—awkward and guileless trying to seduce me. I wanted nothing to do with her.”

“That’s rather contradictory, brother,” Justinian said darkly.

Still looking off, Efran smiled. “I didn’t want to sully her. She was so different from anyone else I knew. Just pure love.”

“But you knew you wanted to marry her?” Justinian asked, probing for what he wanted to hear.

“No. Oh, no,” Efran said, raising his brows in contradiction. “I did *not* want to marry her.”

“Why not?” Justinian asked, perplexed.

“She was young, too young. She rode all the way to Eurus to bring back her birth certificate from Marguerite, proving that she was of age. But what she proved to me was that she was only days into her majority. Too, too young,” Efran said, shaking his head.

Justinian was almost swaying by now. “Please tell me that you’re glad you married her.”

Efran looked at him. “Do you know what it’s like, to lose your heart?”

“I think so,” Justinian said.

“No, you can’t help but know. You wake up one morning to find a vital part of you has left your body. I didn’t know what had happened. I looked all around for this—this piece that gave me a reason to live, then found it wrapped up inside her. If she even turned away from me, I had to reach out to pull her back. You might as well ask me if I’m glad to be breathing, or eating, or making love. Yes, I am, but only if she’s there with me,” Efran said.

“That, I understand,” Justinian said.

Efran groaned, “This isn’t about Vories, is it?”

“No, no,” Justinian said. He went on to tell Efran something else, but Minka slipped away from the door to tread carefully back down the stairs.

She reseated herself at the table, then looked up guiltily at Wendt and Marguerite, who were attending her with subdued smiles. Minka inhaled, then said, “Justinian has found someone he wants to marry. He wants Efran to tell him if he’s doing the right thing.”

“That’s encouraging,” Marguerite said.

“Who is it?” Wendt asked.

“I don’t know. I didn’t hear that part. But I’m sure you’ll know shortly,” Minka said. *Everything he said is true;*

I am awkward and silly. Yet somehow, it doesn't matter. All those other poised, beautiful women tried to make him love them, but he had to wait for me.

Looking down at her plate, she picked up her fork to try to eat enough meat to satisfy him.

Shortly, the two men came down the stairs again. Efran reseated himself at the table while Justinian left by the front doors. Glancing up at the veiled curiosity of his companions, Efran said, "Ah, Justinian's fairly sure he's found 'the one,' so, he's probably going to get married. Again."

"Who is it?" Wendt asked again.

Efran winced. "I'd better let him tell you that, Commander." They all looked at Marguerite, who knew. Then Efran checked Minka's plate, fretting, "Can you eat just a little more of the beef? It's very good." She took up her fork to make a determined effort.

About a half-hour later, Efran, Minka, and Wendt were standing to leave when the front doors opened. The three paused upon glimpsing two people walking through the trees toward the table. When Justinian appeared with Faciane on his arm, Marguerite stood in welcome.

Glancing around at them, Justinian said, "And here's everyone who needs to know: this lovely lady has consented to be my wife, for some inexplicable reason. So we've done the deed. Marguerite, thank you for your kind accommodation up till now, but we feel that—"

Marguerite broke in, "Oh, no, Justinian; please, you and Faciane stay here. There are plenty of rooms; only Eryk is upstairs besides you. So you can each have your own room if you like, but you simply must stay. I'm sorry to be brutish about it, but I insist on it, at least until you can't stand it a moment more."

Faciane laughed, "That's very kind of you."

She shot a glance to Justinian, who said, "Never let it be said that I refused a beautiful woman. If you're sure, dear Marguerite, we'll attempt it, but if there is any—awkwardness, we'll—"

"Don't be silly," Marguerite waved. "HARTSHOUGH!—oh, there you are. Please get Eryk to help Faciane move whatever she needs into whatever room she wants. Yes, thank you."

Marguerite watched in satisfaction as Hartshough bowed. "If you will, Lady Faciane, please direct me to the items requiring relocation and we shall have them transported at once."

Justinian said, "Yes, Hartshough, I'll show you." With a peck on Faciane's cheek, Justinian turned out with the butler.

This left Faciane standing awkwardly with the rest of them. Minka came to life: "Oh, congratulations! He's so adorable, you'll love him. I mean, I know you already do, but he's just so much fun to have around. Isn't he, Efran?"

"Ah—yes," he said, caught way off guard. "Yes, he's quite the—life of the—chapel," he somehow finished. Then he bowed awkwardly to Faciane, taking Minka's arm to lead her out. She turned in his grip to wave her fingers at Marguerite and Faciane while Wendt walked out with them.

Safely outside, Efran asked, "How do you feel about that, Commander?"

“Their staying here? That’s fine. Justinian is good at ferreting out information, even when he can’t leave the Lands,” Wendt observed. With Kraken following, they had paused at the corner of Chapel Road and Main.

“Verlice isn’t staying there?” Efran asked, looking back to the chapel.

“No, he’s boarding at Elvey’s, as their, ah, design consultant,” Wendt said.

“All right, then. Everyone’s secure for the moment,” Efran said.

“Where are her sons? Brayan and Arturo?” Minka asked.

Efran looked blank, but Wendt said, “They’re housed in the barracks, as part of Tourse’s security team. I understand that he’s using them, as well as Wiatt and Gastrell, as scouts in surrounding areas—some of the villages get news before we do. Also, Tourse’s men run messages to Featheringham and back.”

“Ah. Good. That frees up the soldiers for guard duty and training,” Efran observed. Wendt concurred, then they parted ways as he returned to the barracks.

When Efran lifted Minka to sit on Kraken’s bare back, she gripped his arm. “Don’t let him run.”

“Run? You mean ‘lope?’” he asked.

“Whatever the fast, bumpy gait is,” she said, still clutching his arm.

“I can ride behind you,” he suggested, smiling.

“Let me down, first,” she ordered. Laughing, he left her on Kraken’s back as he turned the horse toward the switchback. Efran walked down Chapel Road alongside them, a hand on her leg to steady her.

At the intersection of Chapel Road and Main, they heard a woman call, “Efran!”

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Chapter 10

Efran, Minka and Kraken looked over as Windry strode up to him. “I want to see Calix,” she said.

“All right. They should be out of class by now,” Efran said, resuming their walk up the switchback. Kraken was on Efran’s right side while he kept a steadying hand on Minka’s leg. Windry fell in on his left. It had been exactly one month since she had tried to take Calix and Lilou with her to the home of her new husband. Ryal had ruled that Lilou could stay at Firmin’s and Calix at the fortress, as they wanted.

The three of them (and Kraken) progressed up the first two bends silently, then Windry said, “I’m not getting married, after all.”

“All right,” Efran said in disinterest.

“And I’m not here to take Calix away,” she said. Since she couldn’t if she wanted to, Efran said nothing. She added, “I’m just here to visit with him.” Efran had nothing to say to that, either. So she said, “I stopped by Firmin’s to have a bite and see Lilou, and she tried to charge me for my meal!” Her tone was indignant disbelief.

At this, Efran said, “Lilou and Ionadi have to pay for any deadbeats they serve. You’d be making Lilou pay for your food out of her tips.”

“Well, shouldn’t she, since she’s working and all?” Windry asked.

Efran almost stopped on the switchback. “You try that again, and they won’t serve you. You’re the grown-up; you should pay your own way without expecting your child to do it for you.”

“It’s hard making ends meet without a husband,” Windry complained.

“Perhaps you should reconcile with Surley,” Efran said tightly.

“When he beat me?” she asked angrily.

“Stop sleeping around on him,” Efran said.

“How dare you? You’re the one I was sleeping with!” she gasped, and slapped his face.

Efran raised a quick hand to stop the gate guards’ advance, but Kraken half-reared toward her. With a clipped cry, Minka fell off his side away from Efran. But since she was still clutching Kraken’s mane, she landed on her feet.

Efran put a hand on hers, wrapped in horsehair, to see that she was all right. But he turned again to Windry. “I wasn’t the only one. And unless you control yourself better than that, you won’t see Calix at all.”

“You’re not entitled to make ugly remarks,” she sniffed.

“You won’t use me again,” he said flatly. Minka had begun walking up the switchback ahead of them, so he trotted the few steps necessary to catch up with her and take her hand. Because of what she had heard eavesdropping, she allowed it. Kraken walked right at his back. Disgruntled, Windry followed.

They entered the courtyard gates under the stony eyes of the guards, then progressed around the side of the fortress to the back grounds. The children were out here playing their rowdy games. Efran spotted Calix at once, but did not call him. Windry took a while longer to find him.

Then she called, waving, “Calix! Yoo-hoo! Over here!”

Noah alerted Calix to the summons; when he looked, he went still as though in shock. Then he ran over, crying, “I don’t want to leave! Ryal said I could stay!”

Rondi, waiting on a bench for Mathurin to get off duty, turned at what sounded like an attempted abduction. She stood to walk over and watch, so Minka began explaining the situation in whispers.

Efran was shaking his head at Calix. “You don’t have to go anywhere.”

At the same time, Windry was talking over him: "I'm not here to take you, Calix; I'm just here to see you!"

Calix stopped to think about this as the other children came up behind him in support. Then he asked Efran, "What do I have to do?"

"Whatever you want. Nothing," Efran said. At that final word, most of the children ran back to their play.

"All right." Calix turned to begin running back as well.

Windry cried, "Wait, Calix!"

He turned back in exasperation. "What?"

"Come here! I want to talk to you," she said.

He slouched back to her, then stood waiting. Toby, guardian of any endangered child, stood beside him to eye her. Joshua toddled over to Efran, who was standing behind her, and he bent to lift his son to his shoulder.

Windry collected herself to say, "How are you doing, Calix?"

"Fine," he said.

She waited a bit, but when there was no more, she said, "I just wanted to see that you're having fun."

"Yes, I am," he said.

She took several breaths, then asked, "Can you tell me what you're learning?"

He looked up as though calculating a sum. "Reading, lettering, numbers, and the history of Westford."

She looked vaguely confused. "What's important about Westford?"

"A lot," he told her.

"Well, tell me about it," she said.

He glanced back to the play area impatiently. "About what? There's a lot, years and years of it, and I don't have a lot of play time. We have to get chores done before dinner."

"Well, I want to hear all about it," she insisted with a tinge of desperation.

"Efran will tell you. He knows more than anyone," Calix said. Having fulfilled his obligation to talk, he ran back to where the other children were playing. Toby paused to take one last appraising look at her, then returned to their friends as well.

With that, Efran issued a short whistle. Mathurin, who had changed into street clothes after going off duty, veered from Rondi to run up to him, saluting, "Captain."

Noting his street wear, Efran said, "Windry's done here. Please escort her back down. Rondi can help, if you need it." He sent her the briefest glance, but Minka grinned at her.

She blushed and Mathurin said, “Yes, Captain. This way, please, ma’am.” Smiling, he gestured to Windry, but the smile was meant for someone he wasn’t looking at. And when Mathurin and Rondi had walked the woman all the way down to Main, they two went on to Firmin’s. Windry stood on the sidewalk, exhaling in vexation.

On the back grounds, Efran walked Joshua over to Minka, now sitting on one of the benches under the walnut tree. He sat beside her to ask, “Are you all right?”

“Yes. But I’m not riding Kraken bareback anymore. I’m not as good at staying on as you are,” she said.

“That was my fault,” he exhaled. “And you’re going to ask, ‘Efran, why did you have to provoke her like that?’”

“You’re right!” she laughed.

He smiled, watching Joshua clap out the war drums. “When you learn something new, you want to shout it to the world, but especially to—certain relevant people. I told you how I came to realize that she had been lying to me and using me. So, I thought she should hear what I learned, if for no other reason than to know it won’t work on me anymore.”

“That’s good,” she agreed.

Then he groaned, “Oh, then there’s Justinian marrying Verlice’s ex-wife. She’s—at least fifteen years older than he is.”

“Yes, but she’s pretty and not gaudy, without all that makeup,” she noted. Then she turned to look fully at him. “You’re criticizing Justinian for getting involved with an older woman?”

He darted widened eyes to her. “Me? Criticize him? Oh, no—no no. She’ll be good for him. Watch; he’ll settle down being married to her.” Joshua looked dubious, for some reason.

“If you say so,” she said, evaluating him. He bit his lip, contemplating the advantages of keeping his mouth shut.

Over the next several days, Efran and Minka were circumspect about dropping in on Marguerite, what with the newlyweds getting settled in. Remembering Justinian’s hasty and extremely brief marriage to Leila, Efran was particularly wary of interacting with Faciane at all (no, his carrying her on Kraken to the Lands from Wirrin Valley didn’t count). At least he didn’t have a past relationship with her. But—Marguerite’s son did.

At any rate, on October 25th—three days after the couple had married—Minka told Efran that she was going down to see Auntie, and if he wanted to come along, fine. Efran decided that he wanted to come. Anywhere he went, Kraken wanted to come. But Minka refused to get on him bareback again. So Kraken had to get saddled, which he did not want to do. But Efran made it clear that Minka’s wishes took precedence over Kraken’s.

So Kraken got saddled for Minka to ride down. But as long as there was a saddle, she wanted Efran to ride in it so that she could hold on to him from behind, which she liked doing. (He never fell off.) So that’s what they did for the short ride down the new switchback.

It was midmorning when they made it as far as Chapel Road. Before going on, Efran warned her that he didn’t want to stay so long as to be invited for the midday meal, because too much drama took place around the dining table. Minka agreed that this visit would be just a check-in.

They paused on the front walk for Efran to send Kraken around back to let Eryk take off his saddle and bridle. That way, he could roll around in the nice green grass. While Eryk was letting him into the backyard of the chapel, Windry spotted him from Main Street. She had just come out of the notary shop, where she had made a partial payment on her house lease with money borrowed from Lilou.

With a sigh, Windry walked over to the fence. “Hello, Eryk.” He glanced over to nod, but did not come to the fence. So she said, “I owe you an apology. I behaved terribly toward you.”

“What?” he said, frowning in concentration.

She bridled her impatience. Whether because of his poor language skills or his loss of an ear, he was sometimes difficult to talk to. “I said, I’m sorry, Eryk. I treated you badly.” He shrugged, but remained in the yard to pet Kraken.

She tried again. “I fell back into bad habits, which I regret. I especially regret pushing you away. You’re a good man, and I hope that . . . we might talk now and then. I miss you.” She left it there and walked away. Eryk glanced over his shoulder at her departing back, then returned to the house to resume his duties.

Meanwhile, Hartshough had let Efran and Minka in. Hartshough promised that Marguerite would be out immediately, as she already had two visitors waiting. Efran almost stopped to find out who was there before progressing. But by then, they’d come out of the trees to the sitting area to see Verlice and Arbaiza on the divan.

Efran swayed only minimally. Verlice, spreading in another eye-catching suit of Elvey’s, looked up. “Ah. Arbaiza, meet the Lord of the Abbey Lands, Efran. And this is his wife—Maaka. I don’t know if high music is your style, Efran, but Arbaiza is not the type to degrade herself with the simple little ditties that Polonti like—not to generalize, you understand.”

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Chapter 11

After a moment, Efran got out, “I’m sure you’re right. We’ll come back later when—”

At that moment, Hartshough gave entrance to two more people. Efran and Minka turned as Faciane paused upon seeing Verlice. Justinian came up behind her to regard Arbaiza on the divan. Amused, Justinian nodded to Efran, who rolled his eyes.

“Well,” Justinian said, sitting on an arm of a deeply upholstered armchair facing the divan, “I had no idea that our dear Lady Marguerite has introduced the revolutionary concept of daytime soirées. But as that seems to be the case, I’m all in for entertainment. Now, who can we possibly implore to sing for us? Just something simple and relaxing, certainly no need for embellishments or whatnot.”

All eyes looked to Arbaiza. Vividly remembering the cacophony produced when she so much as spoke among these trees, she refused to open her mouth.

Looking upward in deep longing, Justinian sighed, “Is there no one who can but carry a tune in this vast cultural

wasteland?” Arbaiza’s eyes widened to pits of flaming fire in his direction, but he was studying the ceiling beams.

Faciane, having heard about the faerie-induced bedlam with the trees, looked at her ex-husband. “Actually, Verlice has a remarkable voice. He really should have been on stage, and that I can admit now.”

Verlice looked surprised and somewhat abashed. “Why, that’s very generous of you, Faciane.”

“It’s true. The first thing I loved about you was your voice,” she said. There was the sound of a snicker being quashed, and Efran blocked the sight of Minka silently gurgling.

Justinian turned to Faciane in slight pique. “My dear, if you continue to sing your ex-husband’s praises like this, I shall develop deep feelings of inferiority.”

She shrugged in light regret. “Sometimes you can’t appreciate the best in people you know too well.” Evaluating that, Efran narrowed his eyes at Minka, who blew a soundless raspberry. He barely contained a snort in response, so that the nearest tree quivered.

Verlice sighed, “Well, I don’t know that I can perform adequately in the presence of such enormous talent [his eyes briefly resting on Arbaiza’s bosom] but I endeavor to please.” With the long, drawn-out face of a sensitive soul, he began singing,

“’Twas a dark and stormy night,
Turgid rain in fitful flight,
Violent gusts of mad delight—when lo!
Hordes of phantoms came in sight,
Chilling bones with awful fright—!”

And there came from the midst of the trees howls and moans: “AaaaaaEEEEHOOOwhoooooo.” They wound around the hall like wind or ghosts, reaching from low, guttural growls to piercing shrieks of unearthly origin. Minka hid in Efran’s side; Arbaiza covered her ears, and Verlice sat stock still, his face white and his hair standing on end. Efran raised a brow at Justinian, who lifted his shoulders in admiration at the show.

At that time, Hartshough opened the front door to Wendt, who had come home to eat with his wife. He merely glanced at the mist-shrouded trees to say, “Cut it out.”

Instantly, ghosts, howls and mists vanished. There may have been a little giggle left in their wake, but Wendt glanced at Efran with, “To the patio, if you will, Captain.”

“Yes, Commander.” Efran followed with Minka in hand while Justinian looked at Faciane. Verlice gaped at Arbaiza.

Wendt sat at the table to lean over and kiss his wife. Efran sat Minka before sitting himself. He began, “I don’t want to intrude on your midday meal; we don’t need to eat—”

Hartshough placed a plate before him, saying, “Excuse me, Lord Efran, I was hoping to get your opinion on the pork ribs slow roasted in hard apple cider and molasses, touched with pepper. We have so few guests whose opinions about meat are trustworthy.”

Blinking at his plate, Efran exhaled, “I’m here for you, Hartshough.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said, placing a bowl of pumpkin crumbly and goblet of cold milk before Minka.

“Thank you, Hartshough,” she said in intense gratitude to not receive the ribs.

“You are most welcome, Lady Minka.” Hartshough placed another serving of ribs before Wendt and a seafood salad before Marguerite.

After nodding thanks to the indispensable Hartshough, Wendt told his wife, “Your children are playing in the hall,” just as a bland statement of fact. This did not prevent anyone’s eating.

Marguerite picked up her fork with a sigh. “Oh, I know. I felt it would be best for them to work out their differences by themselves.” Everyone but Efran glanced up at Verlice’s rising voice followed by Justinian’s light, sardonic laughter.

Wendt wiped his mouth and said, “Yes, well, Efran, we’ve had two scout teams come back with reports of a troll troop moving south from Eurus.”

Efran’s head shot up. “More Villalobos?”

“Possibly. The first team evaded the trolls; the second attempted to follow at a distance, but said they were too—erratic. They appear to be accompanied by a mischief of large rats, and, look to be headed directly here,” Wendt said.

“Rats! How is that?” Efran breathed.

“Who knows?” Wendt said with a shake of his head. “The rats could be following as opportunistic feeders at the carnage. It’s not likely that trolls have trained them to do anything.”

“How many in the troop?” Efran ate rapidly, taking no time to savor the ribs.

“That’s undetermined; the second team guessed about twenty. Neither team of scouts could tell because there appear to be different kinds of trolls that have joined together for the advance,” Wendt said.

“From Eurus?” Efran asked dubiously. No trolls hindered their return from Eurus after the defeat of the Villalobos just five days ago.

“That’s also unknown. They were first spotted yesterday near Guerry,” Wendt said. This village was the northernmost of those that had regular commerce with the Lands, being a few miles southwest of Westford.

“Did the trolls attack Guerry?” Efran asked. The sound of raised voices occasionally emanated from the hall.

“No, it seems certain that they didn’t,” Wendt replied. “But that means they’re closing in on us, probably only hours away.”

“Let’s start out with fire arrows; see if that keeps them off the wall,” Efran mused.

Minka asked, “Oh, Efran, do you think they’d hurt our trolls, if they run across them?”

Efran winced. “I hope not, but, aggressive troops will kill weaker ones, just to eliminate competition for food.” He couldn’t imagine the goofy playground trolls surviving a fight with the Villalobos. He added, “I’ll get down to the wall gates, after I take you up to the fortress.”

“Efran, I can walk up,” she said.

“No, I’m not going to worry about you making it up before the trolls hit our gates.” Having finished the ribs, he vigorously cleaned his face and hands with a wet napkin before standing. “Auntie, please tell Hartshough his ribs are fantastic, as is everything he does—”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Hartshough’s voice floated out from the kitchen.

Efran paused, then resumed, “I’ll keep you informed, Commander.”

“I’m on my way to the barracks now,” Wendt said, standing as well. Marguerite lifted her face expectantly, so he delivered. Minka leaned over to kiss Auntie’s cheek before taking Efran’s arm.

He was leading her into the kitchen when Arbaiza’s rich, operatic laughter sounded from the hall, being immediately rendered into nonsensical tonal variations on the order of, “AHHHHhahahaHAWWWW-
hehhehheh.” Kraken sat up abruptly in the grass, his ears pointing high.

Efran dropped his shoulders in recognition, then turned around to take Minka out back and saddle Kraken himself. The reverberations of hooting and howling from the treed hall were ongoing. Even from the chapel yard’s stalls, they could hear faint echoes of the transmogrified laughter, and as Efran led out Kraken, they saw Arbaiza stalking down Main. Verlice was following with a crumpled hat, talking rapidly.

It was only an hour later that the wall gate guards began ringing the alarm bell. Efran, Commander Wendt and every other soldier in the front office of Barracks A ran out to look up the northbound road.

Past the old stone bridge and the east-west coastal highway that ran just north of it, a great roaring tumult appeared coming down the road toward them. “What is *that*?” Efran gasped. All the men at the gates watched in dismay as a swirling cloud of dust surged south down the road.

It was like an oncoming tornado, except that it stayed on the road. There were feet visible here and there, hitting the road at a run. There was an occasional staff, or javelin, pounding the road as well, but none that were thrown. There were also numerous small furry bodies running amid the feet, grunting. Archers lined up at the wall to take aim, but, with the obscuring wind, they could see nothing to aim at. So they lowered their bows to watch.

All at once, the surging mass turned west on the coastal highway before they could cross the stone bridge. And the men watched the tornado roar down the road toward the new bridge over the Passage.

“Open the gates,” Efran ordered. The gatesmen did, at once, and he started to run out. Then he stopped as a small creature ran up to him, grunting, to investigate his boots. Efran bent to pick it up and hold it in his arms. It rooted around in his shirt for something to eat, but did not bite him.

Confounded, he looked back at his men. “What is this that I’m holding?” It was not a rat.

Elowen replied, “That there’s a pygmy hog, Cap’n. Back country folk raise ’em for eating.”

“A pygmy hog,” Efran breathed, his face clearing in recognition. “They were bringing a passel of hogs back with

them!” He threw back his head to laugh in relief. “All right,” he said, stroking the hog’s coarse hair. “Send up for Minka and the children to come down. They’ll want to see them.”

“What, Captain?” The gate guards looked at him in pained bafflement.

He nodded over the Passage toward the children’s play hut. “All that was just Sirs Ditson and Nutbin getting our trolls safely back to the play hut, as they were asked to do, with meat on the hoof—cloven, that is.”

The men stared at each other, but sent a rider up to the fortress with the news. Efran whistled for Kraken. He came over to snuffle the little hog, then tried to nose it off Efran’s arm. “No, I’ve got to return him,” Efran said.

He grasped the pommel to swing up in the saddle, still holding the hog. As he kicked lightly for Kraken to start north at an easy lope, soldiers scrambled behind him to get horses. Efran turned west to the new bridge. Shortly after gaining the heavily treed west shore of the Passage, he saw the playground gates standing open to give glimpses of energetic activity within.

Riding through the gates, Efran dropped from the saddle to look around in amazement. The original trolls Krug, Irtz, Urpèd, Schuchard, and Sheuf came running up to him, babbling in excitement, but Efran was staring at the rest of the trolls.

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Chapter 12

Inside the fenced play area, there were female trolls who were warily appraising Efran, and half-sized child trolls who ran up to him in great curiosity.

One little girl, hardly older than Joshua, toddled over to demand the pygmy hog with trollish words, pointing finger, and fiercely pouting lips. Efran surrendered it to her; she took it to replace it in the passel, counting them.

Meanwhile, Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin hung in the air before him, bowing in satisfaction. Ditson said, “As instructed, Lord Efran, here are your original troll residents and their families, whom they went in search of, to bring them back here, if you allow.”

Efran looked around with a half-laugh of surprise. Krug said earnestly, “Dey stay, Effin? Des gurls n boyse?”

“Yes, of course,” he said, his face communicating what they wanted to know.

The whole crowd of trolls looked behind him, then, as mounted soldiers, Minka, the children, and their bodyguards entered the playground. While they stared at the trolls, the newest residents backed off uncertainly, especially from the red uniforms. Minka cried, “Efran! Our trolls brought their wives and children! Oh, Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin, you’ve done your job wonderfully well!” They bowed to her in agreement.

While Mathurin was on duty elsewhere, Rondi had come down with the children to watch in delight. Joshua, on Martyn’s arm, located his father right away, but was too interested in the trolls to demand being taken to him.

Toby, leader as always, walked up to the nearest boy troll who was about his size. He said, “Welcome to our

playgrounds. I'm Toby." He held out his hand, at which the boy gaped.

Pouring out sharp words, Urpèd rushed up to put the boy's hand in Toby's and make them shake. Urpèd told Toby, "Dis Kobza."

"Hello, Kobza. What are these?" Toby asked, watching the pygmy hogs run around. The fortress children then surged forward to meld with the troll children in chasing the pygmy hogs and each other.

Wendt and Gabriel had entered to observe, then Estes and DeWitt came in to greet the newcomers. Krug proudly brought a woman over to be introduced to the Fortress Administrators. She, in turn, embarked on a lengthy statement about something which encompassed the playground, the hut, and the woods outside the fence.

Efran, Wendt, and DeWitt listened blankly, but Estes appeared to be following the gist of her pronouncement. He told the others, "This is Krug's wife Zaya; apparently, she wants permission to build other huts here in the playground and turn their pygmy hogs out into the woods. It seems they barely got away from the Villalobos, so, want to settle here under our protection."

The others looked at Efran. He exhaled, "Oh, yes, but—" He turned to whistle lightly, waving to the fortress children.

They ran over to him as he knelt, and he told them, "All right, here's the situation: our troll friends are running from bad trolls who want to kill them. They need a safe place to stay, so they came to us. They want to build more huts to live in your playground. What do you think?" He looked around at them.

Toby said, "We must let them stay. We can't keep being safe all to ourselves."

"What about when we want to come play here?" Elwell asked.

While Toby thought about this, Efran told him, "You can always ask permission."

Alcmond said, "Toby's right. Even though they're very different, they deserve to be safe, too."

The other children solemnly agreed to this. Toby looked up at Zaya to say, "You may build your huts and live here, but we'd still like to come see you."

She understood enough to smile trollishly on him. "Da."

DeWitt turned to Estes. "Can you ask them what they need, as far as building supplies or tools?"

Hesitantly, Estes asked Zaya, "Wood?" He patted the wood fence. "Tools?" He pantomimed hammering, then spread his hands in a question.

"Nah," Krug said, waving. "No dis. We mek. Dis?" He went over to pat the patched portion of the hut wall, probably to remind Estes that they needed no help in making that repair. Estes nodded, understanding. So the Lands residents left the playground to let the trolls get to work. Efran persuaded Minka to let him put her on Kraken, being saddled, then Efran walked along beside her carrying Joshua on his arm.

About this time, Barrueta was standing in front of Averno's with a list in hand. Colletta stood beside her in utter boredom, being constantly trailed by a varying group of men who were vainly trying to get her attention.

As Barrueta ticked items off her list with a wrapped piece of sharpened charcoal, she said, “Now, then. He’s not at Averne’s, Firmin’s or Croft’s. However, we’ve not yet searched The Lands’ Best Inn, which affords more hiding places on the unfinished third floor—”

“Mother, stop!” Colletta demanded. “I’m not helping you search for your pink-haired man another moment. We need to be concentrating on finding me a wealthy hus—” She broke off upon spotting a certain Polonti soldier who trotted by them unseeing, as he was concentrating on the assignment before him. “Vonk!” Colletta cried. “There you are!”

Suco did not respond, so she ran to catch him by the hem of his uniform jacket. “Vonk! Stop!”

“What?” He looked back at the tug, then his face drained. “I’m not Vonk,” he protested.

“Yes, you are, and I found you!” Colletta exulted. “Come!”

“No,” he gasped. “I have duty.”

“I don’t care! Come with me!”

Onlookers watched as she dragged the wretched man to the notary’s office. She banged the door open hard, but the entry bell clung to its moorings to ring loudly. Callously, Colletta shoved aside other customers waiting in line to demand of the notary, “Marry us!”

Giardi looked at her in astonishment; Ryal looked appraising. “And you are . . . ?”

“I am Lady Colletta, and I wish to marry this man.” While he tried to slink back, she pulled him forcefully to the counter.

“And you are . . . ?” Ryal asked the slack-faced man.

“This is Vonk. Get out your book,” Colletta instructed Ryal.

“No,” Suco gasped. “I am not Vonk.”

“Shut up,” Colletta instructed. “Get the marriage book!”

“Do you wish to marry Colletta?” Ryal asked the wretch. (“I do!” someone behind them said, who was ignored.)

His face wracked, Suco could emit nothing but a whine, so she replied for him, “Yes.”

While a roomful of customers watched in suspense, Ryal said carefully, “Newcomers to the Lands who wish to marry soldiers are required to wait a minimum of thirty days.”

“What?” she said, screwing up her face. Suco froze a moment, then jerked free of her hand to run out the door and leap over the steps. Colletta pursued him without his speed, and the vast majority of spectators left the shop to watch the chase.

The last remaining customers, Escarra and Ashe, came to the counter. Escarra told Ryal, “I haven’t much experience with Roman’s Law to know all the rules, so the waiting period for newcomers to marry Lands soldiers is—interesting.”

Giardi openly laughed and Ryal smiled. He explained, “The condition is actually that both parties be willing to marry. Since the man who is not Vonk was so unwilling, and I didn’t want to insult the lady with the fact, I unfortunately resorted to an expedient that’s more in Efran’s line.” His admission was tinged with mild disgust.

“Efran. Lord Efran? He is a most interesting Polonti. They are renown for their courage, are they not?” Escarra asked.

“Oh, yes,” Ryal said. “But he was much like Not Vonk when Chataine Sybil—Minka—dragged him into my shop to be married.”

“Efran didn’t want to marry her?” Giardi asked in astonishment.

“No,” Ryal said thoughtfully. “It was almost comical how—paralyzed he was. He’d come for the bequest to the Abbey, but she made marriage the preceding condition. He was trapped.” He almost laughed at the remembrance.

“But you married them,” she observed as Escarra and Ashe listened.

“Yes,” he said, thinking hard. “His momentary reluctance was—irrelevant. She was not to be denied the victory that she had fought for. I knew from the first moment I saw each of them separately—him riding up the street the day before to look at the flooding, her arriving at the Porterhouse late that night. . . . It was destined to be.”

“There’s a sense of destiny about everything that happens here,” she murmured.

“Yes, exactly so.” Ryal said. “But what can I do for you?” he asked the two newcomers.

Ashe looked at his father, who said, “We appreciate your lord’s kindness to give us lodging, but as long as we’re here, Ashe wants to work and I’d like to learn more about your Roman’s Law.”

“Ah. Noble aspirations, both. I feel that you need to talk to our Fortress Administrator DeWitt about that. Have a seat, please.” Ryal directed them to chairs along the wall while he came out from behind the counter to lean out the door and look around the street. He waved down a passing soldier to tell him something.

As the man ran off, Ryal returned to the counter, telling Escarra, “I’ve sent a message up to DeWitt. We’ll see if he has any ideas.” Escarra nodded, then Ryal and Giardi returned to filing forms.

In just a few minutes, another soldier, Quoid, entered to bow, “Lord Ryal, Lady Giardi. Are these are our guests from Eurus?” he asked, looking to Ashe and Escarra. Ryal opened his mouth but Giardi nodded, so Quoid told the two men, “If you’ll come with me, I’ll take you up to talk with Administrator DeWitt.”

Agreeably surprised, they rose, and Escarra thanked Ryal. Then they left with Quoid.

He led them up the main switchback, then into the courtyard and fortress foyer while they eyed everything—the white stone, the vaulted arches, the tree roots growing down and branches growing up inside and outside the fortress.

At a door on the second floor, Quoid saluted. “Escarra and Ashe, Administrator.”

DeWitt looked up from his worksheets and Estes glanced over to nod. DeWitt said, “Thank you, Quoid. Have a

seat, Escarra, Ashe.” They sat across from him, studying the tree growing up from the center of the table. As they drew up their chairs, the tree skinned up slightly, and Ashe jumped.

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Chapter 13

“Now,” DeWitt said, “Escarra wants to go to Law classes and Ashe wants to work. Is that right?”

“Law classes?” Escarra asked.

“Yes, our Roman’s Law expert Soames leads classes in the library every morning, starting around eight of the day candle,” DeWitt said. “Lady Minka, Lady Ella and Lady Rondi attend, as well as soldiers who want advancement. You’ll enjoy that, Escarra. Ashe, let me put out some inquiries for a suitable job; see what we can come up with. Quoid, show them the library on the way out.”

“Thank you, Administrator,” Escarra said, standing. Ashe rose with him.

“Certainly,” DeWitt replied, and the two left with Quoid.

As they came down off the stairs to the first floor, Escarra looked down the corridor toward the back door. “May we—walk around from the back to the front?”

Ashe looked from him to Quoid, who paused. “I don’t see why not.” Before leading them to the back door, however, he paused at the foot of the stairs to point up the corridor. “That last door on the left before you get to the foyer is the library, where they have Law class.”

“I see,” Escarra said. Then he looked back to the exit onto the grounds, and Quoid led them that way.

At the end of the corridor, they went down three steps from the doorway into the back grounds and began traversing a very large area with gardens on their left. Along the far back fence on the south ran a spreading orchard. Throughout the western side were training grounds. Quoid pointed out the archery practice field, the sparring grounds, the horse training pens and stables. Finally, they came to the northwestern corner of the fortress, and Escarra looked over the black iron fence at the large tree on the other side.

“What is that?” he whispered.

Quoid regarded the tree with a half-smile. “Oh, that’s a faerie tree, like those at the bottom of the switchback. Yes, it’s got faeries in it, and they do like to have their fun, so take what you see in it with a grain of salt.”

Half-hearing, Escarra walked over to lay a hand on the fence and look at the tree. Its branches were rustling in the breeze as if whispering to each other. Small white flowers on them began dropping almost as soon as they had opened. Escarra looked to the base of the tree where a girl about ten years old was sitting against the trunk, playing with stick dolls.

She made them talk and laugh to each other for a little while, then set them on the ground, sighing, “I’m so lonely. I wish I had someone to play with.”

“Here am I,” Escarra whispered.

“Father?” Ashe asked quietly. Quoid was watching on the verge of impatience. Neither of them saw anything around the tree.

“Yes, I’m very much looking forward to Law class tomorrow,” Escarra said. He turned away from the tree with a palpitating heart.

As they were descending the switchback, all three looked over at the nest of sticks on the hillside where something black was scrabbling around, flapping inadequate, flimsy wings. “What is *that*?” Escarra demanded.

“Ah, those are the dragon babies, sir, but I sure wouldn’t try to see them closer. For one, the hillside’s riddled with weak spots that’ll send you right down to the cavern waters; for the other, their mum camouflages herself on everything, and you’d never see her till she was right on top of you,” Quoid lectured.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Escarra said. He looked back over to the faerie tree, but could not see its base from where he stood.

As they exited the switchback onto Main, Escarra looked back at the faerie trees, especially at their bases, but they had nothing to show him. “Shall I escort you to Firmin’s, sir?” Quoid asked.

“No, thank you, we know where it is,” Escarra said.

“Yes, sir.” Quoid then took off for the barracks.

As the visitors began walking to their lodging, Ashe murmured, “Father, what is it?”

Escarra exhaled, “Nothing, Ashe, I’m just bewitched by the little girls running all over the place.”

“Do they—remind you of something?” Ashe asked warily.

“No,” Escarra said, looking off.

When they had reached Firmin’s, they paused at a soldier running up to them. “Are you Ashe?” he asked.

“Yes,” Ashe said eagerly.

“I’m Fellowes, in the lower barracks here. Are you interested in scouting?”

“Yes! What does that involve?” Ashe said.

“We ride out in teams to certain areas; see what’s there. Sometimes it’s overnight, but your first scouting trips will be day only,” Fellowes said.

“Yes. What do I do?” Ashe said.

“Come to Barracks B to get dressed out; we’ll show you around, have some grub; see what our schedule looks like for tomorrow,” Fellowes said, jerking his head toward the north end of Main.

“Yes,” Ashe said, then looked back to his father.

“Go on,” Escarra said with a lift of the chin.

Agreeably, Ashe ran with Fellowes to cross Main at one of the yellow crosswalks. Fellowes held up a hand to hold back a hasty rider attempting to cut a little too close through the crossing. They gained the east side of the street and vanished between two buildings.

Escarra looked after them for a little while. Then he went into Firmin’s to get a bowl of stew to take to the back dining room. While he was eating in a dark corner, a woman with masses of curling red hair stepped up on a small stage surrounded by candelabra. Escarra was deeply startled by the clapping around him, which she silenced with an upheld hand.

Then she opened her mouth to begin singing, and he leaned back in recognition of the sounds he had been hearing in his dreams for several nights now.

The following morning, October 26th, Escarra arrived at the library before anyone else, except—a large white-haired man in a black suit. His hair wafted as though he were underwater. The man turned black eyes to Escarra to bow. “Good morning, sir. I am the Librarian. May I help you find a book, or are you here for Law class?”

Taken aback by the Librarian’s appearance, Escarra replied with a slight tremor, “I believe I’m here for class, though I appear to be early. I am Escarra, lately of Eurus, but for the kindness of your Lord Efran to bring me down to join my son Ashe.”

“Then allow me to welcome you to the Abbey Lands, Escarra. Perhaps you would care for some light reading while you wait for class to begin?” So saying, the Librarian turned to extract a book from the shelf behind him. Laying it on the table, he invited, “Sit while we wait for the others to arrive.”

Before sitting at the table, Escarra took note of an old sword displayed on a stand in a corner, which shelves had been emptied of books to accommodate it. Bending, he read the engraved plaque beneath it: “The sword which Commander Ares used in leading the Green Regiment in defense of Westford against the Qarqarian invasion of the year 8069 from the creation of the world, bequeathed to the Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

Backing in respect, Escarra hesitantly slid onto the chair to look down at the book the Librarian had placed on the table. Its title, embossed on tan leather, read, *Visitations from Other Realms*. Escarra touched the lettering with trembling fingers without opening the book. He asked the Librarian, “Do you know of such visitations, sir?”

“I know that they happen, and most often without our bidding,” the Librarian said.

Escarra lifted his eyes to look at the rows of books across the room. “What about from the past? Visitations from one’s past, that one can barely remember?”

“They may occur for healing, Escarra.”

“This is new to me.” Escarra looked away from the book, and did not touch it again. But in the other back corner was a pierced relief partition, behind which was a lantern. In the light, he saw a lump holding a stylus that was moving rapidly. “Someone is in the corner behind that!”

“Yes, that is merely our Historian at work,” the Librarian said.

“Your Historian,” Escarra repeated blankly.

“Yes, she is writing the history of the Abbey Fortress, so we beg visitors not to disturb her,” the Librarian explained. Escarra stared at him, never thinking to attempt to look behind the partition.

Shortly, two young women appeared at the doorway. Escarra sprang up from his chair to bow, and the Librarian said, “Lady Minka, Lady Rondi, Escarra of Eurus has joined us for lessons today.”

Minka swept in to sit at the table. “Oh, I’m so glad, Escarra! You’ll enjoy it; Soames is such a wonderful teacher. We beat him here today! Oh, this is rare.”

Hearing, Soames entered with the heavy book of the Law. “I’d make it sooner if unnamed administrators would stop stealing the book from under my nose,” he grouched. “Oh, hello!” he said to the newcomer.

The Librarian began, “Soames, this is Escarra—”

Ella rushed in, already dressed in work clothes. “I’m here! I didn’t forget at all, just because there’s a new foal to work with. I’m truly excited to learn more about the Law. What are studying today, Soames?” She plopped at the table, now full. Since Escarra had vacated his chair at the table, the Librarian pulled up another for him to sit between Soames and Minka.

Opening the great book, Soames said, “We’re discussing the Emancipation of Minors.”

Escarra perked up in interest while a few soldiers entered to sit on the floor. Rondi said, “Emancipation. How does that work?”

“Simply put, Lady Rondi, any child twelve years of age or older may petition the notary of his or her district for emancipation from his parents or guardians,” Soames said.

Ella asked, “What does ‘emancipation’ mean?”

Soames replied, “It means that the child may live on his own as an adult, without answering to anyone else but to obey the Law itself, Lady Ella.”

Escarra looked amazed. “How can this be?”

Taking the question literally, Soames explained, “First, the child must demonstrate that he or she can earn a living wage. No child may claim marriage for emancipation, as the law of majority age must be observed—that is, anyone desiring marriage must be sixteen or older. A child who is at least twelve and earning such income may then appeal to the notary for emancipation.”

“On what grounds?” Escarra asked.

“On any grounds,” Soames said, lifting his brows. “It is up to the notary to determine if they are serious enough to require emancipation.”

Soldiers continued to drift in, sitting on the floor or standing along the wall. One soldier asked, “Can emancipated children serve in the army?”

Soames replied, “That is up to the Commander, who usually abides by the notary’s recommendations. But you’ll notice the Abbey army has a number of underage soldiers performing as messengers or in other non-combat roles.”

“Efran joined the army of Westford when he was fourteen,” Minka observed.

“True,” Soames noted.

“Could I have applied for emancipation from my aunt and uncle?” Rondi asked.

Soames said, “Regrettably, no, Lady Rondi. Crescent Hollow follows the Book of Notary Rules, which does not allow for emancipation of minors.”

Nodding unconsciously, Escarra asked, “What voice are the parents or guardians given in such cases?”

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Chapter 14

Soames told Escarra, “The notary will interview the parents or guardians to determine if the minor’s grievances justify emancipation. Lord Ryal says he’s seen no requests for emancipation here in the Lands, but he’s only been here for a couple of years. In Westford, he saw numerous requests, and granted almost all of them. Those cases involved theft of wages and abuse; that is, the children were not allowed to keep anything they earned, and were subject to beatings or withdrawal of food for minor infractions.

“If I remember correctly,” Soames continued, “the only cases in which Ryal ruled against the child were those of young girls wishing to be free to be with their lovers. And in those cases, if he could discover the identity of the lovers, he brought them up on charges of abuse of a minor. Those were some of the most dangerous cases he handled; his life was often threatened.”

Ella breathed, “I wish I’d had the option of emancipation in Westford, with my mother trying to arrange marriages for me with the most awful men. I went to the notary there, pleading to get out of one proposed marriage. But he was new, appointed by Parsifal of Eurus, and he just waved me away; wouldn’t even hear me out.” Escarra blinked, and Soames did not mention that she should have been given a hearing, as Westford followed the Law of Roman, purportedly.

Ella went on, “That notary didn’t last long. Oh! Turns out that the man didn’t want to marry me, either! Then that awful woman and Blairgowrie trying to make me marry his son—!”

“Justinian to the rescue,” Minka grinned, patting her hand.

“And then to find out that Efran is my real father,” Ella sighed.

Escarra’s mouth hung open; fortunately, no one noticed. After a moment, he asked, “And how does Lord Ryal rule when Lord Efran has an interest in the case?”

“Ohhh,” Minka said, wide-eyed. “You should have been here when Rondi’s aunt and uncle came to reclaim her after Efran had rescued her from being poisoned. Ryal heard them in the small dining room here, and heard Efran’s objections, and then ruled in their favor. Efran was so angry, he put a dent in the stone wall. It’s still there; I’ll show it to you. Ryal was so upset over having to rule against him that he tried to quit, but Efran wouldn’t let him; he told him, ‘You have to stay; you’re the only one to prevent me becoming a despot.’ Ryal stayed, and then was able to take away their guardianship because they refused protection for their carriage going home, and Rondi was taken by trolls.”

Escarra gaped at her and Rondi, who clarified, “They were friendly trolls. They’re living in the playgrounds now, with their families and pygmy hogs.”

“Didn’t they release the pygmy hogs into the woods?” Minka asked.

“Oh, yes, I’m sure they did, but I didn’t see it,” Rondi said. Minka nodded complacently.

“Whatever happened with the monkeys in Crescent Hollow?” one man asked.

Another laughed, “Not only have they not been caught, but their infants are raiding the Market District, too.”

That news was received in great satisfaction, and Soames said, “We’re glad to know that, but are there any other questions about emancipation?”

No one had any, so after a few more comments and reminders, Soames dismissed the class. As they were leaving, he told Escarra, “You may enjoy Henris’ discussion group. They meet once a week here; in fact, they’re meeting this afternoon. Is that right?” he asked the Librarian.

“Yes, Soames, and I’d advise Escarra to come early, for the group is getting crowded and the refreshments vanish quickly,” the Librarian warned with his typically straight face. Soames and Escarra both laughed.

“Thank you; I may do that,” Escarra said, but his head was still spinning over what he had heard today.

Emerging down the broad, curving steps into the front courtyard, Escarra paused to look down Main Street at the base of the hill, with the shops, homes and plots spreading out on either side. Then, with constricted heart, he looked to the west, to the faerie tree sitting beyond the seven-foot-tall fence. There seemed to be a spot of white beneath it, so he went over to look. No one paid any attention to him.

Placing a hand on the black iron fence, he saw a shaggy white dog lying at the base of the tree, his head on his forepaws, just waiting. His great brown eyes roamed the landscape before him, and he heaved a sigh. Escarra’s eyes filled with tears as he gripped a baluster. “Lucky! Here, boy! Here, Lucky!” he called. But the dog, unhearing, didn’t move.

Escarra turned away, closing his eyes. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” he whispered. He sat down against the fence, facing away from the painful sight.

At this time, Efran was riding Kraken (saddled and bridled) down the old switchback in response to a message from Wendt. Arriving at the barracks, he left Kraken playing in the water trough and turned up the steps.

Wendt met him in the outer office. “Efran, we began receiving refugees from Eurus last night and again this morning. The villages north of us, particularly Guerry and Craghead, have absorbed just about all they can, and are sending the overflow to us.”

“Children?” Efran asked.

Wendt said, “Yes, in families, for the most part. Ryal and Estes are helping us get them settled here, at least temporarily. But there is one child who arrived alone. She’s in the conference room eating right now; seems all right, but won’t speak to us. She looks to be a candidate for you up hilltop.”

“Yes. May I see her?” Efran gestured to the closed conference-room door.

“Yes.” Wendt opened the door for him and Efran to slip in.

Gabriel was sitting beside a child of about ten who was wearing a good dress, though soiled and torn in places. She was silent, focused on consuming a bowl of stew. Wendt raised inquiring eyebrows to Gabriel, who briefly shook his head as he stood to communicate, *No, she’s said nothing.*

Slipping into the chair that Gabriel had vacated, Efran studied the child. Her face was grimy and tear-streaked, her eyes clear but vacant. He said quietly, “Hello. I’m Efran. What’s your name?”

When she looked at him, he crinkled his eyes at her. She released the spoon to rest in the empty bowl, then tentatively touched his arm as though to see what it would do. He placed a hand gently over hers, saying, “We have a lot of children at the white fortress on top of the hill. Did you see the fortress when you came through the gates? It’s a special place for children.”

She leaned on his arm in a state of complete depletion. Efran stood, lifting her. “All right, I’m taking her up.” She sank into him, and he curled his arm under her back so that her head rested on his chest.

“Good,” Wendt said. Gabriel watched silently.

Efran took her out down the barracks steps and began carrying her up the sidewalk. When it got too crowded, he stepped out into the street to walk with her close to the curb. Kraken trotted up behind him, nosing his arm. Efran looked back, conflicted. It would be easier to ride, but she wasn’t able to stay on her feet for him to mount.

Lowry pulled his meat cart over to the side of the road and got out. “How can I help you, Captain?”

Efran glanced at his cart full of raw meat, rejecting that as a ride, then asked, “Can you hold her a moment?”

“Yes, Captain.” Lowry took her off Efran’s arms into his own, and Efran swung up on Kraken. Then he leaned down to haul her easily up onto the saddle in front of him, her legs with torn hose dangling down Kraken’s left side. Her eyelids fluttered during this transition, then closed again.

Taking the reins in his left hand, Efran said, “Thank you, Lowry.” The butcher stepped back in satisfaction as Efran nudged Kraken forward at a walk. Bystanders then resumed their errands.

Efran walked Kraken up the switchback to the courtyard, where Escarra was coming to the gates with the intention of descending. Seeing the Captain rein up to let the girl down into the hands of a soldier, Escarra ran forward in great excitement.

“Tambling! Lord Efran, that’s Parsifal’s granddaughter Tambling! Are her parents here?” Escarra cried.

“I don’t know.” Efran had dismounted to take the girl up again. Both he and Escarra watched as her eyes opened.

She glanced around blankly, then shut them again. Efran began carrying her up the steps into the fortress.

“Lord Efran, let me take her,” Escarra urged.

Efran told him, “I have her. You go up to the second-floor workroom and tell Estes or DeWitt what you know about her. She’ll be staying in the children’s ward.”

Heartsick, Escarra said, “I understand. But what of her parents?”

“When you’ve told the administrators what you know, go down to Commander Wendt; see if you can find her parents among the refugees here.” Efran jerked his head at a soldier. “Get him a horse and an escort down to the Commander.”

“Yes, Captain.” The man ran off and Efran carried her into the fortress.

Escarra followed on trembling legs. *That was her; that was her I saw under the tree. Why didn’t I recognize her? What does this mean?* As instructed, he proceeded up to the workroom to tell the Steward Estes all he knew about the girl that the Captain had brought in.

Then he rode down with the soldier to tell the Commander’s Second about the girl, and ask to see the refugees. The Second Gabriel took him to Barracks B, where there were about fifty people lying on cots, eating, or bathing behind a screen. Escarra looked at all of them, but did not see anyone he knew. So he left the parents’ names with the Second and walked out, lost.

From there, he wandered across New North Road and down past several blocks of houses and shops until reaching the lake. He sat on a bench close to the water on the north shore to watch people fishing from a long pier. On the lakeshore, a harpist was lightly strumming a song that Escarra could almost name. It was about a lover who had gone away.

There was a strange metal tree on the northeastern side of the lake. The wind blowing through it right now sounded like someone crying. *So this is a place for the lost and the wounded*, Escarra thought. *Is that why I’m here?*

In the fortress, Minka was waiting outside the children’s ward while Dorey and the doctor, Wallace, examined the girl who’d just been brought in. Efran came over to put an arm around his wife. “Are they still looking at her?” He nodded toward the closed door.

“Yes,” Minka said. “I just wanted to see—if there was anything I could do.”

“That’s fine; that’s good,” he reassured her. “I’m going down to see if anyone else has come, and get the newest scouting reports.”

“All right.” She reached up to his neck and he lifted her off her feet to kiss her. Satisfied, she let go, so he turned away to trot toward the front doors.

Shortly, Wallace came out. Minka glanced into the room behind him. “How is she?”

“Well, she’s intact; no injuries that I could find, but in shock. We’ll just let her rest,” he said. Dorey left the room, murmuring something about getting the girl clean clothes.

“Yes, thank you, Wallace, Dorey.” As Minka moved into the room and he turned away, a small brown body ran through their legs to jump onto the new girl’s bed. She immediately raised a hand to pet him, so Nakam sat at her side, eyes half-closed in satisfaction.

Minka sat in the chair beside her bed. “Hello! Are you feeling better? That’s Nakam; he’s the official children’s dog. I’m Minka.”

The girl blinked at her wearily, and Minka said, “You don’t have to do anything but rest. Tell Dorey when you’re hungry, and there are other children to play with when you feel like it.”

The girl half-closed her eyes again, pulling Nakam to her chest to cuddle him. Minka paused, then asked, “Is your name Tambling?”

The girl looked at her quickly, raising up on an elbow. “Are my mama and my papa here?” she asked, trembling.

“I don’t know, but their friend Escarra is. Do you know him?” Minka asked.

“Grandpapa’s helper,” she sighed, lying back down. “We thought he was dead, too. But I think I will sleep.” Minka stood to pull the thin blanket over her and Nakam. Eyes closed, the girl murmured, “Who is the man with the black hair? I don’t remember. . . .”

Minka smiled. “Efran. He is guardian of all the children.”

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Chapter 15

“Yes,” Tambling said, eyes closed. And she was promptly asleep. Minka tiptoed out.

Escarra, heartsick, missing Ashe, and lost for what to do, waited for the midday rush to taper off at Firmin’s, then got himself a plate. It was some kind of meatloaf. It was good; he was sure it was good, but everything he put in his mouth tasted like paper.

When he emerged from the dining room, he looked down the street to see a group of people waiting at the wall gates. So he quickly ran over, zigzagging around slow horses, to look through the gates and see if he might recognize anyone. There were only a handful, no one that he knew.

So he walked back up Main, and back up the switchback, where the guards let him in without question. He went up the steps into the fortress, hoping to catch a glimpse of Tambling. But when he stopped in the corridor, he was practically forced into the library again by the number of men entering. They began helping themselves to a large platter of finger foods on a table by the door. This Escarra let alone; he was not hungry.

A young man with sharp, intelligent features stood at the front of the library by the sword of Ares and said, “Attention! Everyone sit.” The men obeyed, sitting in orderly rows on the library floor. With no more room to sit, Escarra continued to stand at the back wall beside the door. He glanced at the Librarian watching silently. Then the young man said, “The question we are considering today comes in four parts. The first part is: What makes life worthwhile?”

The men's answers came quickly: "Love." "Money." "Duty." "Service." "Sacrifice." "Giving." "Work." "Friends." "People you love." "Honor." "Purpose." "Dying well—" and numerous other, similar goals.

When the answers died down, Henris asked, "What's holding you back?"

Again, the men replied readily: "Fear." "Ignorance." "Cowardice." "Selfishness." "No dedication." "Not trying." "Not thinking." "Not enough self-discipline." "A base heart." "Stupidity." "Not knowing how." "Time."

The men looked to him for the third question, which was: "What are you going to do about it?"

This required more thought to answer, but the men came through: "Try harder." "Be more consistent." "Focus." "Put lesser matters aside." "Find a better way." "Find the right way." "Get a teacher." "Get a better goal." "Get real." "Wait." They argued back and forth about some of these reasons, especially the men who considered them excuses while others thought they were real impediments.

Eventually, the room went silent for the leader's last question, which was: "When all is done, will that satisfy you?"

Again, the men took some time to answer, but they finally did: "Yes." "I don't know." "How can you know?" "No." "Maybe." After a short silence, one man said, "Only if I understand the reason for it all." This the group seized on, most of them wanting to know how to attain this knowledge, or whether the reason could ever be known.

Henris suddenly looked at someone standing in the doorway and asked, "Did you hear the questions, sir?" At the acknowledgment, Henris requested, "Tell us your answers, Captain."

The men swiveled to begin scrambling up, but Efran said, "Sit!" They settled back down. Jaw working, he said, "To know God makes life worthwhile. My own self-centeredness holds me back. The only answer for that is to obey Him, what He says in His Word. Then, yes: that must satisfy."

In the ensuing silence, he patted the door frame. "Carry on." And he continued down the corridor.

Some of the men lowered their heads; some looked skeptical; some had tears in their eyes. Escarra stared at the empty doorway, thinking, *He means it. This is what he really believes. Is it even possible?* And Escarra stilled to hear bells ringing from above. Yes, those were the bells in the tower atop this fortress—the bells he had heard ringing when he first entered the Lands. And now someone was ringing an ancient hymn. He could not identify it, but he knew that's what it was.

"You're dismissed," Henris said, satisfied.

Escarra somehow left the library in the outflow of men. He paused in the foyer to see a room directly to his left, and went in to look around.

Before him was a large wooden statue depicting a man being executed by torture. Escarra studied this, looking above it to a window which cast light across the room. Turning, he looked at what the light illumined: Lines engraved on a panel next to the doorway: "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him. . . ."

Turning back in bewilderment, Escarra saw a large open book sitting on a lectern in front of the statue. He went

over to look at the columns before him, one that was headed, “23.” The header at the top of the page merely said, “Luke.”

Escarra read that chapter and the next in unabated confusion. After raising his eyes again to the statue, he left that room, then the foyer, to emerge into the courtyard and walk down the switchback without really being aware of it. He did not know what he was experiencing or why, but it was profound. He felt something working intensely—but he didn’t know what it was.

He walked down Main because that’s where he was. As he stood indecisively in front of Firmin’s, he became vaguely aware of a minor tumult around him. Something darted between his feet. He looked down, but before he could see what it was, a soldier stopped in front of him to demand, “Sir, is that your animal?”

Having no clue what he was talking about, Escarra said, “Wha—yes. Why, yes, it is.”

“Then please keep it contained or on a lead. Loose animals are not permitted on the streets, sir. We’re trying to keep them clean,” the soldier added plaintively.

“Yes, I understand, certainly,” Escarra said.

Satisfied, the man walked off, and Escarra looked down at his feet again. Cringing behind him was something small and shaggy. Escarra leaned down to pick it up, and found it to be a lost, frightened, and very dirty ladies’ dog, wearing a blue leather collar set with glass stones.

At once, he saw that this little dog must have belonged to one of the refugees on the run. Having gotten separated from his mistress, he ran to the first likely help he could find. The dog licked Escarra’s face in great gratitude, and he laughed, “What a lucky runt you—”

Shocked, he thought back to the dog under the tree. “Lucky,” he whispered. “No, but, I had a dog named—”

No, he didn’t. As a boy, he had wanted a dog very badly, and had named this as-yet-unacquired animal “Lucky.” But, it had never come to pass until . . . today.

“Well, then, Lucky, first, let’s get you bathed.” He took the little dog around to the stables, found a bucket, filled it with water, found soap, then washed and rinsed Lucky until he was white, as he should have been. Then Escarra sat him on his lap in Firmin’s outdoor dining area. When the young server came to his table, he ordered a plate of beef.

She said skeptically, “Show me your money.”

He admitted, “I don’t have any. I am Escarra, and was told—”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, that’s right! The Fortress pays for you and Ashe.” She ran back into the restaurant to bring out the beef, plus water.

He thanked her, and Lucky stood on his lap to eat up all that was on the plate, and lick up the juices.

“Now, Lucky, we’re going to find your owner,” Escarra said, taking him out of the dining area. But Lucky wriggled down from his arms to poop on the sidewalk. Almost panicking, Escarra found a bit of trash to pick it up, then drop both in a construction ditch well off the road. He drew water from the community well to wash his hands, then took Lucky on his arm again to walk him toward the barracks.

Stopping the first soldier he saw, Escarra said, “Excuse me. Some lady has lost her dog, and I think it might be one of the refugees come down from Eurus. Might I ask them?”

“Sure, why not?” the man said. “Follow me.” So he led Escarra to the same barracks where he had come looking for Tambling’s parents. Entering, the man called, “Who’s lost a small dog?” The tired, weary refugees looked over blankly, a few shaking their heads.

“Well, no one there,” the soldier said, leading Escarra back out. “We’ll have someone put him down for you,” he said, reaching for the dog.

Escarra said hastily, “No—thank you, I’ll look elsewhere. Thank you.” The man agreeably left him to it, so Escarra took Lucky back around to the stables, where he found a length of twine to tie on his collar as a lead and walk him around the stable area to make sure he had nothing left to evacuate.

Escarra walked him up and down Main, watching the shadows lengthen over the street. When the men with firepots came around to light the street lanterns, Escarra took himself and his exhausted new friend to his room in Firmin’s. With Ashe sleeping in the barracks, Escarra was rather glad to have company tonight. So they both dropped down dead on the bed.

The next morning, October 27th, Escarra blearily woke with the little dog curled up on his stomach. Groaning lightly at the prospect of another day of wandering in confusion, Escarra got a breakfast of eggs and apples for himself and his buddy, then took him back around to the stables to evacuate.

From there, he carried his friend out to the lake where he sat on a bench to watch the little dog happily roam the shoreline. There was one family out fishing on the pier already, and taking in a good catch, from what Escarra could see. The strange tree of pipes was quiet, but the living trees on either side of the lake were rustling their branches, making their copper and green leaves flutter without any wind at all. Running a hand through his gray hair, Escarra sat and thought.

At this time, Efran was riding Kraken down to the barracks, having been summoned by Commander Wendt. Efran found him in the barracks infirmary, where he was looking over one of the scouts, Allyr, being treated for an injury to his shoulder and left arm. The man was in great pain, and being given hard ale for it.

“Have a look, Efran,” Wendt nodded as the medic, Milo, pulled back a bandage to reveal a series of puncture wounds, four of them, running across Allyr’s shoulder and upper arm.

“What the devil—?” Efran muttered.

“It’s from a booby trap just off the northbound road. It seems impossible, but it had to have been set by either the Villalobos or the trolls coming down from Eurus,” Wendt said, stepping back for Milo to replace the bandage. “A trip wire was camouflaged in the dirt of the road; when it was pulled, it released a sling of slender spines coated with wolfsbane.” Wendt used finger tongs to hold up a seven-inch-long spine. The leading two inches of it were bloody.

“How much wolfsbane did he get?” Efran asked, leaning over the injured man.

Allyr replied in a gasp, “Not much, Cap’n, just, the dam’ spines—”

“All right; you’ll be good,” Efran said, patting his uninjured shoulder. Backing away, he asked Wendt tightly, “Are there more of these traps, then?”

“Probably. We’ve got volunteers armored up to scour the northbound road and the major roads to the villages,” Wendt said. “The road from here to Westford appears to be clear. Beyond that, I have no clue. But I’m ordering you to stay off the roads for a while.”

Efran balked only a little, but said, “Yes, Commander.” He saluted and left shaking his head: who taught the trolls to make such a device? “The Trollbrunnen,” Efran decided, remembering the spikes it had flung at Gevorgyan.

In the fortress, the children’s matron Dorey had given Tambling a room to herself for now, to ease her into life in the children’s ward. Awaking in mid-morning, the new child was given breakfast and shown the garderobe (with which she was familiar, being of a well-off family). But her eyes were hollow and listless.

Dorey took her out to the back grounds just to look around while the other children were still in class. Clinging to the matron’s hand, Tambling murmured, “Nakam?”

“Oh, the dog? Goodness, he must be with the others in class right now,” Dorey said. “Oh, look at the chrysanthemums! Aren’t they pretty? Let’s ask Tourjee for garden shears to cut a few.” She led the new girl over to the undergardener, who bent to speak kindly to her. But the girl was lost, seeing nothing familiar no matter where she looked.

Below the hill, Escarra was restless, also searching for something he didn’t know how to find. He kept looking up to the fortress, feeling the compulsion to climb that switchback again. It was hard, and tiring for an old man; he didn’t want to do it, and he was afraid of what he might see under that great tree with the white flowers. And he missed Ashe; he was anxious about his youngest.

Nonetheless, Escarra picked up Lucky, who was most willing to be carried at this point, and walked with him to the old switchback. The new one was closer to the lake, but Escarra was rapidly tiring of new things right now, so he walked over to the old.

On his way up, a few cart drivers stopped to offer him a ride. The first he declined, stating his preference to walk up, but the second he accepted. Climbing into the cart filled with bags of wheat flour, Escarra exhaled, “Thank you. It’s a harder walk than it appears.” He was careful to not allow Lucky onto the flour bags.

“Aye, especially if you’re up and down it several times a day,” the driver agreed.

“Yes,” Escarra laughed shakily. He should just stay up at the fortress all the day, but he couldn’t bear to be that far from the gates, where Ashe would be coming back from scouting. As they ascended, he kept his eyes directly away from the terrifying tree outside the black iron fence.

When the cart rattled through the gates into the courtyard, Escarra clutched Lucky to clamber out with thanks. Then he accidentally looked directly at The Tree. Beneath it stood a young boy, about five years old. The moment he saw Escarra, he jumped up and down in joy, waving to him, and calling, “Come play with me!”

Escarra staggered over to the fence, whispering, “Now who are you?” All the while, the boy could hardly contain his joy to see him. “Come here! I’ve so much to show you!” he cried in happy excitement.

Chapter 16

Laughing with tears in his eyes, Escarra said, “I don’t know how to reach you.” Lucky rested complacently on his arm.

“I’ll wait, then,” the boy said. Still excited but contained, he sat at the foot of the tree to wrap his arms around his uplifted knees in composure.

Not knowing what else to do, Escarra took Lucky around the side of the fortress, groaning, “I can’t endure much more of this. Who is he? He must be someone special. Who?”

Walking through the grounds, he spotted Tambling standing with a woman near the back door. He murmured, “Oh, poor dear, she hasn’t found her parents yet, either. Are they still alive? Oh, dear.”

As he drew closer, she looked over at him, then came to life, crying, “Felix!”

The little dog sprang out of Escarra’s arms to bound toward the girl, who was running to him. She snatched him up while he wriggled in ecstasy, trying to lick every part of her head. The twine lead trailed from her arms to the ground.

After pouring endless tears for a solid minute, she looked up to see Escarra approach. Dorey watched as Tambling cried, “You’re Grandpapa’s helper! Where did you find Felix?”

“He came to me,” Escarra said, his own eyes wet. “He just ran up to me on the street. But we’re looking for your parents, Tambling. We’re looking.”

“I’ll be all right now,” she said, burying her face in her dog’s clean fur.

The other children came out at that time. Seeing a new girl with a new pet, they ran over to crowd around her. Undaunted, she said, “I’m Tambling, and Escarra found my dog Felix. They haven’t found my parents yet. No one knows where they are.”

Toby said, “That’s all right, Tambling. We don’t have parents either, except Efran. He sees that we’re all taken care of. I’m Toby, and this is Alcmund, and Chorro, Elwell, Hassie, Calix, and Jera. A few more aren’t out yet. But this is our safe place, Tambling. You’re safe here.”

She blinked back tears as Hassie and Calix pressed forward to pet her little dog. Tambling said, “Efran is the man with black hair and strong arms.”

Calix said, “Yes. Efran is father to all of us.”

Noah ran up bouncing a big rubber ball on the hard earth. “Come play,” he commanded before running off again. Tambling put Felix down and Hassie took her hand to run toward the boys who were batting the ball between them. After taking a moment to get acquainted with Nakam, Felix followed with joyful bounds—until a passing worker stepped on his lead. Escarra had to catch him again to remove the twine from his collar.

Meanwhile, Escarra was studying every boy in the group. *He’s not one of them. He must be one that hasn’t come out yet. I’ll watch for him. He’s waiting for me.*

Shortly, Efran came out with Minka in hand and Joshua on his arm. The toddler cried out to join the ball game, but Efran wouldn't let him. He glanced over as Escarra half-bowed to him uncertainly. Efran asked, "How are you getting on, Escarra?"

"Lost at sea," Escarra laughed painfully. "But I did find Tambling's dog, so that's something."

"Oh, to a child, certainly," Efran said. He watched in amusement as she played ball almost recklessly for a girl. Toby was the only one who had seen him yet, but Efran didn't want to interrupt their play.

"At least Ashe has found something interesting to do," Escarra noted.

"Yes?" Efran asked, watching the children.

"Yes, he was offered a position scouting, and took it with the enthusiasm of youth," Escarra laughed wryly.

He noticed the lord's quick glance at him, but Efran only nodded lightly, looking off. Then he walked over to the first man he saw to whisper, "Find where Ashe and his partner are scouting; bring them back at once."

"Captain." Routh saluted to turn and run for the western side of the fortress, which was the fastest route to the stables. Escarra was studying the new children who had just come out of the back door.

But Efran was uneasy, no longer watching the children. Minka looked up at him, questioning. Efran looked over to another man, who ran over. Efran ordered, "Saddle Kraken."

"Captain." Lambdin turned to run to the stables. This Escarra noticed.

He was watching when Efran lifted his chin at another soldier, who was instantly beside him. Efran ordered, "Call back all the scouts"—which was so rare, it was done with herald's trumpets. "No one's to be out on the roads without armor." That man also saluted quickly and ran off. Noticing the orders, the soldiers had begun to gather around him. But Escarra had heard the word *scouts*.

Efran gestured Telo over to hand him Joshua. Minka and Escarra were both at his side at once. "I'm going down to the barracks," he told her, then looked uneasily at Escarra.

"Is it something about the scouts?" the old man asked.

"I hope it's nothing. But you may ride down with me," Efran said. He leaned down to nuzzle Minka, who was eyeing the concern in his face. Then he patted Joshua's back and turned to stride away. Escarra was practically running to keep up with him.

At the stables, Efran ordered Gaunter saddled for Escarra, then swung up on Kraken. He reined around to look back at the old man eyeing the horse, and told him, "Ride down to Barracks A; tell any man to bring you to me."

"Yes, sir," Escarra said, wondering. Then he watched the lord lope the black horse to the open courtyard gates.

By the time Escarra got himself up onto the placid animal to ride him to the courtyard, he could hear the heralds' trumpets calling back the scouts. The lord himself was far down Main Street. Descending the switchback, Escarra tried to kick the animal to pick up his hooves, but couldn't muster the authority. Trotting was pretty much unbearable for them both, so Escarra let him walk at his own pace to the barracks at the other end of Main.

By the time he arrived at Barracks A, there was a great hubbub of men around him. Escarra slid off the animal, but stood beside him, unsure of whom to ask to take him to the Abbey Lord.

But the Second Gabriel stopped abruptly before him. “You are Escarra?”

“Yes, sir,” Escarra replied, then stood waiting.

After a moment in which the Second turned away to question another man, Gabriel turned back to tell Escarra, “Come with me.” The old man mutely agreed, and Gabriel led him calmly through parting masses of men to the barracks infirmary.

As they entered, they could hear Fennig say, “I swear, he saw them coming and jumped out in front of me!”

Then someone else said, “You two must have been directly upon them. This one’s gone too deep to help, and right over his heart.”

Recognizing the black head bending over someone, Escarra worked his way through the men, who fell back for him. “Lord Efran?” Escarra queried.

Efran straightened to look back at him with eyes of intense sorrow. And Escarra looked down at Ashe, lying on a cot with a skewer sticking straight up from his chest. He was trembling in pain, breathing unsteadily, eyes unfocused.

A man Escarra did not know was standing over him on his other side, speaking with eyes closed and hand uplifted: “Gracious God, by your mercy, sustain Ashe in this, his last battle. Enable him now to trust your goodness and claim your promise of life everlasting. Cleanse him of all sin and guilt by the blood of your Beloved Son, Jesus. As Christus Victor, he said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.’”

“As you have come to the time of your departure, Ashe, may you rest in peace, and stand in your allotted place at the end of the age, to shine like the brightness of the firmament, like the stars, forever and ever to the glory of God your Maker.” The man lowered his hand to Ashe’s shoulder. Lord Efran bent his head over the young man.

In the extremity of his pain, Ashe suddenly looked straight ahead and gasped, “I see Him!” Wrenching his head to look for his father, he breathed, “We’ll wait for you. We’ll wait—”

He went tense with a shock that shook him violently once, then left him limp on the cot. Escarra looked down on him as though not perceiving anything that had just happened.

Gabriel said, “Clear out now, everyone but Delano and the Captain—and Ashe’s father.”

The men silently exited the infirmary while Escarra, brows knitted, studied the still form of his son. Efran, tears in his eyes, stood to take Escarra’s shoulders. “Whatever you need, for the rest of your life, we will provide. Your son saved my man’s life, with his own.”

Escarra looked down at the pale face and half-closed eyes. “He’s dead, then,” he said pensively.

“Just the body, sir,” said the man who had prayed, and Escarra looked at him as he added, “He lives, and he waits for you, as he said.”

“You are Delano, of the brewery,” Escarra said.

“Yes, and I have a son who’s about your Ashe’s age. And were he to die as your Ashe did, I would grieve mightily, sir, but I would carry the joy of certainty that he lives, and I will see him again,” Delano said.

At that, Escarra passed out on his feet.

Not long afterward, Wendt had a medical cart brought down for Escarra, to take him up to Wallace’s quarters on the second floor of the fortress. He was evidently in shock, and Wendt wanted the doctor to keep him under supervision.

When he was brought upstairs still unconscious, Wallace checked over his vital signs, finding nothing alarming. He was just solidly out. Having prior notice of his transport up and why, Minka asked, “What can be done for him?”

Wallace shook his head. “Only to—keep him covered; let him sleep.”

“Poor man,” she sighed.

That evening, Efran had to hold Minka in bed for a long time, as she could not sleep. She had to feel his arms tight around her while she grieved. “Oh, Efran, he was so young.” Ashe was actually a few years older than she was—18—but that was still very young, especially to die on a routine scouting mission. “Can you imagine Joshua dying that young?”

“No, and I don’t want to try,” he said.

“What about a funeral?” she asked, muffled. Her face was in his chest.

He groaned, “I can’t see it—the only reason to have one would be for Escarra, and he—couldn’t even take in the fact that his son was dead. A funeral would destroy him, assuming he even knew what was going on.”

“A memorial, then. Something at least to honor his sacrifice,” she murmured.

“Yes, that would be appropriate,” he agreed.

She was silent for a few minutes, so that he almost fell asleep. Then she asked, “Why did you want to die young?”

He opened his eyes. “I didn’t know; I didn’t understand how good life could be. Until I had you to love me, and Joshua to give me the gift of fatherhood, I—couldn’t comprehend what a precious thing another day was.”

She gripped him around the neck. “Love me.”

“All right,” he smiled, rolling over on her.

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Chapter 17

The following day, October 28th, Escarra woke, somewhat. He opened his eyes and got up from the bed to eat and walk around the back grounds, but he was a shell of a man. He did not speak, and seemed to comprehend little of anything around him. Minka sat with him on one of the benches under the walnut tree, talking to him about everything, except that one thing. He listened without responding.

Then she finally asked, “What would you like for us to do to honor Ashe’s memory?”

He looked off blankly for a long time, then finally shook his head. But Minka got an idea of what to do.

Since Wallace wanted to keep Escarra under observation, he slept in a small room off the doctor’s quarters, and had his meals there, as well. But he could hardly eat anything.

Two days after Ashe’s death, Wendt authorized his body to be quietly consigned to the Sea. But following Minka’s directions, the stonemason Ernst had a team of stoneworkers bring completed pieces to the back fortress grounds. These they assembled by the pond that had been landscaped with many loads of soil and compost around a depression in the rock of the southeastern hilltop.

Once these stone pieces were in place, the bronze workers brought up a prepared plaque which was bolted onto the center piece at Minka’s direction. And she brought Escarra over to see the new stone bench. Being on the far eastern hilltop, it had a breathtaking view of the Lands clear to the east Passage (barely visible in the distance). Shifting slightly on the bench enabled one to look to the Sea, stretching over the edge of the world to the south.

Looking straight ahead on the bench, one could view the gardens at all seasons (which were mild on the hilltop) and the children playing or working (but mostly playing) in their own gardens.

The seat and arms of the bench were curved for comfort, but the back rest was straight, though tilted, to allow for the best visibility of the bronze plaque affixed to the front. It was flat enough to allow one to rest against it, but plain enough to be read from a distance. And it said, “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.’”

While Escarra looked at the bench, a number of people were watching from a distance. Minka told him, “I think this is the most beautiful spot on the hilltop. And Ashe’s heroism deserves the widest view.”

He studied the plaque for a long time, then reached out to touch it, feeling his son’s name in low relief. He nodded lightly, and she sat down to pull him down beside her. “Let’s just look around and see everything,” she suggested.

His smile was tremulous as he whispered, “Thank you”—the first words he had spoken since seeing his son die.

It was two days later, on November 1st, that Gabriel rode up to the hilltop to summon Efran to the courtyard. When he arrived, alert, Gabriel said, “Captain, Commander Wendt requests your presence in Barracks A. Another man has been hit by the darts.”

Efran’s face went rigid. “Another,” he breathed. “Who? Killed?” The gate guards were listening grimly.

“No, Captain. Lund was wearing armor, as have all the men who’ve had to ride out for one reason or another,” Gabriel said.

“Saddle Kraken,” Efran tossed off to a nearby man.

But Squirt was already leading out the Captain’s horse. Having seen the Second ride up to request the Captain, Squirt knew what he’d need. Efran, surprised by the quick appearance, dug in his pocket for a royal to hand to the stableboy.

Squirt ignored it, extending the reins to him. “Yer can’t pay me for the honor, Cap’n.”

Kraken nodded; Efran exhaled, “We need ten of you, Squirt, but I guess we’ll have to make do with one that does the work of ten.”

“Thankee, Cap’n.” He stood back in satisfaction as Efran leapt up on Kraken’s back and turned him down the switchback, Gabriel following. Efran’s gut was roiling all the way down—another! After their precautions following Ashe’s death, Efran was seriously rattled by the attack. Was there another Trollbrunnen? More Villalobos? He had to find out.

Arriving at Barracks A, Efran flung himself from the saddle to trot up the steps and through the office to the open conference door. Commander Wendt, his Captains, and several other men looked over as Efran dropped into a chair. On the table before him lay a hardened leather vest riddled with spines, five of them.

As Efran picked it up, Wendt said, “Careful! Those spines look to be coated with wolfsbane as well.”

“Yes,” Efran said, studying the slender darts. “Who—Lund?” He looked at the man across the table from him who nodded, whole but slightly shaken. Efran asked, “Where on the highway were you?”

“Not on the highway at all, Captain,” Lund replied. “Me and Ley had gone east off the main road a few miles up, about a half mile past them trees on the ridge, looking for the source of smoke rising that we could see from our post.” He nodded to his companion, Ley, who silently agreed.

“You turned off the road east?” Efran asked.

“Yes, Captain, and rode on down a dirt path into what looked like a campsite, at one time,” Lund said.

“A campsite, in the trees past the ridge east of the road,” Efran repeated. Something clicked in his memory.

“Aye, sir. And as we were looking around, I felt my foot catch on something, and the spines come flinging at me. I got my arm up to catch one comin’ at my face.” He gestured to the hardened leather arm guard with a spine lodged in it.

“It was a set trap?” Efran asked.

“Yes, sir,” Lund replied.

“Did you see anyone?” Efran pressed.

Lund said, “No sir, but after that, we didn’t stay to look around. Someone had been there; we saw the campfire that had been doused, but no one in the few seconds we were there.”

“In the trees past the ridge,” Efran repeated, searching his memory.

Wendt said, “The other interesting thing is that we sent the spines—cleaned of wolfsbane—up to Garrett and Tourjee to look at; they said they’re porcupine quills.”

“Porcupine quills!” Efran repeated. “There are no porcupines anywhere around here!”

“No, and even if there were, they don’t shoot their quills. Someone is using them in a contrivance,” Wendt said.

“Arggh!” Efran grunted in frustration, sitting back to cross his arms over his chest. There was something, something on the fringes of his memory. “A few miles up the road, past the ridge, a campsite, with only one plane tree in the area—” He stopped, eyes fastened on the wall.

“A plane tree,” he breathed. “Showalter. That was—at the beginning of the year, January.” He turned his eyes to Wendt. “Do you remember the magician Showalter?”

“Only vaguely,” Wendt said. Everything during his period of blindness was now like a fading dream.

Efran mused, “That was when we first saw what Nakham can do. But now. . . .” He picked up the arm guard again, then glanced at the men clustered around the door. After a moment’s thought, he said, “Get me a set of the leather armor, and barding for Kraken.”

There was a frozen moment during which the men looked to the Commander. He licked his lips, then said, “Do you know what you’re doing, Efran?”

“No. Do I ever? Only that I need to do it, Commander,” Efran said contemplatively.

After a glance of heavy reluctance at his son in the service, Wendt ordered, “Get him dressed out.” Captain Towner stood with a gesture for his scribe Viglian to follow, which he did. Efran shot a look of appreciation to his father. “Take someone with you,” Wendt instructed.

Efran shook his head. “I value all these men too much. Let me be stupid on my own.”

Stites began, “Captain, I request—”

“No, Captain Stites, you’re the last one I want getting hit,” Efran said. Stites shut his mouth, rankled. Wendt eased back in his chair with a vague smile. Despite what he said, Efran was not stupid enough to go alone, but, had his own way of choosing backup. At that, one man on the edge of the listening crowd drew away, going first to the lower barracks armory, then to the stables.

About a half hour later, Efran and Kraken were fully dressed out in hardened leather. As the men opened the wall gates for him to ride out, they all looked to another rider approaching from the east, apparently from the small northeastern gates. Likewise armored in hardened leather, Neale drew up to salute Efran. “Permission to accompany you, Captain.”

There was a reflexive stirring of outrage among the men, but the wisest of them were quiet: at least Neale presented himself ready to go, which none of them had done. Shaking his head, Efran studied him. “I don’t want to lead anyone into a death trap.”

“Can I at least have the chance to regain some honor before I die, Captain?” Neale asked.

Efran heard this as a question that only the old Neale would ask, who had been one of the Forty. “Let’s go,” he said, and the two of them loped up the northern road.

Some of the men banged the gates in anger; Wendt looked after the pair contemplatively. Did Efran know, or suspect, that Neale would volunteer? If he did, that would explain why he turned Stites down: because Polonti had a special hatred of traitors. Meanwhile, Jehan and Coish exchanged a glance, then ran for the armory themselves.

Past the stone bridge and the Coastal Highway North, the two riders approached the ridge that scouts had begun to sweep for booby traps. Here, Efran and Neale slowed their horses to a walk. Neither talked, as they were constantly scanning the road ahead and to the sides. Because the leather helmets impeded their range of vision, they had to keep their heads moving. As far as weaponry, they carried nothing but knives, which was standard gear for any soldier.

At length, Efran slowed. “Here’s the turn-off.” Neale nodded, cutting in front of him to lead down the narrow path. Kraken objected, but Efran pulled him back. This was no time to fight his partner; he’d let Neale earn the honor he desired.

As they came into the clearing at the end of the path, Neale’s horse stumbled. With a rapid *fffffft*, an array of quills embedded themselves in the horse’s front barding, causing him to rear slightly. One found its way to Kraken’s chest, as well.

Both men quickly dismounted to check their horses, finding that the tough leather had prevented the quills’ reaching skin. The men pulled the spines out with gloved hands (neither considering that this would leave wolfsbane on their gloves) and looked underneath the barding to make sure there was no blood. That done, Efran turned to scan the area while Neale bent to inspect the sprung trap.

“Interesting,” he murmured, holding a tan sheath. “Some kind of elastic whip released by the trip of the wire. Simple and almost . . . brilliant.”

Sounds like Showalter, Efran thought. As he took a step, Neale stopped him. “Hold up! They’re all over this area, Captain.” Efran looked down at the barely perceptible streaks of tan in the grass.

“Can you disable them?” Efran asked.

“I think so. Stand there, please.” Kneeling, Neale drew his knife with his right hand while his left pressed down on the trip wire. Holding the wire to the ground, he cut through it easily, then progressed on his hands and knees to the next, and the next.

Not seeing anything on the ground, Efran raised his eyes to the spotty canopy of elms above him—just in time to see a creature with spines along its backside drop from a branch onto Neale.

As Neale jerked up, Efran grabbed the thing by its foot to lift it, thrashing, in the air. Neale quickly stood, and they both watched the thing twist and writhe by its ankle in Efran’s hand. Efran sputtered, “It—looks like a child, kind of.” It was, in fact, roughly the size and shape of his son Joshua, now almost two years old.

But it was sadly deformed, as though something had gone very wrong in the womb. Its head was irregular, its eyes askew, its arms lopsided. As it was unclothed, Efran turned it around to view its front. “Look at that!” he

muttered. There was a shriveled human finger protruding from the area of its navel.

Neale began, “Yes, and this—” While the wretch screeched, Neale held the head with one hand to pull up on an end of the strip of quills. This he was able to rip off the creature entirely, leaving a red patch of raw skin. It appeared that the strip had been in the process of bonding to its back. “This looks to be—skinned from a porcupine,” Neale added in disbelief.

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Chapter 18

Efran held up the writhing, twisting monstrosity. “Were you growing the porcupine skin on you? As protection?” he asked it.

It hissed, “Try to kill me. It doesn’t work.”

“Eh,” Efran said indifferently. To Neale, he said, “Search around; I want to make sure that all the traps are disabled.”

“Yes, Captain.” Neale dropped back down to his knees to continue parsing the grass foot by foot. He found several more devices, but the farther he got from the entryway to the camp, the fewer he found.

With the thing writhing in one hand, Efran took off his leather helmet to see better all around, then removed the shin guards and arm guards that hampered his movement. Because getting hit with the spines was less likely now, he needed the mobility more. But he left on the hardened leather breastplate.

Efran held up the deformity again to look in its face. “Are there more like you?”

“There is none like me. I am unique, Lord Efran,” it said. Had Efran been listening closer, he might have recognized the voice.

“Right.” Efran looked off, incurious as to how the thing knew him. Frankly, so many strangers recognized him by now that he had come to accept it—almost expect it. Neale, still on his hands and knees, was on the fringes of the camp at this time. But because he found another random one or two traps, he continued searching. Efran considered, *It’s good we came here when we did. In another few days, this creature would have secured the area to carry on with—whatever he was doing here.*

At this time, Jehan and Coish, mounted and armored up, were trotting watchfully up the northbound road, looking for the turnoff. But because they had not been in that area before, they missed the slight signs of passage. And they spent the next two hours searching up and down the road, increasingly frustrated.

Waiting for Neale to complete his sweep, Efran looked back down at the thing still struggling in his grip. It reached up to get a hand once or twice on Efran’s glove, but Efran merely detached the misshapen little hand with two fingers. Grimacing, he watched the shriveled relic of a finger dangle from the navel. Since it couldn’t be there for a reason, Efran decided it had just gotten stuck there after the little monster had found or eaten its original bearer. So Efran took the finger in his gloved hand to wrench it off the belly.

The creature shrieked so that Neale looked over. The finger writhed in Efran's glove as though trying to scratch him, so Efran tossed it to Neale. "Do something with that."

Neale watched the severed finger bounce on the ground beside him. Contemplating the order, he picked up a poisoned quill to drive it through the joint of the finger deep in the ground, pinning it. He returned to his search without looking to see the finger shrivel to a black scrap.

Now Efran looked down in hazy disgust at the blood dripping from the navel. "Did I hurt you?" he asked. The freak caught Efran's finger with both hands to bite down on it as hard as it could. But all that accomplished was to pull the glove off Efran's left hand, causing the thing to fall to the ground with the wolfsbane-tainted glove in its teeth.

Efran picked up his glove with his protected hand to shake the creature off it. So the thing flipped over to begin scrambling toward Neale, who was cutting another trip wire. Efran set his foot on its arm, catching it in the arch of his boot.

First, the creature tried to latch onto his boot with its clawed fingers and (admittedly sharp) teeth, but that was even less successful than holding onto the glove. Efran looked down at him like a disappointed schoolteacher. "Why are you trying to kill us?"

"You should know me, Lord Efran," it said.

This time the voice was unmistakable. Neale glanced over, but as it meant nothing to him, he said, "I'm going to check again around the perimeter, Captain."

"Be wary," Efran said, looking down at the aberration of nature under his foot. If Showalter really had preserved some vestige of himself in this thing, then he did have power to do—something.

"Yes, sir," Neale said, moving off.

Lord God, what is he going to spring on me? Efran asked silently. He thought back almost a year ago to Showalter's attacks—the snobbles, the fireballs, the snakes, and finally, Showalter himself enlarged to superhuman proportions. *All perversions of nature*, Efran thought. While he was thinking about this, he was inattentive to what was happening under his boot.

Suddenly hundreds of deformed little arms sprang up out of the ground. Those directly under Efran grabbed his boots. Startled, he tried to lift a foot, but the little arms were inhumanly strong, wrapping themselves around his feet to begin pulling him down into the ground. The grass roots and topsoil seemed to move away of their own to make room for Efran's feet and ankles to descend.

"Captain!" Neale gasped. Efran looked over to see him in worse straits. As he had been on his hands and knees to begin with, the little arms had enclosed his wrists, hands, lower legs, ankles and feet. He was completely helpless, watching his extremities being dragged underground while his face got lower and lower to the suffocating earth.

Kraken came thundering into the clearing to stamp on the appendages, but they grabbed his hooves, heels and pasterns to begin pulling him down as well. There were just too many of them. Neale's horse, whinnying in fear, stayed back from the clearing.

Efran twisted to look down at the deformed little creature, which was dead, clearly so. And then Efran

remembered the wolfsbane on his gloves. One arm and both legs of the dead thing lay on the ground, and the body itself did not seem to be sinking. However, the right arm was underground from the shoulder down, throbbing deep in the soil. So it was being animated by something else, somewhere else.

Below ground, Efran could feel more little arms—roots?—wrapping around his calves. He twisted to look around as best he could, and saw behind him a plane tree—the plane tree, the only one in the area . . . in which Adele had been sealed.

Peering at that tree over his right shoulder about fifteen feet away, Efran discerned Showalter's smiling face in it. Efran quickly drew his knife with his left hand from its sheath on his left hip, flipped it, and threw it as hard as he could at that face.

The knife sank into Showalter's face in the wood up to its hilt. For a moment, Showalter stared back at him. Then his features began dissolving, changing into features of the tree—knotholes, growth lines, rings and pits. The split in the wood caused by the knife began widening, darkening, lengthening both above and below the wound to end as a gaping black crevice in the tree.

Efran felt the little roots relax and fall away from his legs. He looked up to see Neale pulling himself out of his nearly complete grave. Since the roots clung to his gloves, he just pulled his hands free of them. Kraken raised his feet to indignantly trample the remains of the clutching roots. Efran braced himself on the ground to pull his lower legs free. Upright, he shucked off his right glove and kicked both gloves into one deep hole.

He walked over to retrieve his knife from the base of the tree, then turned to regard Neale. "Nice shot, Cap'n," Neale noted, with his old smiling frown that said, *Not half bad, but I could've done better*. Laughing, Efran grabbed the back of his neck, and Neale patted his Captain's shoulder, tears standing in his eyes.

Wiping his face, Efran looked around to say, "I want to make certain there are no more traps here."

Neale turned to see that the grass around them had shriveled to reveal everything, including the fact that only one booby trap remained. He picked up his knife from the hole that had almost consumed him and cut the trip wire.

They took one last walk around the whole area, then reclaimed their discarded gear to pack in their saddle bags. Before climbing up on Kraken, Efran paused to study the plane tree. Was Showalter dead or just hiding? Seeing nothing in the wood, Efran turned away. After he and Neale had left the grounds, Showalter's smiling face reappeared in the black crack of the tree.

Jehan and Coish saw the Captain and Neale emerge from the woods, and followed at a distance. Hearing the hoofbeats, Efran looked back to wave them forward.

It was late in the golden afternoon when the four crossed the old stone bridge so that the gatesmen began clanging the alarm bell to signal their return. Men poured out of the barracks and ran down Main to watch the Captain and Neale trot through the gates, laughing and shaking their heads. Minka came to the forefront of the crowd to watch.

When he saw her, Efran broke into his beautiful smile. "My Minka, come to check on me." He threw himself down from Kraken to bend for her scrutiny. "Am I all right?" he demanded. A few men were patting Neale on the shoulder, and he nodded in gratitude. Jehan and Coish entered the gates, shrugging at queries.

Minka suspiciously surveyed her husband from head to foot. "Your pants are dirty," she finally noted.

The men lifted their groaning faces to the sky, and he snatched her up. “Then I’ll take ’em off,” he proposed in her lips.

“Efran!” she said in embarrassment, squirming down.

“Come on. I have to make our report, then we’ll go up to the dining hall to eat with the children,” he said, taking her hand. Then he looked at Neale, who was hanging back uncertainly. Efran gestured to him. “You come as well.” Minka turned to glow at Neale.

“Thank you, Captain,” he said, and every man standing around vowed in his heart that he’d never let the Captain ride out of the gates without him again.

They all thronged through the barracks’ office into the conference room. Sitting at the head of the table, Wendt said, “Let’s hear it.”

Efran threw himself into a chair with Minka beside him to look across the table where Neale was taking a seat. Then Efran did the unthinkable, conferring the honor of making the report on the man who had betrayed him. “I’ll let Neale tell you,” Efran said, smiling at Minka again. But she firmly resisted his efforts to get her onto his lap.

In the silence of the room, Neale began a straightforward accounting. As he talked, his voice, mannerisms and bearing reverted to the Neale of old, one of the loyal Forty, one of the earliest captains at the Lands. A few men looked cautiously at the Captain, whose face showed nothing but satisfaction. Everyone deserved a shot at redemption, and some made it good.

When Neale related the part about the binding roots shooting up from the ground, he implied it was from the tree, not realizing that this Showalter was behind anything. Efran did not interrupt to correct him; he just noted the additional explanation that was due Wendt and Minka.

But as Neale described himself being pulled below ground, Minka turned to look down at Efran’s pants again. He shrugged, implying, *Aren’t I all right? It was nothing.* She narrowed her eyes at him, but the fact of his wholeness was irrefutable.

At this time on the hilltop, Escarra was sitting on the stone bench, as he did for most of every day now. Looking over the broadness of the Lands, he had his arm over the back of the bench above the bronze plaque.

A figure clambered up beside him, obscuring the plaque, and he looked down at Tambling. Her dog Felix was trying to get up on the bench as well, but it was too high a jump for his short legs. So she leaned over to pick him up and put him on her lap, as usual.

“I’m sorry your son died,” she whispered, and his arm dropped over her shoulder. “I only saw him once or twice, but he smiled at me,” she said. He smiled down at her in return.

She pressed a little closer into his side. “Everyone is very nice here, aren’t they?” she asked, looking around. The other children were working in their garden plots, which did not interest her much.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

“But, you know, they’re not from home, and, I don’t know anyone from home except you and Felix.” She paused

to squeeze her little dog, who licked her face. “I’m homesick, and lonely for my friends. My parents haven’t come here yet, and, the soldier over there with the crooked nose said that they weren’t getting any more reggies—regurees—”

“Refugees?” Escarra suggested.

“Yes. There haven’t been any more coming to the gates in the last few days,” she said in anxiety. “Are they dead, Escarra?” She was trembling now.

“I don’t know. I pray not,” he said sincerely.

She looked around, thinking hard. “Toby says that Ashe is in heaven. So then, maybe they are, too. Maybe there’s a special section in heaven for us from Eurus. Do you think so? That way, they could be there with Ashe, and you and I will see them all someday. Do you think that’s right?”

He lifted his eyes over the Lands again, and said, “Yes, I think they’re waiting for us there. Just waiting.”

She exhaled in relief. “Good,” she said, wiping her nose. “Then we’ll wait, too, won’t we? You and I can wait together.”

“Yes, Tambling. We’ll wait together,” he said, squeezing her shoulders. She nestled down on him.

A few minutes later, Jera ran up to her with a funny green and white bulb in her hands. “Look, Tambling, the gourds are ripe!” She shook it, and Tambling sat up at the rattle. “Tourjee is going to carve a few for us, and he said you get first choice. He can carve them into bird feeders, or faerie houses, or just storage bottles with lids—you see, the stem makes the lid handle. He scrapes them all clean and neat inside. Come pick one!”

Tambling bounded up off the bench, but told Escarra, “I’ll be right back.” Felix jumped down to scamper after her.

“Go on, dear. I’ll wait,” he said. Watching her run off with her new friend, he felt a lightening of his heart for the first time since that devastating separation four days ago. Looking up to the brilliant blue sky, he repeated, “I’ll wait.”

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Chapter 19

That evening at dinner, Efran was wearing clean pants *and* a clean shirt. The children swarmed the back table at which he and Minka sat with Joshua, Ella, Quennel, Rondi, Mathurin, and various other soldiers. The children had to show Efran and Minka the gourds which each of them had picked out, and tell them what Tourjee (or another garden helper) would carve it to be.

“Mine is going to be a house for my little people. Here’s my little girl,” Hassie said, showing Minka a small clay figure, painted with a red dress and curly yellow hair.

“Hassie, did you make that?” Minka gasped, admiring the details.

“Yes, though the potter Popplewell helped me a little,” she admitted.

“It’s perfect. I can’t wait to see your whole family,” Minka said, handing it back to her. Efran looked over to nod, his mouth full. Joshua, having earned custard by choking down greens, was interested in nothing but the cup in one hand and the spoon in the other.

“Here’s mine,” Ivy said, pressing forward with a delicate yellow-and-white striped gourd. As Minka admired it, Ivy added, “I want Tourjee to carve it into a perfume bottle—”

“Perfume?” Efran choked on his mouthful.

“Tarts wear perfume. It’s in the rules,” she told him impatiently.

He began to plead, “Ivy—”

“Anyhow, I have to wait for him to finish Tambling’s, because he promised her he’d do hers first. I don’t know what he’s making of it. She can’t show it to you because he’s got it now,” Ivy said.

Efran looked over to the next table, where Tambling was sitting beside Escarra, who was listening to her. Efran drew a breath. Life was good; even in sorrow, there were consolations. But—“You may not wear perfume. That’s in *my* rules,” he told Ivy. She made a peeved face at him.

The following day, November 2nd, Detler was taking a shortcut back to Barracks A after having run a message from Gabriel to Lemmerz about the possibility of building another barracks in the eastern Lands. Skirting Twombley’s Dry Goods (behind doctor Coghill’s house), Detler saw a tumult at the entrance of Twombley’s. Since he was in uniform, he trotted over to see if he could calm things down a bit.

Arriving at the edge of a small but excited crowd, he raised his hands. “Here now, what—”

“A troll! There’s a troll in Twombley’s!” a woman screamed.

“If you’ll calm down, I’ll have a look, all right?” Detler roared. The woman and several others went quiet, backing off.

Detler entered the store to see customers standing off from the counter in fear. Twombley himself stood behind it, regarding something whose head barely showed over the counter. Approaching, Detler looked down at a little girl troll who was pointing at something behind the merchant.

Having been one of the soldiers to see the trolls bring their families into the playgrounds with the Captain’s permission, Detler recognized her right away. She was almost clean, and almost pretty for a troll—her wild, wiry hair had kind of a sheen to it, and her nose wasn’t quite as big and red as most of them. She was stocky in the middle, with skinny arms and legs and sprawling feet that would fit with difficulty in a grown woman’s pair of flats.

“Here now, what d’you need, girlie?” Detler asked. She continued to point insistently behind Twombley at a sack of rye flour. Detler nodded at him, “Pull out the bag o’ flour, Twombley.”

The merchant turned hesitantly to the shelves. “It’s five pieces,” he noted.

Detler was fishing in his own pocket for payment when he saw the royal that the little girl clutched in her other knobby hand. “Here, she’s got payment,” Detler said, almost offended. He took the royal from her fingers to hand to Twombley.

He took it, studying it to make sure that it was genuine. Then he said, “I—haven’t got enough silver to give her change.” A royal was worth 30 silver pieces.

Detler glanced around momentarily, then bent to ask the girl, “D’you need anything else? What else you got there, Twombley? The rice is good, ain’t it? What d’you think, girlie?”

The child looked complacent, so while other customers watched, Twombley pulled out one offering after another: a bag of rice, a basket of dried apple rings, a pouch of venison jerky, and even a simple little frock of pink cotton. This Detler took to pull on over her head and cover whatever bag that she was wearing. She looked down at the pink, patting it.

Buying all that with the rye flour got her six pieces in change. As Twombley pushed the coins across the counter, Detler said, “C’mon now, give ’er a little bag for her change. And box up the rest of this for me to carry.” Mildly chagrined at the accusation of being rude to a customer, Twombley did all that.

Detler then escorted the girl out around gaping Landers. Wearing her pretty dress, carrying her little bag, she padded down the sidewalk beside her champion, who carried her box of dry goods. Detler paused to give a passing man Lemmerz’s answer to Gabriel (“Sure, we can work in another barracks—let me know when you can go look at locations”). Then he escorted the youngster around the smiling guards and out the gates.

They two went over the bridge to the playgrounds, which Detler entered in astonishment at the activity. There were huts going up similar to the first, but also ground being tilled. The trolls apparently liked the brick walkway that Tarrant and Toby had laid to the first hut, for there were clay bricks being arranged in a similar fashion up to the door of another.

One of the troll men rushed up to Detler and the girl with amiable jabbering. As that troll took the box, Detler looked at a pair of men coming in behind him. They patted him on the back with their great lumpy hands, telling him, “Wurk! Wer wurk!”

When they showed him their royals, and he looked down at their muddy feet, he apprehended, “You’re digging! You’re digging the new sewers!”

“Akeducks,” one troll corrected him.

“Aqueducts. Right-o,” Detler said with a laugh. But as the little girl was walking away, he ran to catch up with her. Bending, he said, “Detler,” tapping his chest. “You ask for me if you need help again. Detler. What’s your name?”

When she just blinked at him, he straightened to the smiling trolls around him. “Detler,” he repeated, thumping himself. “What’s ’er name?” He pointed to the girl.

“Ah. Fumagallie. Da Fumagallie,” one troll said happily.

Detler looked pained. “Can I call ’er ‘Gallie’?”

“Da, da. Gallie,” the troll said.

Detler knelt to her again. “Gallie,” he said, pointing to her. “Detler,” he said, back at himself.

“Deetler,” she repeated, and he grinned.

“Right-o, then. Carry on.” He stood in satisfaction, leaving to their happy waves. And he went straight back to Barracks A to tell his astonished Commander what the trolls were up to.

About that time, Windry was sitting at a table in the outdoor dining area of Averno’s, right next to the low fence separating it from Firmin’s outdoor dining area. (The seats around her were few, because the pond on Averno’s side of the fence took up so much room.) She wanted Lilou to see that she was snubbing her because Lilou wouldn’t give her free meals or loan her any more money, which was ridiculous. If she was going to work, she should come home and share her earnings with her mother.

Every time Lilou came within view, Windry turned wounded eyes to her, but Lilou was so busy, she never saw her. “How can she ignore her mother like that?” Windry muttered. She needed to be working now; she had baskets of wool waiting to be carded and woven, plus a number of half-finished projects, but—she just couldn’t sit in that empty house any longer. She needed company. And money.

One man sat at her table so abruptly that it rocked. She looked at him cautiously, discounting him immediately for his sweat-stained, filthy work clothes and air of importance. “Hiyuh there,” he said. “What’ll yuh have to eat? I’ll join yuh.”

Curling her lip, she didn’t answer. So he said, “Don’t think I can pay?” He reached into his pocket to flip a royal on the table. “Been digging the new sewers. Ever’body sez they’s ‘akwaducks,’ but they ain’t, they’s sewers. Even the dam’ trolls come out to dig the sewers, if yuh can wrap yuh head around that.”

“That’s my husband coming,” she said, nodding to a beefy laborer who was approaching them on the sidewalk.

The newly rich digger promptly got up with his royal and left. Windry lowered her eyes so that the unknown laborer would pass by without bothering her. (No, that wasn’t her husband Surley.)

She then spotted Eryk coming out of Averno’s practically in front of her with baskets of produce. She posed prettily at her table, but he didn’t see her. So she called, “Eryk!” He didn’t hear her. She called louder, “ERYK!” and he looked over.

Tilting her head in her girlish way, she said, “I see you’ve been shopping! Is all that for Hartshough?”

He glanced away in confusion, then said, “. . . Yes?”

“Well, come sit a moment!” She patted the seat beside her, because a server had just told her that if she wanted to sit there, she needed to order something.

“I—” He held up the baskets of perishables as if to make some kind of point, then went on his way with a confused shake of his head.

Windry slumped back in her chair. Then almost immediately, like an answer to prayer, appeared a man in a dapper suit with a top hat and a dashing cape. Windry folded her hands demurely on the table, but looked up with wanton eyes.

He received the message immediately, pausing to evaluate her. With the air of someone who had nothing better to do, he approached her table to tip his hat. “Good afternoon. I am Verlice, stylist for Elvey’s. I’ve seen you about, but we’ve never been introduced.”

“Please have a seat,” she urged. “I’m Windry; I’m a weaver, but, I come away from my loom from time to time for . . . inspiration.”

“There is nothing like a walk down Main Street for inspiration,” he agreed, sitting next to her and placing his hat and walking stick on the chair opposite him.

A server immediately approached the table to ask, “What’ll you have, sir?”

“A mild ale for the moment, and perhaps a plate of cheese balls. A lager for you, my dear?” Verlice said, smoothing back his ruffled hair.

“That would be lovely, thank you,” she murmured. Satisfied, the server withdrew.

“Well,” Verlice said, glancing around. “You chose the perfect moment and the perfect spot to meditate, as it is blessedly free of the rabble that normally congregate around—” He broke off, face sagging, and Windry turned in her chair to look.

Efran, on his obnoxiously prancing black horse, had just pulled up to Firmin’s next door. He had his toddler on his arm, and his wife on a little mare beside him. He hopped down off his great horse as if he were stepping off the curb with his little lookalike secure on his arm. Then he walked over to lift his wife down from her saddle with his other arm while she protested, “Efran! I can do it myself!”

“What fun is that?” he laughed with his glorious smile. Their two bodyguards dismounted behind them; one looked over to Windry and nudged his partner, who recognized her as well. (Jehan and Coish had won bodyguard duty today for being so sorely disappointed in their efforts to follow the Captain and Neale yesterday.)

Firmin’s stable boy began taking their horses around back as Lilou came rushing out to bounce around them in excitement. “Efran! Sit here! What do you want? But we’re out of cheese balls.”

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Chapter 20

Efran smiled down on Lilou’s eagerness to serve them. “Oh, tea for the lady, pie for her and Joshua—any kind—mild ales for whatever men sit here, and—whatever—”

“We have breaded fish bites just now frying straight from Shurtleff’s,” she said breathlessly.

“Bring your fish bites,” he conceded, and she left in a whirlwind.

Close to the pond, he sat his wife in a chair that was only about ten feet from Windry’s table. Efran spread out in the chair next to her with his back to Avere’s. Their bodyguards promptly sat behind them, then a deluge of men

appeared from nowhere to take seats around them or, more likely, stand on the sidewalk in front of them to talk.

The men all approached respectfully, with salutes, but then immediately let down to talk as friends. They were so loud, interrupting each other so frequently, that it was impossible for Verlice and Windry to converse where they sat. But neither of them suggested moving. They quietly ate the valuable cheese balls and drank ale while listening to the ruckus next door.

“Neale! Sit over here,” Minka commanded, indicating a prime spot next to Jehan, who made room for him. Efran glanced over to nod, stretching as he leaned back in his chair with his son on his shoulder. Verlice watched Windry watch the muscles ripple across Efran’s back under his shirt.

A flash caught her eye, and she looked in disgust at the diamonds dangling from Minka’s ears. And the gold band on her wrist! How dare she? So Windry leaned over to whisper a disparaging comment to Verlice about girls who flaunt their wealth in public. In agreement, he scowled at the display of diamonds in an outdoor eating area. He started to whisper a supportive comment, but Windry hushed him so they could hear:

“Captain! Did you hear about the troll girl at Twombley’s?” someone called.

Efran leaned forward, and Windry watched the shirt tighten on his back. “What? A troll at Twombley’s? Who—”

“Detler. Where is he? Someone go fetch Detler,” one man said.

There was a lot of crosstalk about where Detler was while Neale was answering questions about their encounter with the creature and the roots yesterday. Another man mentioned Escarra, and they went almost quiet as the Captain told them, yes, he was grieving, but had found someone to grieve with, and that made it bearable.

Then Detler appeared on the sidewalk in order to hear highly vocal doubts as to whether he really helped a troll girl at Twombley’s. The men finally shut up for him to tell them about the precocious little purchaser and the wealth she had on her for the rye flour.

“A royal!” one man said in disbelief. “Who’d she steal a royal from?”

Detler solemnly shook his head. “It wasn’t stolen.” There followed a loud chorus of disbelieving jeers. “The Cap’n knows how she got it. D’you know, Cap’n?” Detler demanded. All the men hushed, looking to him.

“I haven’t a clue,” Efran disavowed.

One man posed, “Then somebody dropped it and she picked it up off the street.”

Detler shook his head. “Nope.”

Another man said, “She begged it off someone.”

“No,” Detler said.

“Then how did she get it?” the soldiers protested, on the verge of throttling the storyteller.

Detler looked around at the men appraisingly. Then he took a royal from his pocket—the only one he had—and lifted it above his head. “I’ll give this royal to anybody who can tell me how she got one.” After having heard all the questions and suggestions, he was confidant that no one here knew.

Windry cried, “The trolls are digging on the new sewers!” Twenty surprised faces turned to her—including Efran’s—but Windry looked only at him. He dropped his eyes and turned back around.

Detler, crushed, handed the royal to a man near the low fence. “Give it to ’er.” That man then leaned over the fence to hand it to Windry. She took it primly to place in her pocket. Verlice reddened in embarrassment.

Efran’s shoulders started shaking. With repressed laughter, he shifted Joshua to dig a royal out of his pocket which he flipped to Detler: “That was stupid but entertaining.” The men fell back, clapping.

Detler, revived by the reimbursement, whistled lightly. Lilou ran up, and he gave the royal to her. “Another round of ale, girlie.”

“Yes sir!” She pocketed the royal and ran off.

“So the trolls are digging, and earning money, and making improvements to the playground,” Efran mused. “That’s excellent.” He looked at Minka to ask, “Do you think they could be related to the mountain trolls?”

“Like Hartshough?” she whispered, and he nodded, readjusting his sleepy son to lie down on his arm. She raised her shoulders. “I . . . have no idea. But they don’t look anything like him.”

“Hmm.” He leaned over his boy to nuzzle his wife.

Windry rapidly consumed her share of the cheese balls and chugged her lager. Verlice watched dubiously, then began to suggest, “Shall we—”

“Thank you very much,” she said, standing. “I’d love to see you around later.” She puckered at him, and he dismally watched her walk off. From there, she went straight to the notary’s shop to pay two months’ rent on her house.

Not much later, Minka leaned on Efran’s arm to murmur, “I want to see Auntie.”

“All right.” He kissed her head, then stood with his sleeping son. Jehan and Coish ran to the stables to get their horses while Efran took a pouch out of his pocket to absently lay it on the table. The men saluted and melted away as Efran led Minka out by her elbow (just from habit. He didn’t doubt her ability to walk by herself; it was his protective nature that surfaced whenever he was near her.)

While he and she stood out front waiting for their horses, Lilou came out to see the empty tables. She went over to pick up the pouch to look in it, then sagged in distress. Seeing him out front, she ran to him with the pouch. He looked down at her. “Lilou? What’s wrong?”

She pulled on his arm to make him bend down. “Efran, it’s too much! It’s so much too much! Take half of it out and that will cover the bill and the tip!” she whispered earnestly.

He whispered back, “Then put it aside for when you or Ionadi might need it. But, that’s for you and her, Lilou; that’s not for your mother. She can earn her own way.”

“All right, Efran. Thank you.” She kissed his cheek as a grateful little girl, and that was all. Minka looked over in understanding.

They mounted their horses to ride to the chapel at a walk with Joshua still passed out on Efran's arm and their bodyguards following on their horses. Efran looked over to ask her, "What's wrong?"

"I don't know, really. I think I have to talk to Auntie to find out," she said with a weak laugh.

"Hold on; we're almost there," he said.

She closed her eyes. "You're so patient with me."

"You're so worth it," he returned.

She stretched out her hand to him on Kraken, but couldn't reach. So Kraken swerved toward her to bump the mare, who flattened her ears. "We'll take care of it," Efran told him, turning him away from the mare. Kraken kicked out a back leg in a petty tantrum, which Efran ignored.

When the four of them arrived at the chapel, Eryk took their horses around back, and Hartshough met them at the door. "Good afternoon, Lord Efran, Lady Minka, and young gentlemen. Shall you care for refreshments on the back patio?"

"Thank you, Hartshough, but we're all refreshed out," Efran said, patting his shoulder. "Minka wants to see her auntie, though."

"Yes; please follow me." Hartshough turned to lead them through the labyrinth of trees, and they grinned at each other.

Outside under the arbor, they found Marguerite sitting with Faciane. Appraising that, Efran bent to kiss Marguerite's head. "Minka needed her auntie, but Joshua and I'll just lie down in the grass."

"Oh, Efran, let me hold him, even asleep. I don't see him nearly enough," Marguerite protested, raising her arms.

"Call me when he crushes you," Efran said, laying the toddler across her lap. He was getting heavy.

Minka sat beside her, smiling at Faciane across the table. Jehan and Coish communicated silently; Coish went out to the yard with Efran while Jehan took the last seat at the table between Minka and Faciane.

There was a short silence, during which Marguerite rearranged Joshua on her lap and Minka looked out to the yard. Efran had flopped onto his back in the grass while Coish sat on a dry rock edge of the fountain. Kraken, unburdened of saddle and bridle, ambled over to roll so close to Efran that he had to move over. Minka's mare Rose was also let into the yard to graze, but retained her gear.

Faciane told Minka, "I was just showing Marguerite my newest creations." She gestured to an array of earrings, necklaces and bracelets on the table.

"They're lovely," Minka said, looking at them sightlessly. She was preoccupied trying to think of what to say to Auntie in front of Faciane. Also, because Minka was aggravated at herself for neglecting Efran's gifts, she had made a point to wear the diamond and gold earrings and engraved golden cuff from the Treasury today. This she had forgotten about, but Faciane saw them, and paled.

Minka watched Marguerite coo over Joshua, who began to wake a little. Then Minka said, "Oh! Detler told us about the funniest thing that happened! He found a little girl troll at Twombly's who was—"

“A troll?” Faciane gasped. “Here? In the Lands?”

Minka began explaining, “Oh! Not exactly. They’re in the playground across the Passage, but, they’re good trolls. They—”

“Bloodthirsty creatures. There are no good trolls.” Faciane was shaking.

Minka winced. “Oh, dear, I know how you suffered because of them. But, there are many different kinds of trolls—”

“And Efran allows them here?” Faciane was peering at her in disbelief.

“It’s all right, really. These trolls saved Rondi,” Minka said.

Faciane was looking at her in utter disgust. Then she turned to Marguerite. “And you’re fine with that?”

Marguerite replied, “There are good men and bad men, dear, of all different skins.”

Faciane put her head in her hands. “They almost killed us.”

Minka said, “The bad ones almost killed Efran, too, which is why he takes care for the good ones.” Jehan was wisely silent; Efran and Coish were watching from the yard.

Faciane stared down at her papier-mâché jewelry while Minka’s gold and diamond earrings glittered fire from her wild curls. Suddenly, Faciane hated everything about this place. Standing, she swept her pieces off the table before storming out through the kitchen.

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Chapter 21

Efran sat up; Minka turned to Marguerite in dismay. “Auntie! What—what did I—?”

“I’m afraid she didn’t like what you’re wearing,” Marguerite murmured as Joshua sat up sleepily on her lap.

“Hawso,” he muttered, pulling on his ear. Minka fingered her earring as she looked down at the scattered pieces of paper jewelry.

“Oh, dear. I should have known better. I didn’t mean to—” Minka was trying to unhook the earrings to take them off. Efran came to the patio to watch with hard eyes.

Marguerite said sharply, “Minka, I refuse to let you feel guilty for wearing them, and I refuse to let you take them off now.”

Minka stared at her while Efran withdrew from the patio, taking Joshua with him to go lie back down in the grass. Marguerite let him go reluctantly, but Minka fell on her auntie, crying, “I love you!”

“And I love you, dearest. We’ll let Faciane and Justinian work out their own affairs,” Marguerite said, patting her hand.

“Does this involve Justinian?” Minka asked warily.

“In some degree, it must. I’m sure she had reason to be angry at Verlice, but I don’t think it was wise to divorce him.” Marguerite looked vaguely perturbed, as she had when the trolls were ransacking Featherstone.

“Oh. Well, not every man can be as wonderful as Efran,” Minka said. Lying on the grass about twenty feet away, he grinned. Coish looked away to mutter something about Justinian, and Efran rebuked him with a laugh. Jehan went rigid to contain a bark.

“Efran’s a lot like Wendt,” Marguerite observed. Minka nodded happily, playing with Marguerite’s fingers. “One thing I don’t care for, however, is when Wendt—” She leaned over to whisper in Minka’s ear, and Efran sat straight up in the grass. Jehan squinted in the effort of deciphering hisses.

When Marguerite finished her observation and pulled away with a resigned nod, Minka almost fell out of her chair, laughing. Jehan leapt up to catch her and put her back in her seat. “Oh that’s—that’s just—” She was gasping for breath.

At this time, Faciane had caught Justinian coming out of Delano’s. He wasn’t buying ale; he was talking with Delano, who employed a few men to sell ales and lagers in the surrounding villages and Westford. The construction supervisors in charge of the rebuilding were providing a steady flow of refreshment to their workers. In fact, sales of Delano’s in Westford had grown so quickly that Delano hired a man to sell directly from their brewery there.

The point being, these salesman were eyes and ears for a wide swath north of the Lands, and a rapid warning system for any movement of men, trolls or arms. So Justinian usually checked in with Delano daily. On the sidewalk in front of his building, Faciane poured out to Justinian her deep humiliation at trying to sell her handmade jewelry to Marguerite when Minka swept in wearing diamonds and gold.

Justinian listened quietly, wondering how this could ever be an issue when Minka simply didn’t know how to dress up. If she swept anywhere, it was in the plain linen dresses that she had worn since first coming to the Abbey. But Verlice, exiting Firmin’s in disappointment to find neither Faciane nor Arbaiza nor Windry there, saw the couple and subtly crossed the street to pause behind them. In the space of a few seconds, he concluded that Minka, wearing diamonds, had laughed and mocked at Faciane’s handmade jewelry. Gripping his walking stick, he turned to stalk up Main toward Chapel Road, vengeance in every stride.

Justinian’s sharp eyes caught movement behind them, and he asked Faciane, “What did you tell Verlice?”

“What? Verlice?” she asked, confused, and he nodded toward the angry ex-husband striding toward the chapel. “Uh oh,” she murmured, turning to follow. Justinian followed her with a look of foreboding. He hated the sight of blood, which there would be much of should Verlice express anything unpleasant to Minka in Efran’s hearing.

Faciane and Justinian ran after Verlice, who had altered his angry stride to that of heated pursuit. So he burst through the guards at the front door, who knew him as Marguerite’s son, to brush past the impeding faerie trees and arrive at the back patio.

Hardly before anyone could turn around and look at him, he had landed a blow on the patio table with the brass

knob of his walking stick which cracked the glass table top. Minka jumped with a gasp; Marguerite held her arm, beginning, “Verlice—” But Efran stood to begin walking over, breathing. Coish prevented Joshua from following, because the Captain was . . . breathing.

It was his “bear in the back of the cave” breathing: that quiet, sustained indication that disaster was about to befall someone if they didn’t fly like a house in a tornado.

Efran approached the patio while Verlice was haranguing Minka, “How dare you flaunt your wealth and status to a woman who lost everything but her life? The heartache that she has endured because of these evil creatures should fill you with pity instead of contempt!” Justinian, coming to the table from the kitchen, held his breath to see Efran arrive on the other side.

Efran was reaching across the table toward Verlice’s ruffled shirt when Faciane caught her ex-husband’s arm from behind to spin him around. “No, Verlice, you idiot! She did nothing; it was only my stupid pride!”

“But, Faciane, after I’ve hurt you so much, I can’t endure the thought of anyone else hurting you!” Verlice said in genuine anguish.

Efran paused in recognition of that feeling. Faciane said, “Oh, Verlice, we were all so confused and bewildered—I can’t blame you for hoping that our men would defend us as they should have.” She laid a hand on his chest.

“No, Faciane,” he said, head hanging. “I should have swallowed my pride and asked the Polonti at once for help, even though I had grave doubts about what they could do.”

He said nothing because he had doubts about what we could do? Jehan squinted at Coish, who had come up behind the Captain with Joshua in his arms. Coish crossed his eyes.

“But you earned the right to be proud of what you had built,” Faciane said. “And if the trolls are truly gone, we should go back and rebuild.”

He looked at her in breathless hope. “Faciane! Do you mean it?” he gasped.

“Yes. I was a fool to let one lapse wipe out all that we had together,” she said tenderly. Efran was rocking slightly on his heels; Minka was watching them as though the whole scene were spoken in Western Frisian.

“Can we leave at once?” he asked, holding her close.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered, stroking his chest under the frills.

“Come, then.” And he led her out on his arm, her head on his shoulder.

Those remaining on the patio looked blankly at each other. Then a young messenger, Salk, appeared from the kitchen. Spotting his target, he said, “Lord Justinian, the Notary Lord Ryal sends his apologies—your recent marriage is invalid because the waiting period after the lady’s divorce wasn’t observed.” And he handed Justinian a royal, which is what he had paid for the marriage license. “Captain,” Salk saluted. Efran nodded and Salk turned to leave again by way of the kitchen.

Justinian pocketed the royal, then told Efran, “Delano says his circuit salesmen tell him there are no more trolls anywhere, except here. Many were wiped out in the purge, but even more ran back north to the Fastnesses. A unknown number of those who stayed were killed by the poisoned porcupine quills. Apparently they’d heard of something valuable buried at a campsite near here, which the original owner wanted back.”

“Something valuable? What?” Efran asked.

“Some kind of potion that changed whoever drank it into a . . . Pongo,” Justinian said carefully.

“‘Pongo.’ What is that?” Efran asked.

“A distinctive kind of ape. There was a carriage driver back in January of this year who was apparently the first to experience this dramatic change. I understand he’s part of a traveling zoo now. But the trolls who heard about it wanted the potion for themselves, so went to war with the original owner,” Justinian said.

“The original owner of the potion that changed appearances,” Efran said carefully. *That would be Showalter*, he thought.

“Yes, that’s my understanding. So he was attempting to wipe out the troll thieves and reclaim his property,” Justinian said.

“Do we know who has the potion now?” Efran asked.

“No,” Justinian said. “Or even if it still exists.”

“All right,” Efran said, looking off in thought. Then he looked back at Justinian to ask hesitantly, “Are you . . . all right?”—after having lost the woman he professed to be in love with.

Justinian exhaled, “I don’t think I’ll ever forgive you for marrying the one girl who could have made me happy.” He and Efran looked at Minka.

She flattened her lips at the jilted lover. “Oh, that’s ridiculous. You’re just romanticizing the fact that you don’t like to be married.”

“Ouch,” Justinian said quietly. “I’ll be in my room, if anyone needs me.” Then he paused to look at the cracked glass. “Sorry about your table top, dear.”

“It can be replaced,” Marguerite said. “You can’t be. I’m glad you’re still with us, Justinian.”

“Thank you, dear heart.” Perking up, he twirled his walking stick on his way back to the hall, and the stairway.

The following afternoon of November 3rd, when Efran, Minka and Joshua were on the back grounds with the children, a contingent of the leadership—Toby, Noah, Ivy, Hassie, and Alcmund—came to Efran with a complaint. Just this once, Toby allowed Hassie to be spokesperson, as she had deepest feelings about the matter.

So she stood before Efran with crossed arms to say, “Efran, it’s been two weeks since Jonguitud’s babies were born, and we still haven’t seen them, though you keep promising we will.” The other children supported her with wounded eyes.

Restraining a smile, Efran said, “You cannot go on the hilltop.”

“But why can’t we stand down on the road to see if they will come down to us? Jonguitud always comes down to us, but we have to be on the road,” she pleaded cogently.

Efran glanced at Minka, who raised her brows at him. Joshua patted his shoulder in solidarity with the children. Efran exhaled, “We’ll go down to the road. No one goes up a foot on the hill, or we’ll come right back.”

The children cheered, and Efran whistled for bodyguards to go with them. Besides the children mentioned, there were Chorro, Elwell, Jera, Acy, Pim, and Calix. Jera called urgently to Tambling, who pulled Escarra off the bench to join them. The soldiers Arne, Verrin and Bennard accompanied them down, with Arne carrying Pim, the youngest.

As they went down the switchback, they looked eagerly to the nest on the hillside, but saw nothing moving around it, not even Jonguitud. Regardless, they walked hopefully west on Chapel Road to stand directly below the nest, high on the hilltop above. Still they saw nothing, until—

Efran sucked in a breath to see Pia and three of her Polonti attendants walking down the northwestern hillside from the woods. Also seeing them, the children pointed and cried out to them in warning. Efran took a step up, but Minka breathed, “Don’t you dare. She knows what she’s doing. You don’t.”

He grimaced back at her, but stayed where he was while they all watched the group descend to the nest. Pia even leaned over to look in the hole beside it, and Efran started swaying. But she straightened to proceed downhill with her bodyguards.

When they arrived at the group of children, there was much chiding and crosstalk and even some tears until Efran whistled, kneeling with Joshua in front of Pia. “We’re going to be quiet and let Pia tell us what they’re about.”

She stroked Joshua’s head, as she liked to, and said, “They eat, and will come down.”

The children received this news in tentative silence. Efran asked, “They’re eating? Snobbles?”

“Yes,” Pia said complacently. So the whole group of them looked back up to the hole.

A few minutes later, a large shape emerged from the hole to begin scabbling down the hillside, waving its three heads in greeting. With the hydra were two smaller bodies: one was black, like Jonguitud, but had only one head. Also, it was staying aloft by furiously flapping two small wings, which Jonguitud lacked. The other baby had two heads, but was hardly discernible except as a black lump on Jonguitud’s back. Halfway down the slope, it desired to descend on its own, so suddenly appeared as little more than rocks and dirt moving downhill. Where its head or feet came in front of Jonguitud, they changed to black.

The children and bodyguards watched breathlessly as this unruly cavalcade approached, but Efran was searching the sky for mother Gevorgyan, who could camouflage herself to invisibility. Also, she resented anyone messing with her babies. He had not found her before the dragon family arrived at the road.

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Chapter 22

Jonguitud sat up on his haunches as usual while the children fell in delight on the babies, each about the size of a bulldog, around 50 pounds. Pulled down from the air, the black one landed on Elwell. Before it could hurt him, Verrin picked it up to hold it so that the children could gather around and pet it. “Look at those teeth!” Noah cried in admiration.

“Keep yer hands away from ’em, then,” Bennard ordered. They minded him, mostly.

Calix stretched a wing out from the body to study it, and the baby knocked him down pulling it back. Efran glanced in concern at the hubbub, but was still keeping his eyes skyward. The two-headed baby, sitting up like Jonguitud, had hands petting both its heads. When Jera leaned against it, its skin replicated the flowers of her dress.

Escarra watched all this in wonder while Tambling held on to his hand. Pia complacently regarded the excitement; Jonguitud lowered his middle head to her in greeting. Efran asked him, “Where is the mother?”

“Off playing,” Jonguitud said, waving a forearm in dismissal.

“Playing?” Efran asked, searching for an interpretation. “Hunting?”

“Flip flop.” Jonguitud turned all three heads upside down, which made the children screech in laughter.

“But what have you and the babies been doing?” Hassie demanded.

“Eating,” Jonguitud said. His right head opened its mouth to show them two snobbles clinging to its yellow tongue. Efran startled; the children cried out in surprise, and the snobbles dropped off the tongue, seeking escape.

There followed chaos as the children scattered, screaming. The bodyguards picked up the smaller ones while stamping futilely at the skittering creatures. The black baby darted at one, snapping it up. Efran plucked the other snobble off his boot, holding it with two fingers behind the fiercely clacking teeth. One camouflaged head swiftly took it from his fingers, leaving a streak of blood—his—and Efran pulled back his hand with a gasp. Joshua, on his other arm, attended all this in great interest.

“All right, we’re done. Back up!” Efran ordered, wiping the blood on his pants.

Minka picked up his hand to study the injured finger. “It just needs alcohol,” she decided.

“Not amputation?” he asked, watching the bodyguards herd the children eastward on the road.

“You shouldn’t have tried to play with it,” Minka said reprovingly.

“Wha—?” he half cried. He was distracted by Jonguitud waving at them before scampering back up the hillside, followed by his little ones. Efran looked for Pia, but she and her Polonti were already halfway to their woods. The children were running up the switchback in victory, all agreeing that this had been the best, the most fun outing ever. Seeing Escarra laugh lightly as he trotted with Tambling, Efran thought that maybe it had been.

After the children had settled down to saner play on the hilltop, Minka kissed Efran and rode out with Rondi to

go help Racheal at The Lands Clothing Shop. (They took bodyguards, of course; today they were Martyn and Seagrave.)

Then Efran went to the courtyard to look north past the wall gates at the line of trees beyond the ridge. Although he scanned for the one plane tree, it was not visible from here. And he wondered, was Showalter dead? Or had he managed to survive in some form, again? Had he found the potion he was looking for, or was that a red herring?

Efran was fairly sure that this potion was what Adele had used to change her appearance in order to get into the fortress. But it certainly hadn't changed her into an ape, so something must have happened to alter it—maybe it just went bad over time. Was it a threat? Did any threat remain in that campground? It was too close to the Lands to ignore.

After thinking on this, Efran turned with the intention of ordering Kraken saddled. But Connor was leading Kraken to him, geared up, as well as another horse. He stopped before Efran to salute. "Permission to accompany you, Captain."

Efran half-smiled, nodding. Connor was one of the old guard who could read him at a glance. "We have to stop by Barracks A."

"Yes, Captain." Connor mounted, as did Efran, and the guards opened the gates for them to lope easily down the switchback.

When they arrived at Barracks A, they went in to glance around the outer office. Wendt was not here, only Captain Towner, who stood. "Yes, Captain?" he asked Efran, knowing not to irritate him by saluting.

"Yes, please tell the Commander that we're going to the campgrounds, just to look around. Nothing urgent," Efran said. As Towner was assenting, Efran asked, "Is Captain Stites available?"

"I'll send for him, Captain," Towner said, going to the door to speak to a sentry.

"Tell him we'll be at the armory down here," Efran said, and Towner nodded.

From there, Efran and Connor walked their horses across New North Road to the armory behind Barracks D. Efran poked around a little, then tossed a breastplate to Connor, taking one for himself. "This is good protection for when you don't know what you're doing," he observed.

"Yes, Captain," Connor said with a bare smile, strapping it on.

Stites appeared at the door to salute. "You summoned me, Captain?"

Efran glanced over, amused that Stites thought he was covering his anger and resentment at being passed over for an assignment in favor of *Neale*. "Yes, Connor and I are going to do something possibly stupid, and I thought you might like to come along."

Stites loosened up at once. "Yes, Captain, thank you. For an unknown task, you might want to try one of the new knives of Meneely's, from Gerdts—"

"Gerdts is . . ." Connor began hesitantly.

"Village northeast of us," Stites said, picking up a sheathed knife from a compartment at the front. Unsheathing

it, Stites explained, “He brought his knives to the Faire and sold out the first day. The Second managed to snag some for us. Solid steel. See the jimping on the back of the blade—handy for keeping a grip in heavy use. And it’s full tang—blade runs clear through the handle. I carry one with me everywhere.” He lifted his elbow to show the knife sheathed on his belt.

“All right.” Efran handed one to Connor, strapping the sheath of another onto his belt. “We’re wearing token protection,” he added to Stites, indicating the assortment of breastplates. “Oh, and odor cloaks. The trolls are supposedly all gone, but the cloaks work on wild animals, too.”

After Stites had strapped on a breastplate, the three covered themselves with the gossamer, faerie-made drapes. And once Stites got himself a horse, Efran gave his men a brief recounting of Showalter and the appearance-changing potion.

Thus equipped, the three rode out of the northeastern gates, continuing up New North Road out of the Lands. A short half mile past the ridge was a barely discernible turnoff to the deserted campgrounds. As the men were approaching from the east instead of the west, they turned left off the road to gain the campsite.

As a precaution, the three deviated from the path and dismounted to leave their horses hidden in the trees. “I won’t insult you by tying you here,” he told Kraken, stroking his nose. “But if you’re inclined to rush to my aid, remember the roots.” Kraken snorted, shaking his head. From that point, the men made their own path to the clearing of the campgrounds. But they did not enter, hearing grunts and growling.

Peering through thick foliage, the three looked on two large trolls settling watchfully with something in between them that they guarded with obsessive care. Connor almost silently breathed, “Villalobos.”

They were certainly Villalobos, identifiable just from the style of their metal vests and the length of their wiry hair, besides their heavy build, broad faces and prominent fangs. These Villalobos, however, were haggard, weary—hunted, even, which made them all the more dangerous. They were obviously the remnant of a much larger group that had spread terror through cities, towns and villages. These two had managed to capture something that they wanted to keep at all costs. And they seemed to think they could do it here.

But they were presently fighting over the object between them—the larger troll ripped the face of his slightly smaller partner with his claws till he gave up the prize, growling, “Wait! Is he near?” (This was troll talk, which the eavesdroppers did not understand.)

The larger hunched down, clutching something dirty white to his chest while the smaller, bleeding heavily, turned wary black eyes around the empty campground. He put his ear to the ground, then pointed, “Horses that way.” The men tensed, correctly interpreting the actions and utterance.

But the first spat, “Means nothing! Ingannamorte does not ride horse. Smell for him!”

The second lifted his great, bleeding nose to the air, shrugging, “Just faerie cloak.”

“Ingannamorte needs no cloak, no. I drink now. Drink, and Ingannamorte can do nothing for it.” The first raised the white object to his face, which turned out to be a slightly cracked ceramic jug. But before he could get it to his mouth, the second used the distraction to go for his throat with his claws, and they were fighting again.

The larger subdued him again by scraping out one of his eyes. While the second held it, sulking, the first ordered, “Look again”—which he had fairly well hampered his partner from doing.

With bloody face, the second surveyed the area, his head rotating almost 300 degrees from a point over one shoulder to the same point over the other. "Just men in the trees," he muttered.

"Ha. They do nothing, know nothing, but maybe die," the first said. He paused in extreme caution. "No Ingannamorte?"

"No," the second said without looking. So the first put his mouth on the spout of the jug and lifted it. The curdled, viscous contents seeped out around the sides of his mouth, and the three in hiding covered their faces from the nauseating odor.

After having drunk, the troll dropped the jug, which the other quickly righted. The first fell on his back to writhe in soundless agony. The men could not see what was happening to the supine figure, but his companion watched him from a crouch with his one remaining eye.

The first apparently completed his transformation, and stilled. Then he began to rise from the ground. "Here. I am changed. A super troll of great power." He stood on his two feet, lifting bare wings at his sides. Head raised with a great red comb atop it, he crowed his battle call.

Literally. For the first troll was now a huge featherless chicken.

There was rumbling laughter from somewhere above them, but the chicken spread his scaleless feet. "I shall never be defeated again."

No, you shall be slow-roasted, a deep voice replied. These words the men understood. There was nothing to see of the being that spoke but a ripple in the air. And the next thing they saw was a great spit with the featherless chicken slowly rotating over a fire.

The second troll leapt up to begin blowing the fire higher under the squirming chicken. When the ripple appeared in front of him, he let off the entertainment to run. But the voice said, *Wait, you have not drunk. What use is it to steal but not drink?* And the second troll was stopped and spun around.

"Do not want," the second troll growled, attempting to look formidable with one eye gone. He did not drink, but where he stood, he was changed into a great hornworm, standing upright. Aligned in rows along his back were white oblong cylinders. "I am in armor, with great tokens. But what am I?" he breathed in awe at his own transformation.

What you always were. You may go, the voice said. The troll lumbered out of the clearing, and the voice instructed, *You men in hiding, come out*.

The trees and brush separated by themselves on either side of them, making a path into the clearing. Efran led Stites and Connor out of concealment to stand over the listing jug. Then Efran suddenly picked it up by its finger loop and flung it hard at the first tree that he saw. He did not realize that it was the plane tree.

The crock jug shattered, falling in pieces as the gooey substance splattered, then oozed down the pierced trunk into the gash made by his own knife. He looked back at the ripple in the air. "I am Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. I do not know who or what you are, or what your claim to this potion may be, but I have disposed of it for you."

The ripple undulated as though laughing. *You are out of your Lands, Lord Efran*.

“I am entitled to protect my Lands, and anything that draws Villalobos is a threat. Are you a threat?” Efran asked.

Do you not see what I can do? The voice grew in volume and resonance.

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Chapter 23

Unimpressed, Efran said, “I know Who protects us.”

The ripple intensified, so that the trees around them began to shudder. The ground under the men shook to make them stagger. And the voice demanded, *Bow before me!*

“No,” Efran said derisively even as he was pitched to his knees. He scrambled to his feet again. Stites fell on his back and Connor rolled, but neither was bowing, either.

BOW!

“No!” Efran laughed.

The shaking abruptly halted and there sat a little man on a giant toadstool in front of them. He was dressed in a suit of black speckle tweed with large red buttons and a matching flat cap. With angry tears, he whined, “You’re not playing right! You’ve ruined everything!”

Efran glanced at his companions, who stared at the petulant little man as they got to their feet. Then Efran sardonically replied, “Ah, I apologize. What are you playing?”

“The Game, of course,” the little man said, aggravated by Efran’s stupidity.

“Is . . . that what the trolls were playing?” Efran asked.

A wide, mischievous grin spread across the impish face. “They lost.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Efran said carefully. “And what is your name?”

He looked disgruntled. “If I must tell you, it’s Sir Gotobed,” he admitted.

“Sir Gotobed. And what is ‘Ingannamorte?’” Efran asked.

“That’s my play name!” Gotobed said, vexed to the point of exasperation.

Efran replied, “Very well. We’ll use your real name. This is Connor and Stites. They are not playing, either. But who else is playing your game, Gotobed?”

“Whoever I can trap,” he said, alight with mischief again.

“I see. That could be a problem. Did you think to trap us?” Efran asked.

“You won’t play right,” Gotobed said, trembling in anger.

“No, I won’t. What do you know of the potion?” Efran asked, nodding to the remains on and around the tree.

The little man shrugged. “It’s something they wanted.”

“I see. Part of the game?” Efran asked.

“Everything is part of The Game!” Gotobed was fairly outraged that this mortal could not understand its importance. “You don’t know anything! You’re not even a wizard!”

“No, I’m not. But I’m afraid that you have to stop playing your game,” Efran said.

“What?” Gotobed gasped in disbelief.

“Yes. Villalobos are fair targets, but, they’re pretty much wiped out from this area. So anyone you trap is going to be innocent. And we can’t have you playing with innocent people,” Efran explained, chin down.

Gotobed took on an aloof expression. “I think I shan’t regard you, Lord Efran.”

“You won’t? What are you? Where do you get your power?” Efran asked.

Gotobed raised his bushy black eyebrows to sniff, “I am a sprite, Lord Efran.”

“Ah. A faerie! Well, I was King of Abbey Lands Faerie for a short while. My wife is faerie, the great-granddaughter of Marguerite, whose mother was Queene Everleigh of the entire Southern Continent,” Efran told him. “So I have the authority any way you look at it to tell you that you have to stop the game.”

Gotobed sat pale and trembling. Then he blurted, “I appeal to Lady Marguerite!”

Efran paused. “You appeal to Marguerite?”

“Yes. As daughter of the last reigning monarch of Continental Faerie, Lady Marguerite is authorized to hear my appeal.” Tears brimmed in Gotobed’s eyes.

Efran drew a breath in consideration. If he refused Gotobed, then he’d have to leave him here, where he would certainly continue his game. So he said, “All right, you may appeal. But she’s not coming here; I have to take you back to the Lands. I warn you that Faerie Law forbids you to play your game again before Marguerite rules. And you may do no magic at all in my Lands. Do you know what happened to the last faerie who defied me?”

Gotobed squinted at him in vague dread, and Efran said, “She was turned into a troll, and taken by Troop Dunghill to be their Queen.”

Gotobed raised a wretched face to cry out in despair. Efran gestured, “Shut up and come on. Conjure up a horse, if you like.”

Immediately there appeared a great white war horse, three hands higher than Kraken. Snorting, Kraken stormed into the clearing to rear before the challenger. “Take it down, Gotobed!” Efran shouted. The horse then shrank to a pony. Gotobed perched on it with an angry pout that looked a little like Minka’s, so that Efran laughed.

Leaping up on Kraken, Efran told Gotobed, “Behave. You’d make a very small troll.” The little man peered at him in impotent hatred.

The four of them returned to the Lands by way of the Main Road (to the west of the campsite) at a leisurely lope. As they came over the old stone bridge, the gate guards began sounding the bell. Men rushed up to the gates; Wendt came out of Barracks A to look, and Minka ran out from behind him to watch the party enter the gates. She cried, “The minute I turn my back you leave to go—”

She paused abruptly at the sight of the smug little man in a tweed suit on his pony. He grinned evilly at her, his teeth sharp. “Hello, dearie. Would you like to play a game?”

“No, you splotch of runny chicken poop,” she said indignantly. “Efran, what are you doing with this—this—”

“Chicken poop?” he laughed, dismounting to take her up on an arm. “Well, he tried to play his game with us, and we didn’t want to play, either. I made some threats, so he appealed to Marguerite. Would you go see if she’s available to hear him before dinner?”

She eyed him in surprise, but said, “Yes. Give me a minute to—warn her.” She looked back at Gotobed. He smiled in an oily way, and she shuddered. But she got on her little mare to kick her to a slow lope.

Meanwhile, Efran saluted Wendt. “Captain Efran, Captain Stites and Connor reporting in, Commander.”

“Give me the short version. I’m coming to hear the appeal,” Wendt said dryly. This Efran did, while a great number of men clustered around them, listening. When Efran finished, Wendt nodded to the sprite, who was looking at all the potential Game players like a hungry man at an all-you-can-eat diner. “Bring him to the chapel. I’m on my way.” Without waiting for Efran’s salute, Wendt turned up Main.

Efran told Gotobed, “Get down. We’re walking to the judgment hall.”

The little man made his mount disappear to land on his feet, eyeing the big men encompassing him.

Stephanos saluted, pleading, “Permission to accompany you, Captain.” The other soldiers looked at him in dread of being left out.

“Whoever there’s room for. Just don’t collapse the loft,” Efran said. Connor and Stites fell in on either side of Gotobed to walk him up Main. He went along, his eyes shifting back and forth.

When they arrived at the chapel walk, Efran stopped everyone behind him while Wendt advanced to the open double doors to talk to Hartshough. They spoke for a few minutes, then the butler withdrew.

Wendt turned to the men waiting behind Efran and the sprite. “Lady Marguerite has consented to hear Gotobed’s appeal. Soldiers only may enter as witnesses, as many as there is room for. But whatever you see and hear in this appeal is confidential. Any man talking about it to anyone outside the army will be dismissed with dishonor.”

A light gasp rose among the men; Efran came forward to whisper to Wendt: “Commander, I must tell DeWitt and Estes.”

“They’re already here,” Wendt whispered back.

Efran exhaled in relief, then wondered, “How did they get here so quickly?”

“She heard his request in the campsite,” Wendt whispered. He nodded at Connor and Stites. “Bring the appellant into the hall.” He and Efran entered before them.

The first thing they saw was that the trees in the hall had effaced themselves to practically nothing but leaves. These, however, were exhibited almost as official pennons of the faerie realm. The next thing the men saw was the court.

On the raised platform in the front of the hall (on which Arbaiza had sung), there stood a line of dining chairs, the largest being in the middle. Marguerite sat on this, and the men entering paused at the sight of her—even Wendt and Efran.

It was Marguerite *almost* in her true appearance: beautiful, but—not quite the Marguerite Efran knew. Her hair was short and light blonde; she wore what looked like a leather jacket over a silk blouse and voluminous, sheer silk skirt that draped over sharply pointed high heels. Efran did not entirely approve of this look. As though to emphasize the fact that her status was in herself alone, she wore no crown. Minka, however, seated at her left, had gone all in as a faerie princess—she wore a billowing silk taffeta dress with flowers, a tiara, and a scepter. At Efran’s look of dismay, she smiled at him as if to say, *It’s all for show. Aren’t I cute?*

A hundred or more men swarmed into the hall to stare at them. Justinian and Eryk were leaning on the loft railing on the other side of the hall to watch.

The chair to Marguerite’s right was empty. She looked at Efran to say, “The Abbey Lands Faerie Court of Appeals requires the presence of the Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Please take your seat beside me, Lord Efran.”

Heart pounding, he stepped up on the dais to turn and sit in his work clothes. Since the breastplate and sheathed knife seemed inappropriate in this setting, Efran took off both to drop them beside his chair. He looked over at Minka, who grinned at him from Marguerite’s other side. In the chairs to Minka’s left were Sir Nutbin, Administrator DeWitt, and another empty chair. Then Efran looked to the chairs descending from his right, in which were Kele—Queen of Abbey Lands Faerie—Sir Ditson, and Steward Estes.

Marguerite said, “This Court of Appeals also requires the presence of the Commander of the Abbey Lands Army. Commander Wendt, please be seated.” He paused in surprise, then took the empty chair next to DeWitt.

Marguerite turned her eyes to him briefly, then looked forward to say, “The appellant shall now present his complaint. Gotobed, what do you want?”

Her presentation as a barrier-breaking woman of authority had the desired effect on the sprite, who was goggling at her and her court. He swayed for a moment, taking in the men surrounding him. Then he bleated, “I want to play The Game!”

“Who have you altered in your game?” Judge Marguerite asked.

His eyes went cunning. “Nasty trolls. Wicked, killing trolls.”

Marguerite lifted her glittering eyes. “I see a farmer passing by with his sheep whom you surprised with your game. You changed him into a wolf. Isn’t his family still looking for him?”

Eyes wide in alarm, Gotobed flipped out a hand almost involuntarily. “He’s back,” he said, clipped.

Marguerite’s eyelids dropped in contempt, and he began shaking. She asked, “Are there others for whom there is no going back?”

Teeth chattering, eyes bouncing wildly, he searched for a defense. “I claim combat!” he squealed.

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Chapter 24

“You wish to fight one of these men to regain your game?” Marguerite asked Gotobed skeptically.

His eyes narrowed craftily. “Fight in my game.”

“That hardly seems a fair fight,” she observed.

He looked aloof. “I have a lot to lose.”

“As does the man you fight, should you beat him,” she said.

At this point, Efran almost began swaying in his seat. Faerie Law was often absurd; it made no sense for an appellant to be entitled to win his case by combat. Then he felt Minka’s eyes on him. Looking to her, he heard her say with closed lips, *Faerie Law is designed to work out well in the end.*

So he stood, turning to Marguerite in the expectation that he would be Gotobed’s opponent. She raised her eyes to him. “Unfortunately, Lord Efran, court officials are not permitted to accept challenges.” He eyed her suspiciously, but the Marguerite he knew flashed a smile at him. So he grudgingly sat.

Looking over the hall, she asked, “Shall anyone here volunteer?” Practically every man in the hall raised his hand. On the loft, Eryk did as well, but Justinian forced his hand down and held it behind his back.

Marguerite looked to the man in the last chair to her left. “Commander Wendt, will you choose the volunteer to challenge the appellant?”

Everyone looked quickly at Wendt, who drew a breath in dismay. Her eyes said, *Choose, dear*, so he reluctantly scanned the sea of raised hands.

So many men. So many unknowns, he groaned inwardly. *Who of these men—?* Then he spotted Seagrave, whose hand was stiffly extended, eyes fixed on his Commander in the demand to be chosen. Despite not knowing him well, Wendt knew that he had more experience than most men with faerie.

“Seagrave, step forward,” Wendt said. Efran almost relaxed at the choice.

The men parted for the chosen one to advance to the front. Seagrave was out of uniform, dressed for a personal visit. On his way, he had seen the procession with the sprite and followed. He bowed to Marguerite and saluted his Commander, then turned to face his adversary. The men backed off to give them room.

The sprite narrowed his eyes, grinning with his sharp teeth at this great lumpy fool. Seagrave faced him with his head down, avoiding his gaze. Instead, Seagrave's eyes locked on his fingers, which were the big giveaway of undisciplined faeries. When the pinkie finger on Gotobed's left hand twitched, Seagrave jerked to his own left. Still, his right cheek was viciously slashed by a flash from Gotobed's pinkie. The wound began profusely bleeding down his neck.

Some of the men choked back cries; Efran's jaw began working. But Seagrave remained calm, almost unaffected. Again he stood still, waiting.

When Gotobed thrust out his left hand in a burst of impatience, Seagrave fell to the floor to grasp the sprite's hand from underneath, wrenching his pinky finger backwards. Several men jumped as it cracked; Gotobed cried out loudly and vanished.

"Not fair!" several men called out.

But Marguerite merely whispered, "Shhhh." So there was utter quiet in the hall as Seagrave slowly stood, listening. Not many men knew that lesser faeries, including sprites, had to expend great energy to maintain invisibility. This produced a faint but telltale buzz that reliably indicated location.

Seagrave suddenly dropped and rolled, upon which a flare of light skimmed inches above his left shoulder to strike a man watching at the edges. He fell unconscious, and several men lifted him to carry him to Coghill, the doctor on the Lands outside the fortress. The rest of the spectators backed farther away.

At the missed strike, Seagrave grabbed something in the air to throw it down to the floor and sit on it. Finding appendages, he pressed those into the floor. Gotobed became visible sprawled on his belly underneath Seagrave, his hands pinned to the marble. The sprite was crying, "Cheater! Cheater!"

Then in place of the little man in the black-speckled tweed, there appeared a black-speckled crocodile. One thrash of its mighty tail was enough to dislodge the man, who had to roll away quickly from the snapping jaws. The spectators called out the foul; Efran looked to Marguerite, who returned a placid side glance to him.

Seagrave got to his feet to maneuver around the beast, taking care to avoid the sweeping tail. It could not turn easily on the slippery marble, so Seagrave was able to dart in to pick it up with one hand by a rear foot and dangle it in the air. The spectators were stunned by this show of strength. They did not know, as Seagrave did, that hasty faerie permutations often lacked essential components of the real thing, such as internal organs or weight. Therefore, Gotobed's crocodile weighed no more than Gotobed did, and its mighty tail thrashed uselessly in the air.

Holding the crocodile's right rear foot in his right hand, Seagrave leaned over to grasp its left foreleg, crunching the claws together. With a roar, the beast suddenly changed back to a little man in a tweed suit, hanging like a hammock from his left hand and right foot.

Then Gotobed began a quiet, rhythmic singsong, and Seagrave began drooping. The men shouted in objection; Efran half-stood as warning that if the cheats were not addressed, he'd intervene. Marguerite said calmly, "Spells are not allowed." But by that time, Seagrave had dropped unconscious. Gotobed got to his feet, his teeth bared like fangs at the unconscious man.

Efran fully stood, but Gotobed suddenly spun around. His shoulders began rising and lowering alternately as in a dance. "Stop it!" he cried, watching his left foot stretch out to rapidly tap the floor in front of him while his

shoulders continued their bobbing. Seagrave began coming around. Efran, sitting again, looked over at Minka watching Gotobed while bobbing along with him.

When the sprite turned to begin shaking his bottom at the seated dignitaries, the men roared in laughter. Marguerite said, "Outside interference in the combatants is also not allowed."

"Hmph!" Minka sniffed, looking off. Gotobed halted his gyrations, staring at Minka in deep offense and possible retribution.

While he was thus distracted, Seagrave, on his feet, grabbed the sprite around his belly to lift him and flip him upside down. Then he began shaking him as though emptying his pockets. Gotobed hung helplessly, his mouth wide open as Seagrave shook him again and again.

Then something metallic dropped out of his mouth, and the men pressed forward to look down at an ornate silver key on the floor. Seagrave turned him right side up to set him aside. Then he picked up the silver key to hand it to Marguerite with a bow.

Weak and weaving, the sprite murmured, "The Game Key. You took . . . The . . . Game. . . ."

All those in the hall (and the two on the loft) watched without a sound as the sprite seemed to crumble formlessly to the floor. Something else then began to emerge in his place.

It was a formless black curling, a presence, a power. It rose up from the remains of the sprite to whisper, I am Ingannamorte. I cannot die. All else comes to me.

Efran stiffened, and Marguerite glanced at him. "Your turn, Efran."

He stood from the chair to descend the platform, studying the emptiness of that presence that could not be, but was. Trying to formulate some idea of how to confront it, Efran glanced up to see Nakham, the guardian angel of the hill, sitting in the top boughs of a faerie tree just beneath the ceiling. Nakham looked down on him to nod in encouragement.

So I can do this, somehow, Efran thought. The men in the hall were utterly still as Efran circled his opponent, looking him over from all sides. There was no difference; there was no front nor back, no face nor rear, no part of it that looked to be vulnerable.

Efran swept a hand at the shadow, and jumped back at the fiery pain of contact with that wisp. It breathed inaudibly, You are unable to touch me, hold me, or wound me. I am greater than God.

"Are you, really?" Efran said, mocking. It shifted toward him a bare inch, perhaps, and Efran was flung on his back to the floor. For a moment it felt as though the thing had opened a hole in him. He rolled away and scrambled up.

The curling column heightened a bit, and spread out to cover a bit more floor. Watching Efran, the men moved back, but he looked over to the principals on the immobile platform. Whether they couldn't move out of the way or didn't see the necessity, Efran didn't know. But all of them merely watched him.

You think you have fought evil? the formlessness asked him. It undulated, shifted, reaching up on one side while dipping on the other. Yet it somehow never changed. You have no idea what I am. I am more hopeless than Abaddon. I am deeper than the Abyss. I am more evil than the Evil One himself.

Sweating, Efran looked up to the top of the faerie tree again, where Nakham was watching . . . while eating cheese balls and drinking ale. Nodding at Efran again, raising the bottle, he settled back to continue observing.

Efran decided that this must be one of those battles won by talking. “You are not higher than God. You’re still just a thing.”

And the formlessness stretched itself out in laughter. No, I am not. You cannot comprehend how vast I am. Were I to show you how much of the blackness beyond the stars I occupy, it would drive you mad. Again it exhaled just a wisp of itself toward him, and the pain of it made Efran almost black out.

“I won’t let you,” Efran uttered, strained. When Krall reached down to help him up, he was alarmed by the coldness of the Captain’s arm. It was as though he were dying on his feet from something that could not be seen or touched.

With intense effort, Efran stood on shaky legs. He could feel some vital force draining out of him, but had no clue what it was or how to hold it in. He looked up to Nakham again, pleading. Nakham sat back on the branch, covering a yawn, then looked back down at Efran to spread his hands in exasperation. *Well?*

Efran sank to his knees, blinking, while the formlessness began encompassing him bit by bit, cutting him off from the sight of everyone around him. They seemed incapable of helping or even understanding what was happening. Nakham knew, but also seemed unable to help—

No, that wasn’t correct. Nakham knew, but he seemed to think it was unnecessary for him to help—that this was something Efran knew, too.

While he tried to wrap his mind around this, that spreading vastness closed in on him. As if sprinting a victory lap, it said, Take me inside you, and you will die.

This resonated in Efran’s memory. He muttered, “If I take you inside me, I will die. How do I take something inside me. I—consume it. I eat it. So you mean, if I eat you, I will die.” He looked up, then, at the grayness that surrounded him on every side. He could see nothing. “If I eat you, *I will die.*” With that, he remembered. Leaping to his feet, Efran raised his hands and cried, “Nothing! You are nothing!”

And Nothing began evaporating, having been named. Exposed as . . . nothing. Efran looked up to see Nakham sardonically applauding for Efran having finally remembered the riddle.

Once his vision cleared, Efran turned to Minka on the platform. She looked away in mild confusion, then asked, “Are you done?”

“You didn’t see it?” he asked, pained.

“I saw nothing,” she said, shaking her head. Everyone else agreed that there was nothing. He had been running around and falling down on the floor for no reason that they could see.

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Chapter 25

Efran leaned over his knees, laughing, as warmth filled him again. He ran up onto the platform to snatch Minka up while she was in the process of rising from the chair. The hearing concluded, both she and Marguerite had reverted to their usual appearance. And the men surged forward in congratulations. Justinian and Eryk descended from the loft to join them.

Wendt engulfed his wife. "From now on, I'll be known as Lady Marguerite's husband," he predicted.

"Don't be silly," she purred, and he held her close.

DeWitt asked Estes, "Are you going to tell your wife about this?"

Estes stared off in near shock. "I don't see how."

"Good. Me neither," DeWitt said, grasping his shoulder. They congratulated Marguerite and Minka, patted Efran on the back for vanquishing nothing, and left the chapel to go back to work.

Sirs Ditson and Nutbin were taking notes on Queene Kele's proclamation barring sprites from engaging in games of the imagination. After they had jotted down three pages of conditions, stipulations, prohibitions, and ancillary provisions, a man who had been watching them asked, "Are there more sprites on the Lands, then?"

The three looked at each other, then Ditson said, "Nooo, I don't believe so."

"Oh. Well, it's good to have the rules ready in case a few show up, right?" he asked rhetorically, moving on. The three looked at each other, and Nutbin disappeared the notes.

The hall was filled with a great deal of hubbub and laughter as all the men had to pound the Captain and Seagrave on the back. Someone observed to Seagrave, "Hey, the cut on your face is gone!"

"It was all illusion. Make-believe," Seagrave said.

Other men began talking, so Efran raised his hands to say, "Wait, wait—everyone, shut up. I have to understand."

They quieted down, and Efran bent to pick up the tattered remains of a black-speckled tweed suit. "Marguerite—what—what was Gotobed?"

She said, "Gotobed was a sprite, as he said, who had discovered the power of belief, even in Nothing. He changed no one in his game; they were acting out as children pretend that they're going to war or sailing on ships. But neither the people he trapped nor Gotobed knew it."

Efran scowled in confusion. "Then what was Ingannamorte?"

"Gotobed's imagination," Marguerite said, smiling. "Gotobed had become so dependent on his games of the imagination that he could not live without it, nor could it exist apart from him. It was quite literally nothing outside his own mind."

"But—I still had to fight it," Efran said, bewildered.

“Yes, we often have to contend with nothing before we realize that *it is nothing* and dismiss it,” she said.

Efran protested, “But you saw it! You told me that it was my turn.”

Marguerite corrected him, “I saw your reaction to it. That was all the clue I needed that you were to act.”

Minka was mulling over what Marguerite had said about Gotobed’s games being nonexistent outside his own mind. She asked, “Suppose he had written out his playacting as stories. Wouldn’t they exist then?”

“Of course,” Marguerite said. “Recording his games in a form that could be read or heard—even just repeating them orally to others—would give them existence, that they might live on apart from him. Unfortunately, that capacity did not exist for those who were trapped unwittingly.”

Minka looked up at Efran in resolve. “I’m going to write stories,” she announced.

He shook his head. “You’re too busy living them. Nibor will have to write them for you.”

“Oh, I wonder what chapter she’s on now,” Minka murmured.

“Let’s go check. It’s got to be close to dinnertime,” he said.

Before leaving the chapel, Minka hugged her auntie tightly. “Oh, the hearing was so much fun. I hope we get to do that again some time. Oh, and Seagrave!” She caught him in the midst of a congratulatory group of men. “Seagrave, how did you know what to do with Gotobed?” she demanded.

He said dismissively, “For being so dependent on his imagination, it was pretty lame, Lady Minka. Everything he did was standard practice among the sprites.”

“I didn’t know any of that!” she protested.

“Well, Lady Minka, the sprites are the—rats of the faerie realm. You’re—altior, you see. The—upper class. Higher level.” Seagrave looked embarrassed to explain all this to her, but Connor made it plain by raising his nose with a finger, indicating snootiness.

“But the key was real! Haven’t you got it, Auntie?” Minka demanded.

“Yes,” she said, pulling it out of her pocket. “And I think it should go to the one who procured it.” She handed it to Seagrave, who took it, muttering embarrassed thanks.

Still confused, Minka said, “So—that’s a real silver key?”

Seagrave replied, “Yes, Lady Minka—It’s a real key, and real silver. Sprites often swallow their treasures, to keep them forever. Gotobed needed the key to give token reality to his games. Once he was separated from it, he had no more reason to exist. He was able to keep it because sprites don’t—” His courage failed at the prospect of explaining to her that sprites were not physically equipped to evacuate bodily waste as humans and altiors were.

“Don’t what?” Minka asked blankly.

No one answered until Efran said, “Use the garderobe.”

She considered that, then said, “Oh, no, if he tried, he would have fallen down in it.”

All of the men standing around stiffened in restrained laughter, Efran included. When she realized that he was talking about bodily functions and not just using a convenience that only wealthy people owned, she cried, “Oh! Am I that naïve?”

“No, just—sheltered, as you should be,” he said, wiping his eyes. Sighing, he took her hand, and most of the men went on up to the fortress with them for dinner. So they forgot all about checking on Nibor’s progress, which suited her fine.

The following day, November 4th, Efran summoned Stites and Connor again. He brought them into Barracks A to tell the Commander, “If all Gotobed’s games were illusions, as Marguerite said, then the remaining two Villalobos are still alive, and still looking for the potion. That means they’re certain to go back to the campsite. I need to go see, and I’m taking precautions.” He gestured to himself and his men, geared up with hardened leather breastplates and Meneely’s knives.

Wendt patted Efran on the back for demonstrating that he wasn’t so proud or stupid as to go unprepared. “Very good, Captain. Dismissed.” So Efran and his backup rode out of the gates in anticipation of their own fun and games.

While they were gone, the children were on the back grounds of the fortress playing, as they always did after class. Tambling was sitting with Escarra on the stone bench, also as usual. Her dog Felix, after having exhausted himself running around with Nakam and the children, was curled up beside her.

Tambling was holding on to Escarra’s arm, sitting quietly. He patted her hand as he looked over the far eastern Lands and the Sea crashing up against the cliffs in the distance. He could endure, he knew; he would wait. It was hard, but now he knew it was not impossible.

A soldier rode into the back grounds, looking around. He issued a piercing whistle, and the activity on the grounds subsided. “Tambling! Where’s Tambling?” he shouted.

She looked over, shaking in dread that they had found her parents dead. Escarra raised his hand. “Here,” he called.

The man rode over. “Tambling?” he asked.

She was too frightened to speak, so Escarra said, “Yes, this is she.”

“Tambling, your parents have come. They’re waiting at Barracks A to see you,” the soldier said.

“What?” She jumped up in disbelief joy. “My parents? Are here, alive? They’ve come for me?” she cried.

“Yes, I’m to take you down. Help her up here,” he told Escarra.

The old notary’s assistant got up to lift her as best he could, and the man leaned down to hoist her up to sit in front of him on his saddle. “Felix!” she cried, reaching down. The dog was jumping up ineffectively beside the horse.

Escarra picked him up to set him on her lap, and she clutched him. With an arm firmly around her, the man turned the horse to lope off around the corner of the fortress. The children watched in placid interest, and the activity on the back grounds resumed.

Escarra sat again on the bench, stretching an arm over the bronze plaque that was now fully visible, with no one there to block it. "That's good," he said, nodding. "What a very great good, what a marvelous answer to the prayers of many people," he said, eyes watering.

At that time, Efran, Connor and Stites had arrived at the turnoff to the campsite. As before, they left their horses in the thick of the trees to walk noiselessly through the detritus, stopping frequently to listen.

Hearing nothing, they progressed toward the clearing until Stites whispered, "Captain—!"

"I see them—or one of them," he returned in a bare breath, peering through the branches to catch glimpses of tangled troll hair and blood-stained armor.

Connor gagged at the nauseating stench of troll blood. Before going farther, the three pulled out hoods to cover their faces, particularly their noses and mouths. As they progressed through the trees, they lost some caution. "Both lying down," Stites muttered.

"And not moving," Connor added, muffled by the gloved hand over his nose.

The three stepped fully out of the trees to regard the two bodies sprawled on the ground. It didn't take long to determine what had happened. "They killed each other," Stites noted.

"With their bare hands, it looks like," Efran added. But he paused at the larger corpse, of which there was not much intact. But what was there seemed to be covered with short orange hair.

Since there was nothing more to be done about them, Efran looked over to the plane tree. Unsure of what he was seeing, he went over to have a closer look.

There was the deep vertical gash in the tree, now dead, with black rot in the depth of the crack. Vestiges of Showalter's face remained on either side of the crack, only, it looked . . . strange.

First, his face was completely expressionless and immobile, looking much like a death mask. Also, it had taken on flanges at either side, and strange tufts of hair on his head, as well as a beard, all dark orange. His body was also radically changed, almost—simian in appearance, especially the hands and arms compressed at his sides.

That was the other curious thing—Efran bent to look closer at the outline of his body, which showed clearly in the tree. It was squeezed tightly in the narrow confines of the trunk, so tightly that bits of something exuded here or there through the bark to congeal and harden. Somehow, Showalter's rejuvenated body had altered so much, there was no longer enough room for it in his hiding place.

And then Efran looked down at the broken pieces of the jug he had flung against the tree, and the globs of dried potion that coated it.

"Oh," he said. Then, "We're done here."

As he, Connor and Stites turned back to their horses, they paused, looking at each other. "What is that?" Connor breathed.

They looked all around for the source of what they were hearing, or just something to help them identify the sounds. "Clapping?" Stites said.

"Huzzah'?" muttered Connor. "When was the last time you heard someone say, 'Huzzah'?"

Efran stood still a moment, then said, "I don't know, but we're off."

While they quickly mounted and rode away from the clearing, five little men that were perched on a large tree limb watched them in great satisfaction. They wore tweed suits in varying colors, all with big red buttons and matching flat caps. One little man said, "There! The wicked master is dead at last, and poor Catchup's death is avenged."

There were more huzzahs from the group, but another said, "Not yet, Getaway, for his wicked arts live yet."

"How? How is that, Pullaway?" Benext cried.

"His dark arts live on in the girl he wrote letters to," Pullaway said, his eyes shifting here and there.

"Oh, the girl." "Yes, the girl." "What shall we do, Pullaway?" his fellows pleaded, the last question being from Carryon.

"We find her. Destroy her arts. And see that she dies for good," Pullaway growled.

"Yes." "That is what we must do." "We will watch and wait, Pullaway." "But where will we find her?" the last little man, Passthetime, asked.

"At the Lands, of course. We wait," Pullaway smiled.

"We wait," the others echoed.

As the fortress dinner bell rang, everyone on the back grounds stopped what they were doing, put up their tools, and washed their hands at the well to go in for dinner. The children ran for the back door, but Toby stopped to look at the old man alone on the stone bench.

Toby walked over to him to take his hand and pull. "Come in to dinner, Escarra."

"Thank you, Toby," he said, patting him with a trembling hand. "But, I think I'll just sit a moment longer. Go on in; the others will be looking for you."

Toby studied the fresh grief in his face. "I don't want to leave you here alone."

"No, I'm all right. Truly. But thank you," he said, producing a smile.

"There! I caught you!" a girl's voice cried. Toby turned and Escarra looked over to see Tambling running down the steps into the back grounds. "I thought you'd be in to dinner right now, but I couldn't find you in the hall." She ran breathlessly to the bench.

Escarra was unable to speak, but Toby asked, "What is it?"

She turned to him excitedly. “My parents are here! They came! And your notary is giving us a house to live in and everything!” She then pulled on Escarra’s hand. “You must come live with us, and be my Grandpapa! He died, you know, but we have you, so that Mama and Papa were so excited to hear that you’re alive. Although they are very sorry about Ashe, they are very grateful that you found Felix for me, and of course he’s attached to you now, too, so you must come with me.”

She turned serious eyes to Toby. “I’m sorry that he’ll miss dinner tonight here, but, I’ll bring him up to see you all, but, you see, he must come with me now to eat with my parents at Croft’s and see the house we’re looking at, to see if it suits him. And—oh! The nice Notary Ryal said that they’ll move the stone bench down to the lake—they have to cut it up to move it, but then they’ll put it back together again. And at the lake, it will be closer to our house, and more people can see what Ashe did.” She turned back to ask the old man, “Will that be all right? Oh, please tell me that you’ll come live with us, Escarra!” she pleaded.

Toby assured him, “We’ll come help you move in. And we’re down at the lake all the time, so you’ll still have us.”

With the two children watching expectantly, he said with a quaver, “Thank you, Toby; that would be appreciated. Tambling, I would be honored to live with you and Gavitt and Fern.”

“I knew you would,” she said smugly, patting his hand.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on November 4th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

AUTHOR’S PURPORTED NOTES:

The riddle that Efran finally remembered, from *Lord Efran at the Faire*, is:

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

I previously used it in [Games of God and Men: Book Six of the Latter Annals of Lystra](#). It was originally from the [Arts Forge Middle English Book of Riddles](#), translated by Tobin James Mueller.

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Villalobos*
(Book 27)

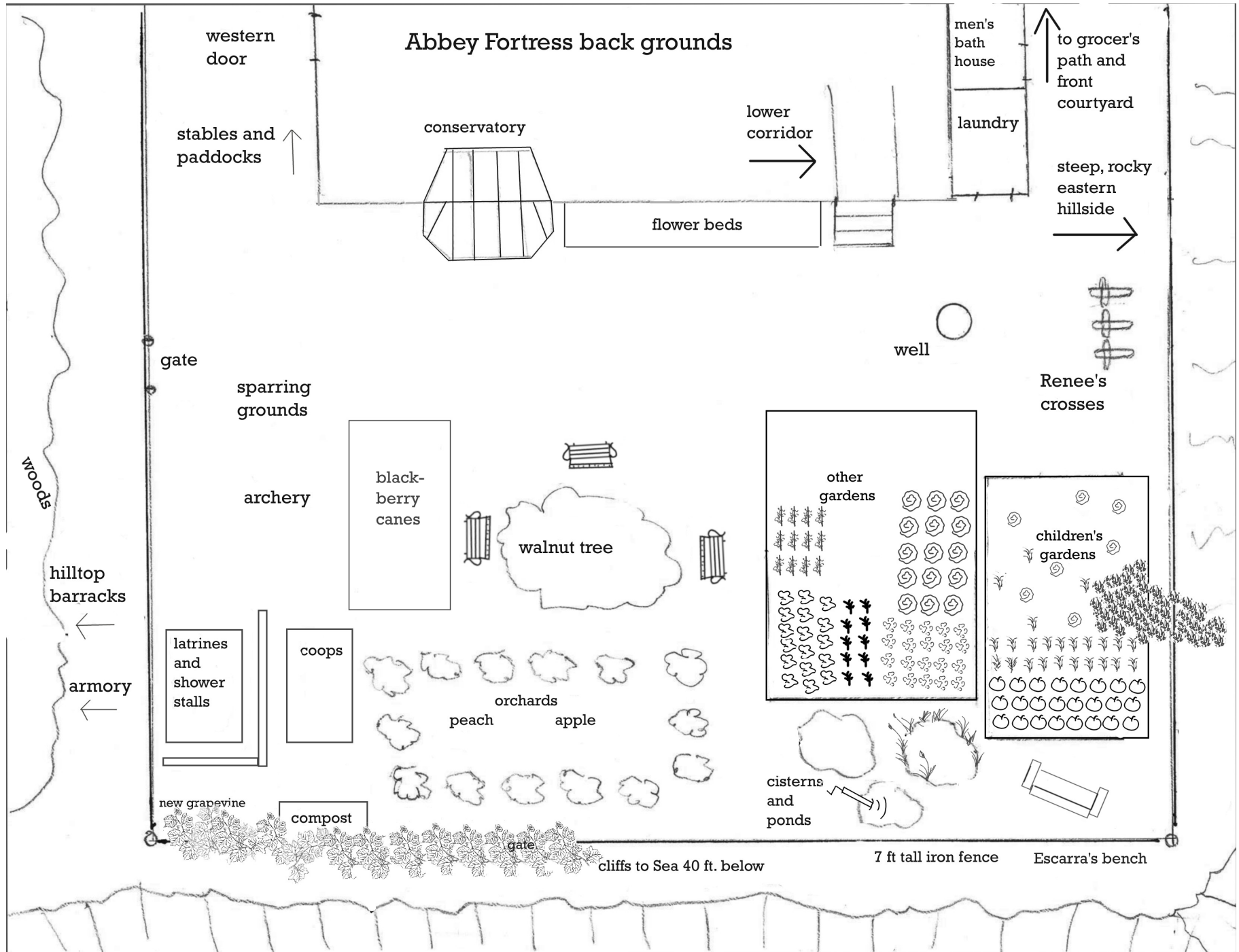
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Adele—ah DELL	Ingannamorte—IN gah nah mort
<i>aike</i> —AY kay (shooting by instinct)	Ionadi—ee YON ah dee
Allyr—AL er	Javier—JAY vee er
altior—ALL tee or	Jehan—JAY han
Arbaiza—are BAZE ah	Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
Arenivas—air en EEV us	Justinian—jus TIN ee un
Ares—AIR eez	Kaas—kahs
Arne—arn	Kele—kay lay
Averne—ah VURN	Koschat—KOS chat
Barrueta—bare ooh ET ah	Kraken—KRAY ken
Beardall—BARE duhl	Leila—LYE la
Bennard—beh NARD	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
Blairgowrie—blair GOW ree	Ley—lay
Borgnino—born YEEN oh	Lilou—LEE loo
Bozzelli—bo ZELL ee	Lowry—LAHW ree
Bullara—bu LAR ah	Malaga—MAL ah gah
cacophony—kuh KAH fuh nee	Marguerite—mar ger EET
Calix—KAY lix	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Chatain—sha TAN	Meneely—meh NEE lee
Chataine—sha TANE	Milo—ME low
Conte—cahnt	Minka—MINK ah
Dallarosa—dal ah ROW sa	Minogue—men OGE (hard g)
Delano—deh LAN oh	Nierling—NEAR ling
Dileonardo—dee lee on ARE doh	Ori—OR ee
Efran—EFF run	Pia—PEE ah
Elowen—EL oh win	Picco—PICK oh
Elvey—ELL vee	Pieta—pie ATE ah
Escarra—ess CARE ah	pique—peek
Estes—ESS tis	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Eurus—YOUR us	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	Qarqar—KAR kar; Qarqarian—kar KAR ee an
Eustace—YOUS tis	regime—reh ZHEEM
Everleigh—EH ver lee	rendezvous—RAHN day voo
Faciane—fah see ANN	Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee
Frisian—FREE zhun	Routh—roth (rhymes with <i>moth</i>)
Galvao—gal VAY oh	soirée—SWAH ray
garderobe—GAR de robe	Squitieri—squeh tee AIR ee
Gevorgyan—geh VOR geh yan (hard g's)	Sroufe—sroaf (rhymes with <i>loaf</i>)
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)	Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)	Stites—stights
Gores—GORE ez	Suco—SUE coh
Goss—gahs	Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Goyne—goyn (hard g)	Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Graeme—GRAY em	Sybil—SEH bull
Guerry—GEHR ee	Telo—TEE low
Gyldenbollokes—GILL den bull ux	Teschner—TESH nur
Hartshough—HART soh	Tiras—TEER us
<i>hulu kukui</i> —HOO loo koo KOO ee (dancing lights)	Tomer—TOH mur
Imelda—eh MEL dah	Tourjee—TUR jee

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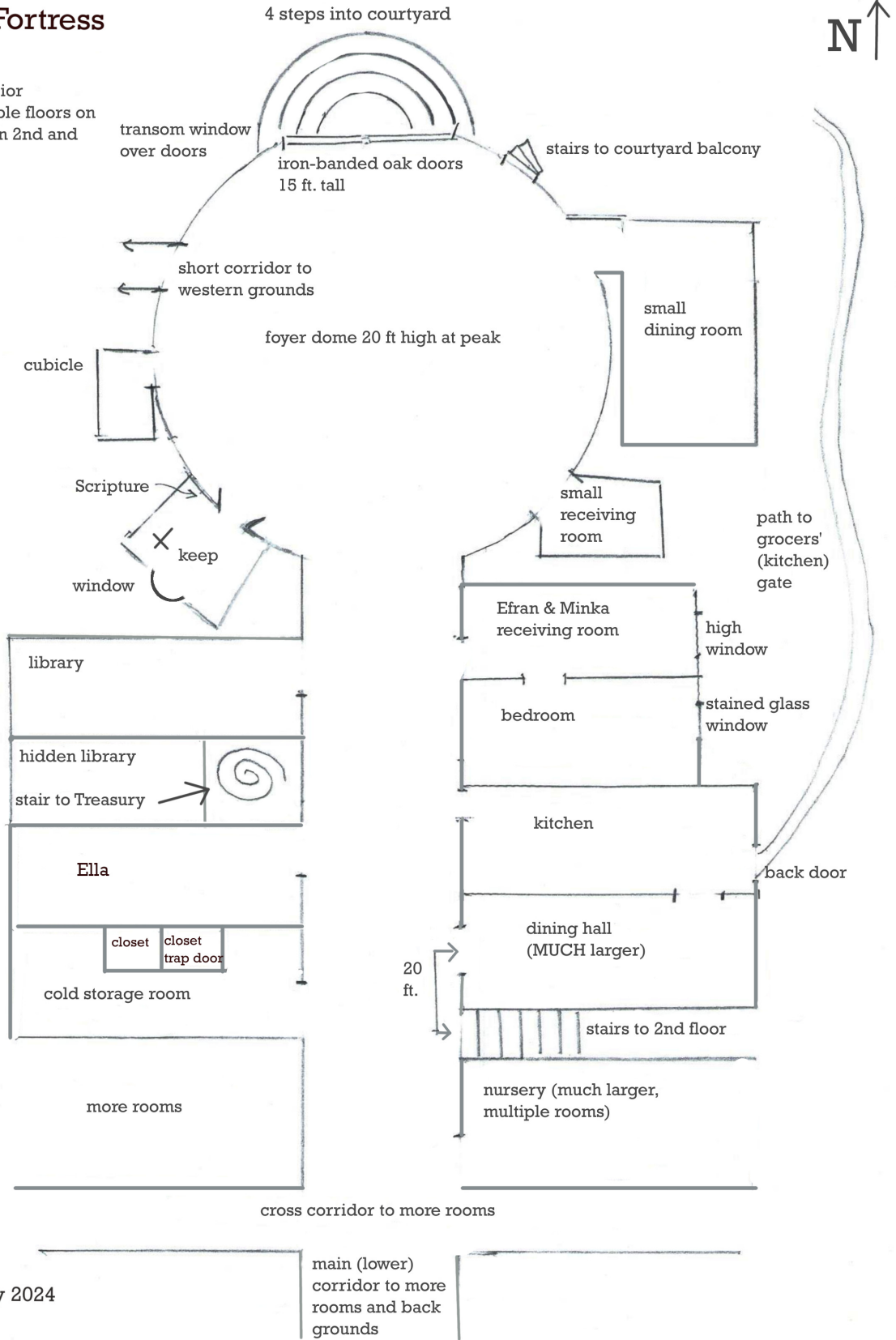
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Velie—veh LEE
Verlice—ver LEESE
Verrin—VAIR en
Viglian—VIG lee en
Villalobos—VILL eh low bos
Vories—VORE eez
Windry—WIN dree
Wirrin—WEER en



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



NOT TO SCALE

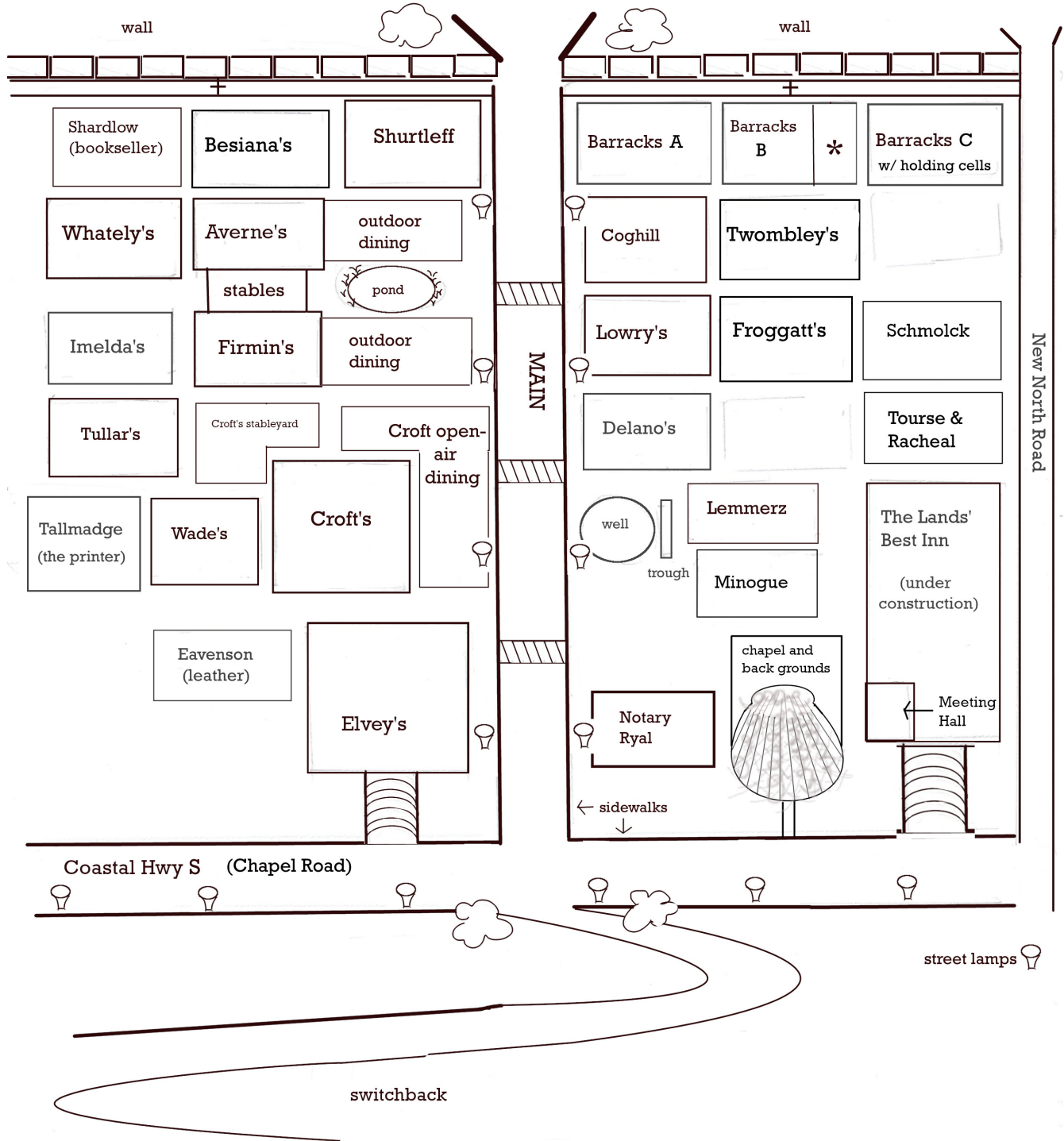
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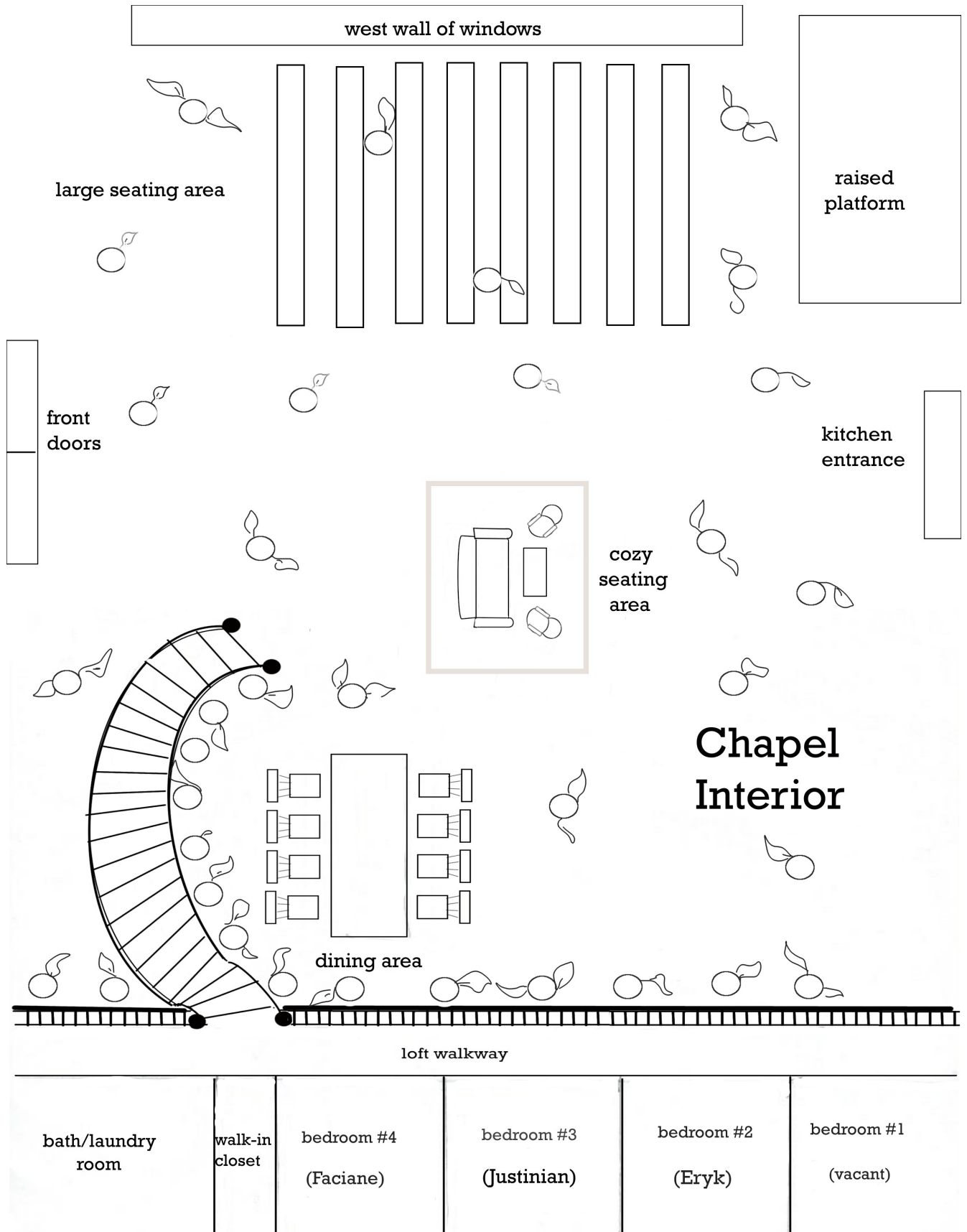
main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds

Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

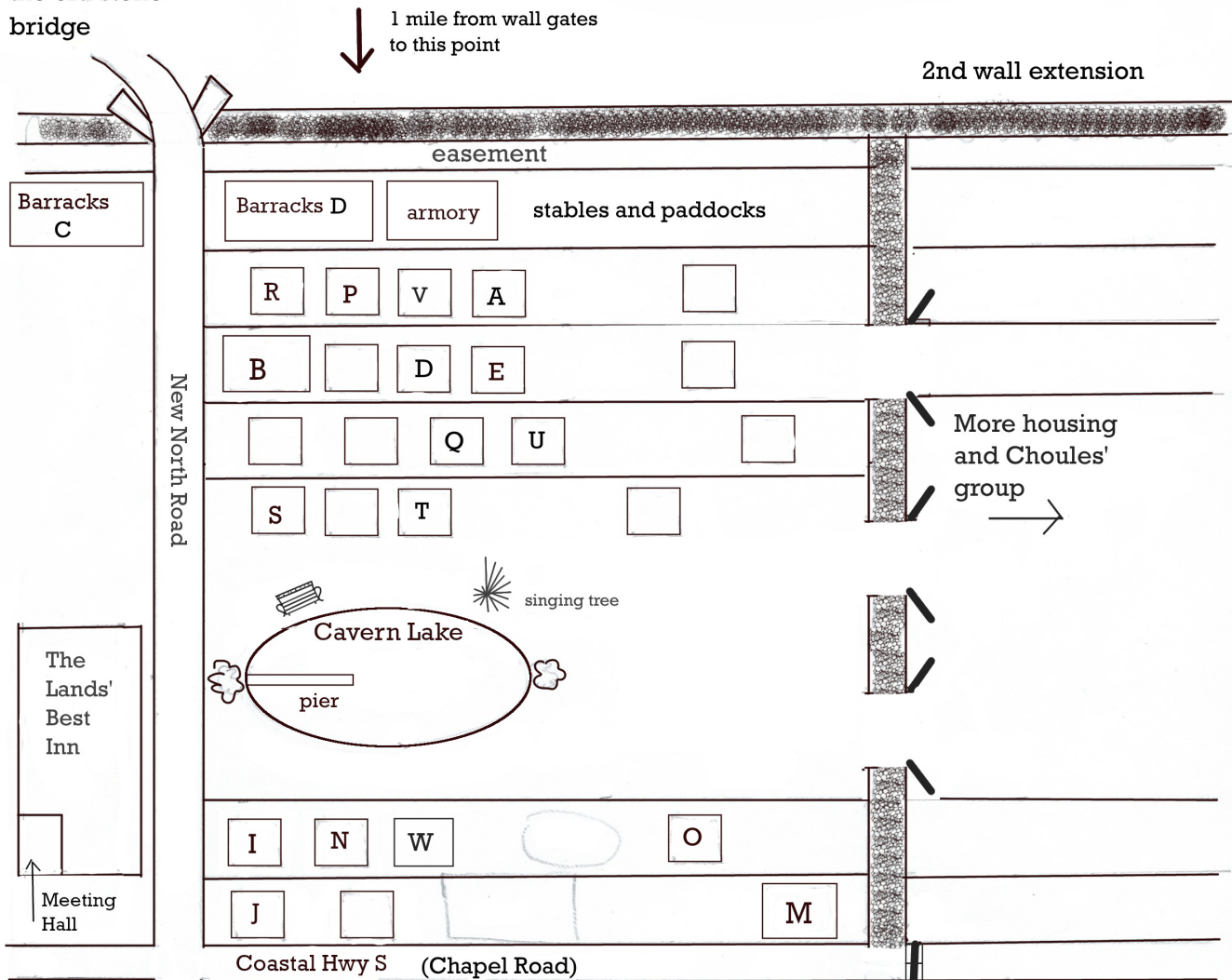
+ easements





road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands



1 mile from wall gates to this point

2nd wall extension

easement

Barracks C

Barracks D

armory

stables and paddocks

R

P

V

A

B

D

E

Q

U

S

T

Cavern Lake

singing tree

pier

The Lands' Best Inn

Meeting Hall

More housing and Choules' group

Coastal Hwy S (Chapel Road)

- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Follitt'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

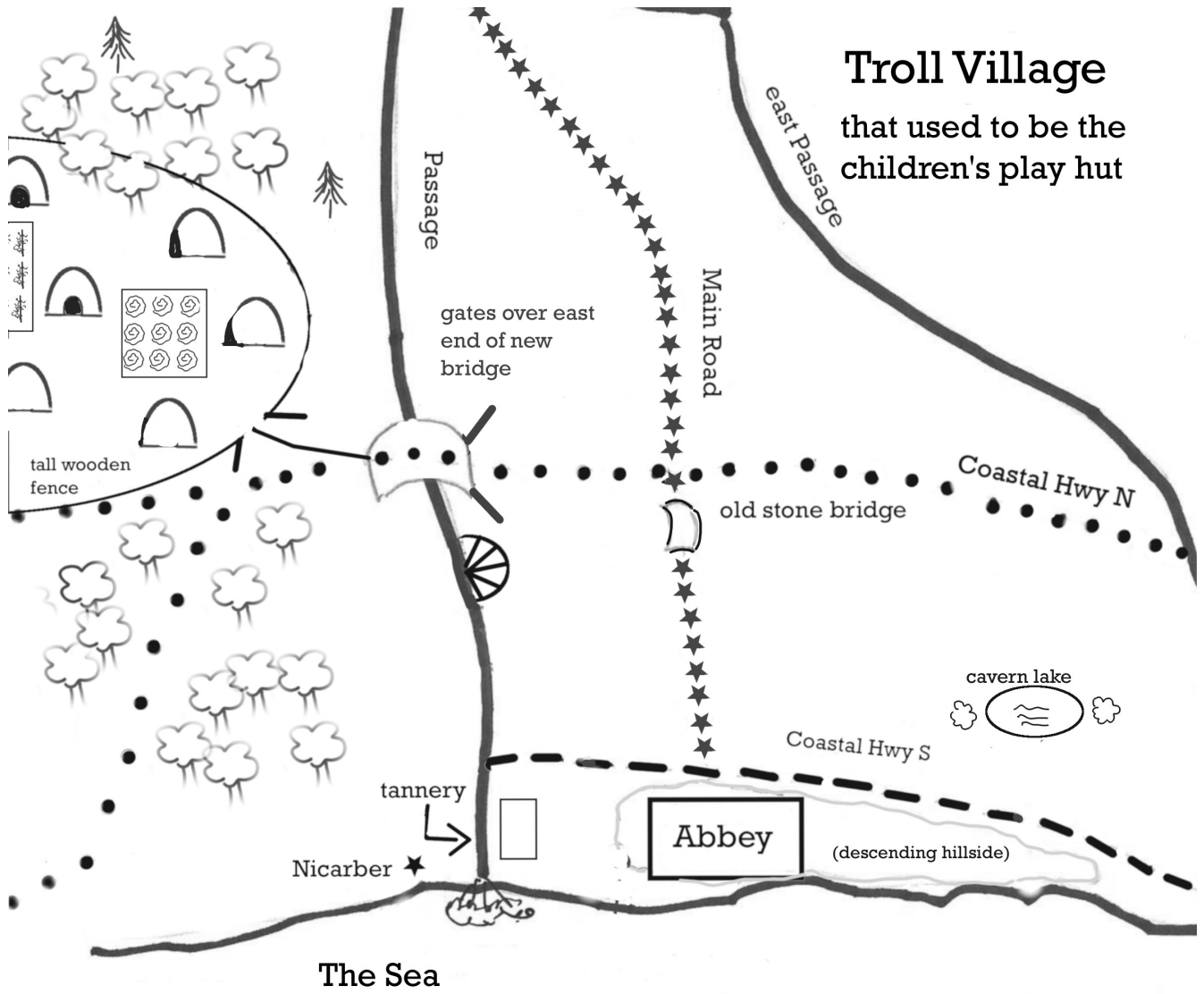
barricade

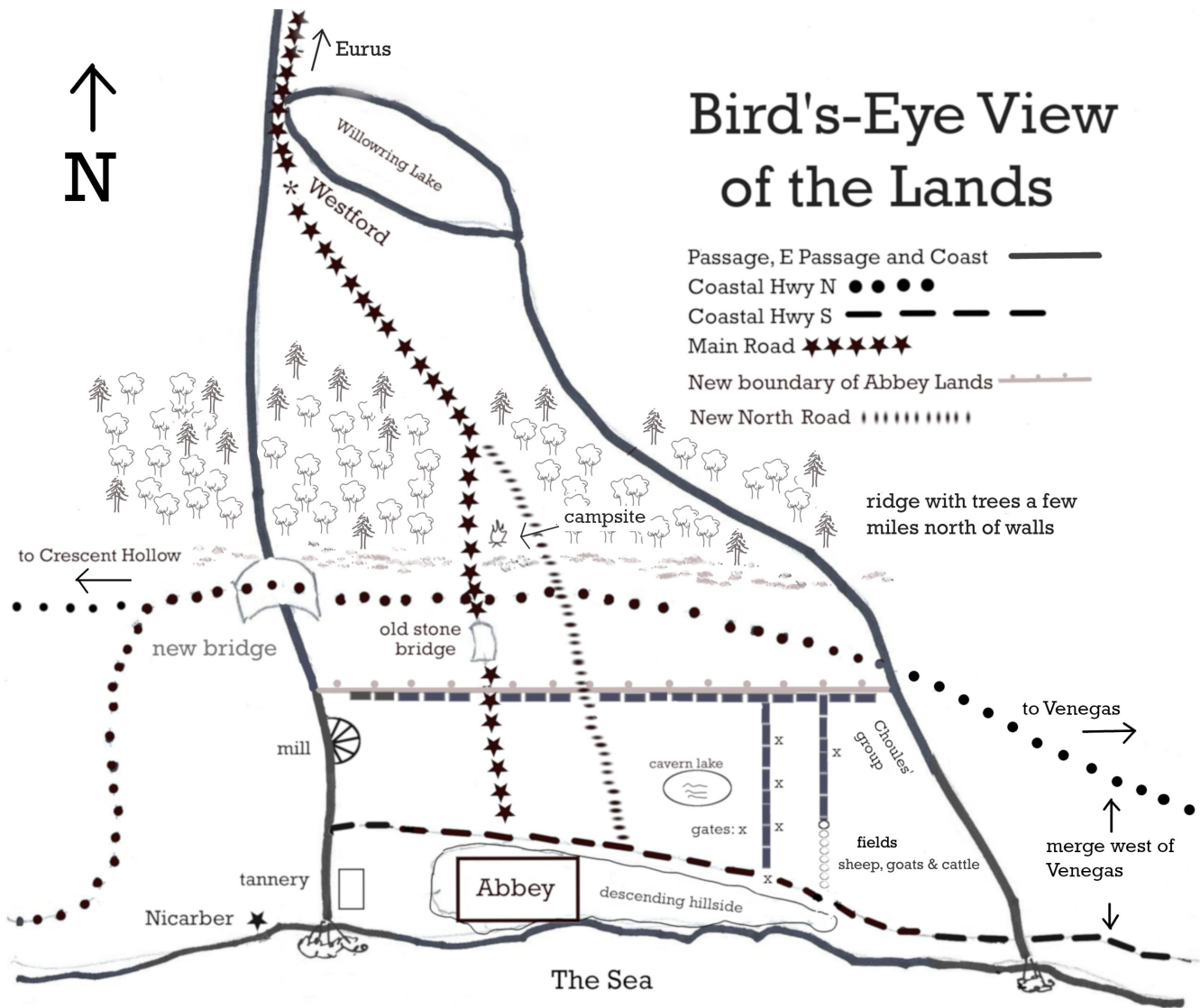
new switchback

to courtyard gates

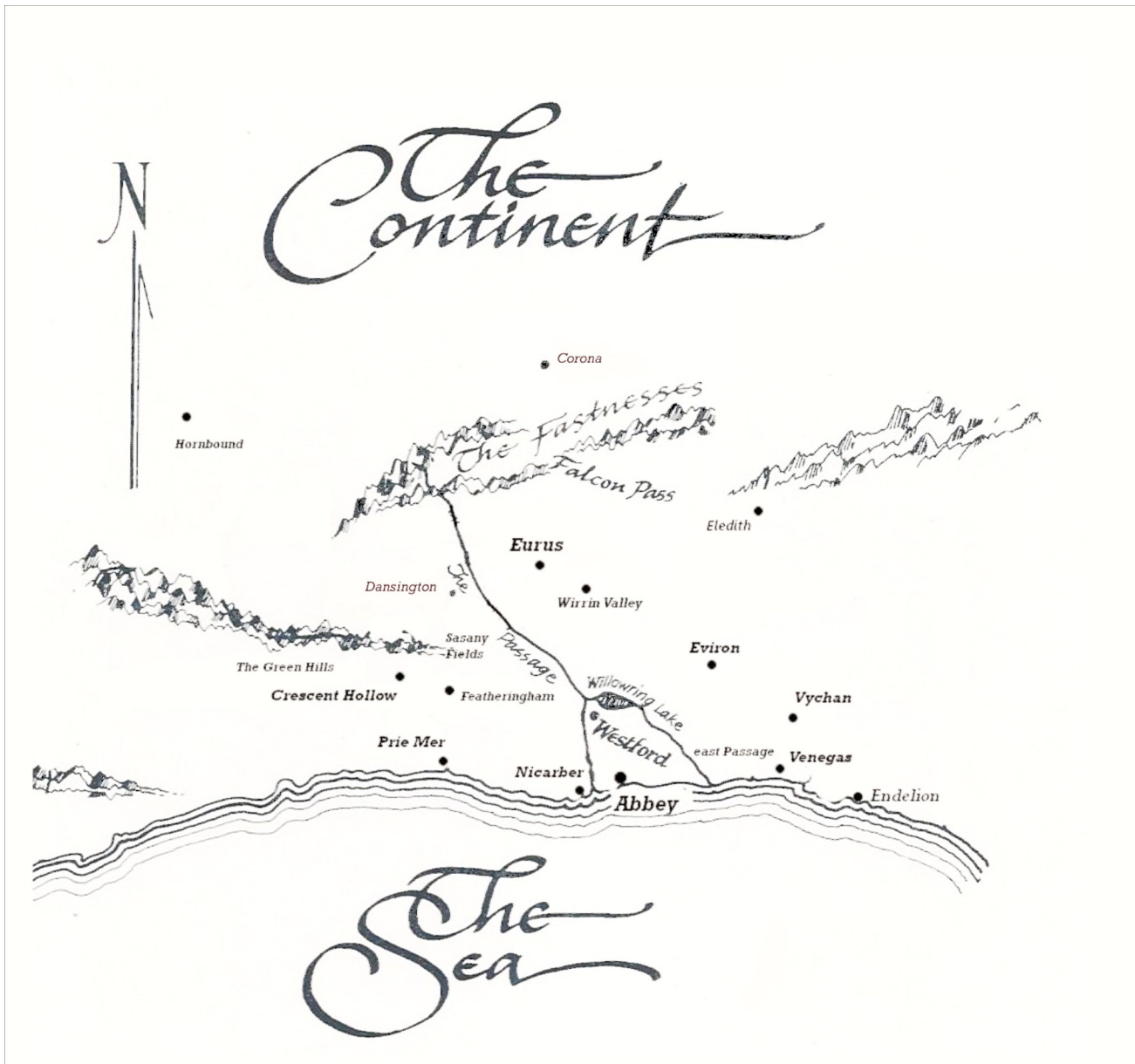
- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry & Eryk
- W - Barrueta & Colletta

Troll Village that used to be the children's play hut





NOT TO SCALE





Gotobed Appeals to
Marguerite (Book 27:
*Lord Efran and
the Villalobos*)
See the Notes--
Robin Hardy

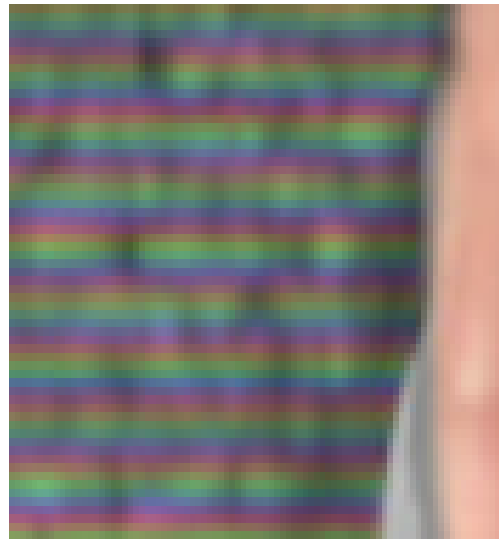
The setting for this challenge is the great hall of [Caerphilly Castle](#)¹ in Wales. Marguerite is portrayed by [this](#) model². I struggled with this photo for days, as it did not reflect how I saw Marguerite at all, but then realized how she might use it. Her throne is from the [National Museum of India](#)³, and her hair is from [pngegg](#).

Minka's get-up was the most fun. I imported everything but the swing from [this](#)⁴ special occasion in a beautiful young girl's life. Minka's hair was from [Wallpapers.com](#), and her scepter from [Pngtree](#)⁵. Her and Efran's chairs are the throne of [Napoleon](#)⁶ without the humongous back drape.

Efran's [face](#)⁷ was provided by the same model I used for him in Windish And Malaga Get Rondi (the illustration for book #25, *Lord Efran and the Minor Regent*). It was just a hilarious coincidence that he was mildly scowling at something, which in our illustration is Auntie Marguerite's provocative ensemble. Since he's got his hands in his pockets (which no one does sitting down), I had to provide him another [body](#)⁸. His [breastplate](#)⁹ is the same one from Lues, the illustration for Book 23, *Lord Efran on the Game Board*.

The [steps](#)¹⁰ up to the table—I mean, the dais—were AI generated, but the drapery [fringe](#)¹¹ is real. I just gave it a new purpose.

I spent *days* looking for something to give form to Gotobed. I was tearing my hair out when I finally ran across [this](#) wonderful image, below left. Because it's in black and white, I used Gimp's [video degradation filter](#) to add both speckles and a little color to his suit. A close-up of the effect is below, right. Then I added his [face](#), [hair](#), and [flat cap](#).



[Seagrave](#)¹² was the easiest one of all. The minute I saw his cool confidence, I knew I had him.

PS. I am claiming no copyright for this illustration.

1. Photographed by SquireRamsalot on Wikimedia Commons
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5. Created by [588ku](#) on Pngtree
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