



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

Book 24

Lord Efran and
the Girl Troll

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Shortly after the infamous Lady Leila had left the group of soldiers at Firmin's, Wendt and his officers returned to Barracks A to attempt to get some work done. There was much that lay before them in coordinating with Choules' group in the eastern Lands, preparing for the next troll attack, and negotiating with both Crescent Hollow and Venegas after aborted attacks and alliances. Mostly, however, Commander Wendt had to get his bearings after the sudden restoration of his eyes—not just his eyesight, but his eyes.

The horses for Captain Efran, Lady Minka, and their eight bodyguards were brought to them at Firmin's from the lower barrack stables. Because the new 12-year-old waitress, Lilou, had served the party of ten almost by herself, her supervisor Ionadi handed her the bill to give to the Captain.

When Lilou studied it, her heart almost gave out. Ionadi had been teaching her letters and numbers, so Lilou was able to read the amount due as ten royals and eight silver pieces—a huge bill. While she held it in mild terror, Efran walked over to hand her a pouch with a pat on the head. “You did a good job, Lilou,” he said.

“Thank you, Efran,” she breathed. Minka smiled warmly at her, and Lilou watched as they all got on their horses to begin walking them up Main.

Only then did Lilou open the pouch to look in it. Then she took it to Ionadi, who murmured, “If it doesn't cover the tab, that will come out of our pockets, you know.”

Lilou remained silent while Ionadi counted out twenty royals from the pouch. The old lady gave Lilou four, then put four in her own pocket. Handing her back the pouch, she said, “Take it and the bill to Gudgeon in the back room. Oh, and I forgot to tell you: the Captain always overpays. I'm glad to see him again, wherever he went to.” Efran had disappeared for a month until suddenly returning yesterday.

Grinning, Lilou nodded and ran to the accountant's room with the pouch and the bill. And when Gudgeon saw the excess, he gave it to Lilou as a tip. So she was almost staggering around the rest of the day.

When her shift was completed, however, she sat looking at the gold in her hand. Then she got up with a sigh to go to Ionadi's room. She knocked on her door and stuck her head in. Ionadi looked over from her little table, where she was eating. “Come sit,” she invited.

Reluctantly, Lilou said, “I made a lot of money today. I think I need to go home, and, give some to my mother”—Windry.

“If you like, dear, but you're welcome to sleep here. I've plenty of room,” Ionadi said.

“Thank you.” Lilou went over to hug her neck. Then she listlessly turned out with two—no, three royals in her pocket.

Her mother's house was across the new northbound road in the east Lands. Lilou walked quickly, as it was getting dark. One of the things she liked about Firmin's—and Main Street—was that it all stayed brightly lit until fairly late in the night. When Lilou left Main with its lanterns, she ran the rest of the way to her house.

Opening the door, she paused at the voices from her mother's room—she and her new husband Eryk were

arguing again. He was saying, “Why should I stay with you, when you have men here while I’m at work?”

Her mother said, “That’s insulting, and I’m very offended that you say it.”

To not hear any more of it, Lilou took a candle from the kitchen back toward her own room. While waiting for them to finish their argument, she needed to get more clothes anyway. But on opening the door, she jumped at the sight of a strange man lying on her bed. He rose up quickly to put a finger to his lips, then pulled his boots on.

With her door open, they could hear her mother and Eryk arguing. She and he left Windry’s bedroom to continue arguing in the gathering room just beyond Lilou’s door. So the man got up to gently close it again. “You want me to help you get ready for bed?” he asked.

“No, I’m leaving,” she gasped. Lilou flew around the room to gather her few possessions, and the man brought over a wicker basket to help her pack her cloth doll and extra shoes.

When she had everything together, she paused fearfully at the door, unwilling to walk into her mum’s argument with Eryk. But the man behind her said, “Shhh! Here.”

She turned as he opened the window, waving to her. So she ran over to climb out, lugging her bags and basket. “You’ll be quiet about me, won’t you?” he asked genially. Eyes wide, she ran off with the royals still in her pocket.

Clutching her possessions, Lilou ran up the dark street to Main and straight over to Firmin’s. At the lighted doorway, she paused to watch Eryk stalk back up Main toward the oyster house. Then she slipped by the line of customers, murmuring apologies, until she got to Ionadi’s room. The door was open.

The old woman looked up in surprise at Lilou’s baggage. “Are you staying, then?”

“If it’s all right,” Lilou said, still shaking.

“Look there,” Ionadi nodded.

Lilou looked to the other side of the room where a second pallet bed was set up with a pillow and quilted covering. She gasped, dropping her bags to clutch Ionadi around her skinny shoulders.

Before she could start crying, Ionadi said, “Just put your things on the bed for now and come with me to get you a plate. The diva’s about to sing, and we can hear her clear in the kitchen.” Wiping her eyes, Lilou nodded excitedly.

Prior to this, Efran and his party were riding at a walk up Main. It had been only late afternoon when they left Firmin’s, so there were still hours of daylight left. Approaching Chapel Road, Efran’s legs tightened slightly so that Kraken stopped as his rider looked east. He asked Minka, “Would you like to sit at the lake?”

“Yes,” she said warmly. “But we need Joshua.”

Efran turned to his men to say, “I need a volunteer to run up and get him, please.” (Bringing all the children down required advance planning.) Krall was the first to spur up the old switchback, so the rest of the bodyguard followed Efran and Minka toward Cavern Lake. But Kraken pricked his ears toward the switchback several times to check Krall’s progress. The horse was rather attached to his human’s little human.

When they drew abreast of the chapel, Minka paused on Rose, so Efran said, “I need another volunteer to go kidnap Lady Marguerite.” Teschner happened to be closest to the chapel entrance, so turned his horse to lope to the double doors. The rest of the riders stopped to watch.

They saw Hartshough come to the door, then withdraw. Shortly, Lady Marguerite emerged to begin up the front walk with Teschner. Being Minka’s great-grandmother, Marguerite was elderly. But because she was also faerie, as was her great-granddaughter, Minka strongly suspected that this was not her true appearance. Minka gasped, “Auntie’s wearing pants! Why am I not in my pants?”

Efran laughed, and Teschner assisted Marguerite up into his horse’s saddle. Approaching with picnic blankets, Hartshough inquired, “Shall I fetch drinks for your group, Lord Efran?”

“No, no, thank you, Hartshough. We only came to abduct the lady,” Efran said.

“Very good, Lord Efran.” Hartshough then passed the blankets up for Marguerite to carry on her saddle.

Teschner turned to walk at his horse’s head as the party set off again. “Thank you for bringing me along,” Marguerite said, and Minka reached over to squeeze her hand. Marguerite asked, “How are you feeling, Efran?”—after his month-long struggle with Lues.

He turned to her. “The Commander has his eyes back.”

“So that’s why the Firmament broke out on the Lands. I thought Sir Nomus might be just showing off,” she mused. “Stranger things may yet appear now that Lues is gone.”

“Where did it go, Lady Marguerite?” the irrepressible Jehan asked.

“Back to the Abyss, I hope,” she said.

Hawk asked, “How did you do it, Captain? How did you make it leave?”

Efran considered that as they arrived at the north shore of the lake to dismount. “I’m trying to remember,” he laughed. “And now I think it was nothing I did. Who of you were on the march of forty-eight, when we were kept on the move for forty hours straight?”

“Yo,” Connor said, lifting a hand. Truro and Hawk groaned in remembrance. Minka glanced at them in subdued alarm as she spread a blanket at the edge of the lake.

“That’s how it was with Lues,” Efran said. “All I did was stay awake, and that was hard enough.”

Letting their horses graze, they dropped down to the cool grass. The two women were actually the only ones on a blanket. Then they all looked over as Krall loped up with an arm firmly around Joshua, who was screeching at the collection of men around the lake. When Krall let him down to Efran’s arms, Minka gasped, “Spikes!”

The men laughed, and Efran stroked the 19-month-old’s new spiky hair cut. Krall said, “Yes, Lady Minka, Toby just gave him a nice new cut. All the men hilltop were admiring it.”

She looked momentarily distressed, so Efran said, “You don’t want to discourage Toby, do you? I should get a matching cut.”

“Don’t you dare,” she muttered, narrowing her eyes at him.

He grinned at her as they settled down around the lake. Then they just let the late afternoon melt around them into early twilight. The horses grazed placidly while light winds ruffled the lake water. The aroma of cooking fires wafted up, and they watched Plunkett turn his empty peat cart off Main to return to his little house for the evening. Minka and her auntie chatted quietly.

The calls of thrushes and chiffchaffs began to sound from the faerie trees at the east and west points of the lake. Half-awake on the grass, Efran turned his head toward Marguerite. “Are those real birds calling, or the faeries?”

“Oh, those are real,” Marguerite assured him. “The tree faeries prize their home birds, and are very protective of them.”

“That’s good to know,” Efran murmured, closing his eyes. Joshua had laid his head on his father’s chest to pat him sleepily while Efran had a hand on Minka’s leg. At the moment, she was not chatting. She was holding Marguerite’s hand, face raised to the soft twilight, listening to the bird calls mingle with the rooftop bells’ gentle pealing.

She whispered to Efran, “When Ryal declared you dead, I went up to the fortress rooftop—not to throw myself down,” she hastily added, as he had looked over in alarm. “No, I just needed to get a broader view. I took in the hilltop, and the gardens, and the Lands, and the Sea—I could see everything. More, I could see that whatever happened, it was all worthwhile. And I knew I hadn’t lost you.”

He smiled slightly, watching the lowering sun color her hair a fiery gold more splendid than Leila’s had ever been. He said, “But you cried when you saw me”—which was a generous understatement.

Her lips parted as though she had remembered a surprising coincidence. “I could hardly believe how quickly my prayers were answered when I let go of the fear. All of a sudden, you came and told me it was all right. I didn’t have to go through a sham marriage. There you stood.”

He raised up on his elbow to demand, “Then why were you wearing makeup?”

She grinned. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yes,” he said as though offended.

“To make sure you would come and tell me to wash it off,” she declared in victory. Marguerite laughed and the men smiled, looking cautiously for the Captain’s reaction.

A little surprised, he lay back down. “Well—don’t do it again.”

“Don’t leave again,” she countered, eyebrows raised. He looked deeply conflicted.

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Chapter 2

The group lingered at the lake while watching the twilight deepen from pink and gold to purple as lights were lit all around the lake and along the new north road clear to Chapel Road. When they heard the fortress dinner bell ringing, Efran stood with his sleepy son on his shoulder. “The children will be looking for us.”

The men got up to whistle for the horses, who came readily. They knew they had hay waiting in their stalls. (Oh, and, Squirt had two new helpers in the stables. Although both were older than the 13-year-old, they understood that they were under his direction. He answered only to Greves, the soldier in charge of the hilltop stables.)

Everyone mounted; Teschner helped Lady Marguerite back up on his horse, and they all began walking west on Chapel Road. Upon their approach to the oyster house, Efran drew up the reins in surprise (using one hand, as Joshua was asleep on his other arm). “Who are all those people coming out of your house?” he asked Marguerite in gentle rebuke.

She replied, “Oh, that’s Xander and his orchestra. They have weekly practices for performances about once a month. No alcohol is served, so it’s all very tame.”

Efran was not satisfied. “What about the—the bell ringers and chorale and the half-naked dancers?” he asked darkly.

“Only the bell ringers and the chorale are still here,” Marguerite said, “but they don’t stay in the chapel. They play and sing in Croft’s outdoor pavilion in exchange for lodging—four to a room. They also clean tables and wash dishes most cheerfully, so everyone is happy.”

“All right,” Efran grudgingly conceded. They stopped for Minka to hop off Rose and walk Marguerite to her door. In consideration of the others waiting, Minka said goodbye for only a few minutes.

As she came skipping back to her horse, Coish asked, “What are all the lights in the greenery atop the chapel?”

Climbing back up on her little mare, Minka looked over to the chapel rooftop. “Oh, those are faeries, of course. Some of them are wood faeries, there to maintain the wood that Bozzelli built into the ceiling, but then you have the music faeries, because of Xander and his group. Oh, there are star faeries and moon faeries, as well, because of the clear night sky.”

Minka paused so long to scrutinize the greenery that Efran gently prompted, “How about dinner faeries?”

She turned right away to nudge Rose up the new switchback. “You’re teasing, but the faeries improve the air in the dining hall a great deal every evening.”

“I can imagine,” he laughed.

Efran, Minka and Joshua appeared in the dining hall moments before soldiers were to be dispatched to find him, because everyone was anxious to see the Captain in his usual place for dinner. So he and Minka sat with Joshua, who barely woke up to eat. Efran disallowed pie until he ate bites of mashed peas and perch in a cream sauce. Meanwhile, Efran drank his ale and listened to the children describe their improvements to the garden, which he had not seen to their satisfaction. He promised to do that tomorrow.

Neither he nor Minka ate much, having spent most of the afternoon at Firmin’s. But for Efran, it was good just to

look over the hall to see the satisfied glances their way. He was appreciative of everyone who paused to pat his shoulder or welcome him back. Whether it was because of the faeries, or the absence of Lues, or just the reawakened sense of how much the Fortress depended on the Captain, he was gratified by the goodwill.

And that evening in bed, Minka personally welcomed him back. Secure in his arms, she murmured, “I’m not letting go of you again.”

“All right,” he sighed. Privately, he was just hoping that no other women he had once known would decide to visit the burgeoning Lands. Surely, without Lues to draw them, they were done coming. Weren’t they? How many others were there?

When he paused to think about this, she asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly, returning his complete attention to her.

The following morning, July 31st, they both slept in, or tried to. But there were timid knocks on their outer door from children who had been given a second day off from class because of the urgency of showing the Captain the improved gardens. Minka murmured, “We need to get up now.”

“We will. Right away. Just one more kiss,” he whispered. Then he snorted, hunched, and fell over on his back.

Minka lurched up. “Efran! What—?” She gazed at him while he shook in laughter.

“I can’t believe—it’s a line in a song,” he gasped.

Gaping, she demanded, “Sing it to me.”

“I’ll have to get Justinian to sing it,” he groaned, sitting up. The knocking had become more urgent with the telltale sound of his laughter. So they got up to get dressed. While Efran was putting on fresh pants, Minka picked up his pants from the floor. Finding the folded parchment in the pocket, she put it on the small table in the outer room without looking at it. Then she put all the rest of the clothes on the floor into the laundry basket.

Shortly, Efran, Minka and Joshua were on the back grounds exploring the new, expanded garden section. It had been created with many cartloads of dirt and compost transported from the far western grounds by Kraken and Gaunter under Tourjee’s supervision, with Joshua’s help.

Tourjee was actually as eager as the children to show Efran the improvements. “What we’ve done, Captain, is have each child be responsible for their own garden section—those who wanted to, anyway. They got to choose what to plant, but they have to do all the work themselves—the planting, watering, weeding, and pest killing. Of course, I’m here to help with problems. And whatever they grow that makes it to the kitchen, I’ve arranged with Kitchen Administrator Goyne to have them paid a bit.”

“Oh, excellent,” Efran said. The children clustered around him, nodding in excitement.

“That’s wonderful!” Minka cried. “It looks like some beds have been harvested already.” She strained to see over the men.

“I’ll let them show you,” Tourjee said, as they began walking along the rows.

Toby led off: "I have two sections, pumpkins and squash, because everybody likes those. I mean, not the squash, except when it's fried, and then the kitchen can't make enough of it."

They all surveyed the healthy green plants. "Little pumpkins," Efran sighed, and Minka squeezed his arm. "What are you going to do with all the money you earn?" he asked Toby.

He replied, "Froggatt's has mechanical toys that you put together. They cost a lot, anywhere from ten to fifteen silvers each, and there are a lot of small pieces, but if you get them together right, they move all by themselves. We saw one that Froggatt had put together. Thrupp [the Fortress' structural engineer] promised to help me with it if I have problems."

"Very good, Toby," Efran said.

Minka hugged him in excitement. "I like the pumpkins best."

Efran grinned at her and they went on to the other children's beds. Jera was growing a bed of marigolds that were lush and blooming. "I've already earned *six silvers* for what I've cut, and the more I cut, the more they grow! Tourjee showed me how. Because not only do they make pretty flowers for the tables, but the kitchen makes candies of them that you can eat!" she explained with shining eyes. (It was not a coincidence that she sounded much like Hassie, older and more knowledgeable about everything.)

Minka declared, "Marigolds are my new favorites. I must try the candies."

Jera said, "I've had some! They're so good!"

Efran and Minka looked over all the children's garden beds: Calix was growing pole beans, which were almost ready to harvest. Hassie had chosen oregano, because the kitchen used loads of it and it required almost no care. Alcmund was growing two beds, one of marjoram and one of parsley, not only because they were frequently used, but he got paid extra for drying them. He also had his eye on Froggatt's mechanical toys.

Elwell was growing tomatoes. Although they were a lot of work, they brought premium prices. Chorro had started a bed of licorice mint—which of course was wonderful for tea—but then he abandoned it. So anyone who harvested from it got paid for it. And since it was an enthusiastic spreader, Tourjee had made him plant it in a less desirable area, away from the other beds. There, it had taken over most of the hillside.

Meanwhile, Efran kept an eye on Joshua riding Kraken just for fun. One of the men always walked around with them, but they were getting a little careless. Not only did Joshua stay on pretty well by himself, but whenever he started slipping, Kraken would whip his head around to push him back up.

While Efran and Minka were on the back grounds admiring everything, Pleyel trotted up, saluting. "Commander Wendt requests your presence at Barracks A, Captain."

"I'm coming," Efran said, turning at once.

Minka began trotting with him to match his stride. When he glanced over, she said, "You're not really going to tell me I can't come with you to see the Commander." It was not even a question. His restored eyes were a constant source of wonder for everyone.

"No, I wouldn't dare," he conceded, but he was uneasy. If Wendt had an assignment for him, it might be something he'd rather she not hear . . . unfiltered. Pensively, he looked toward Kraken to say, "I need a horse."

Kraken bumped the man walking alongside him, tilting so that Joshua fell into his arms. Rather than cry, Joshua reached down with the command, “Unh! Unh!” There was a bright green frog hopping toward the natural cistern from which the Archimedes screw drew water. So the man had to transport Joshua to follow the frog.

From there, Kraken trotted over to Efran, who stroked his nose to tell him, “You have to gear up.” Kraken nodded, and Efran took Minka’s hand to walk her to the stables.

He saddled Kraken while Squirt got the dun mare ready for the lady to ride. She made no objection, though this horse was one that she couldn’t mount easily by herself, unlike Rose. But Rose was too short to keep up with other horses on extended rides, and Efran didn’t know if they’d need to ride out somewhere.

Pleyel and Serrano accompanied them down to the barracks. Entering, Efran didn’t salute to announce himself right away, because there was an orderly hubbub of men coming and going with messages, assignments, questions, instructions—Commander Wendt operating at peak efficiency.

Efran exhaled gently in the familiar, comforting environment. “We needed this more than anything,” he whispered to her. She nodded, eyes bright.

Seeing them, Wendt extended a short stack of papers which Melchior came forward to take. “Brief him in the conference room,” Wendt said to him, then looked up to tell Efran, “I’ll be right back there with you.” He added, “Hello, Minka.”

“Hello, Commander,” she said almost shyly. He was a different man.

“Commander.” Efran saluted, then glanced at her before following Melchior to the conference room. Minka wilted a little, realizing that he didn’t want her here.

“Captain. Lady Minka,” Melchior said as he sat at the long end of the conference-room table facing the door, which stood open. Efran and Minka sat opposite him. “Last night we got in a messenger from Sasany Fields. I spoke with him this morning in Polonti, which is how he talks best. Do you want to see my notes?” he asked Efran.

“Not unless you translated them,” Efran said uneasily.

“No, not yet,” Melchior admitted. “We need men who can translate better. When Hob and Wymond took over about a year ago, they dropped the speech that Master Crowe used [that Melchior was familiar with]. Now, they’re using a—a different speech we’re not understanding. But I can give you the meat of it while we wait on the Commander.”

“Give me the bottom line, first. What’s the problem?” Efran asked.

Melchior studied him for a moment. “Eh, the problem is, we don’t really see the problem. It could be just a routine report, but the messenger seemed—pressed to give it. The Commander feels we need to send an inspection team. Oh, the messenger’s name is Kocak, and he’ll be guide for the return party.”

Efran looked up to the ceiling a moment. “The prisoners who should be there are Wyse, Alberon, and the three who tried to rob the Treasury during the insurrection. Are they all still there?”

“Yes,” Melchior said. “The robbers are Rugg, Protch, and Owsin, all accounted for.”

“Are they alive? Working?” Efran asked.

“Yes,” Melchior said. “That’s also seems certain. But there are questions regarding their handling.”

“What questions?” Efran asked, close to scowling.

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Chapter 3

Melchior laughed, “We’re not sure what those questions are.” Efran resigned himself to listen patiently. Melchior explained, “Again, it’s the language. The Polonti spoken in camp is a little different from what we speak, so there are gaps. We had Aceto and Ure, both recently come from the camp, come talk to Kocak. They understood him, but don’t know the Southern Continental language well enough to give us the, ah, finer points. The Commander has ordered all new Polonti into language classes, by the way. Anyhow, we had Conte write down his take on Kocak’s message. . . .” He paused to shuffle through the papers. “Ah, here it is.”

He put a sheet before Efran, and Minka leaned over to read it as well. Efran began to read aloud: “funny bossy faerie man slight of wit.” He raised his eyes to Melchior, who shrugged and nodded. Efran returned to the sheet to read: “fighting each other,” “punished to escape,” “laughing crazy,” “pretending dead.”

Efran read silently a while longer, then leaned back and said, “So, they’re being as uncooperative and troublesome as we thought they’d be.”

“It appears so,” Wendt said, entering. He sat briskly at the head of the table. “The problem is, Efran, we need someone to go see what’s happening at camp who has the authority to take what corrective actions are needed. The Law of Roman doesn’t permit us to kill captives for simply being a nuisance, but if there’s more involved, we need someone who can handle it according to the Law. I am asking if you’re interested in going. I won’t order it, but you do appear to be the only one to meet all criteria.”

Minka asked, “How dangerous is it, Commander?”

He paused. “Honestly, Minka, not very. If it were, I sure wouldn’t send the Lands’ Lord Sovereign. The difficulty lies in keeping the camp effective while making sure these criminals are—legally contained. If they had tried to escape or attack the guards, they would have been killed at once. If there is a legal rationale to put them to death, I’d be fine with that.”

Leaning back, Wendt looked to Efran to explain, “We’re hoping to make the camp not just a training facility, but an outpost, which would greatly enhance our defense. But first we’ve got to figure out what’s going on there right now.”

Efran asked, “Where are the camp leaders in this?—Hob and Wymond?”

Wendt said, “We understand that this message is directly from them. And we do have an oral agreement with them for their complete cooperation with the Abbey Fortress. We want to clarify that in writing, as well.”

Efran nodded. “I’ll ride out in the morning. Who would you recommend taking?”

Wendt answered immediately, “Conte, Lorient, Dango, a few of the new ones—Aceto, Ure, who’ll translate for you.”

Efran said, “All right, I’ll have them summoned—”

“And me,” Minka said.

Efran looked quickly at her. He paused to choose his words carefully in front of the Commander. But she told him, “You’re taking all Polonti, when you need someone who can deal with a devious faerie . . . and Wyse.”

Efran lowered his eyes, unwilling to shut her down in front of Wendt. So she went on, “The Commander just said he didn’t see much danger in the situation. And you once told me you wanted me to be available to cut off Alberon at the knees. You don’t know him like I do; you’re not able to detect what power he may have remaining and how he might use it. And Wyse won’t speak to you at all, but . . . he could be open to me.”

Here Efran looked genuinely alarmed. But she looked at Wendt to ask, “What do you think, Commander? Could I be an asset on this trip? If you think not, I won’t ask to go.”

Efran and Melchior quickly looked at Wendt. Half-smiling, he looked down at the scribbled notes and said, “Minka, I think you would be a great asset, but I won’t make Efran take you.”

She looked back at her husband. “You were upset that I dropped down in the cavern after you to face Alberon at the height of his power. You didn’t want me anywhere near Symphorien, but she needed help with her eggs. And you certainly didn’t want me on the gallows with you, but by then you were too beat up to object. I’d like to go before you get beat up.”

He was studying the table all this while. Pressing his lips together, he looked at her, then grudgingly nodded. He wet his lips to say, “I don’t like it, but I’ll probably need you . . . a lot.”

She smiled at him and Wendt said, “Assemble your party here at daylight tomorrow, then. Dismissed.”

Efran and Minka were quiet on the ride back up to the fortress. She paused at the intersection of Chapel Road to say, “I’m going to tell Auntie, but I’ll only be a moment. You don’t need to stop.” There were always soldiers on duty in or around the chapel.

“All right.” Looking sick to his stomach, he rode on up the switchback while she trotted to the oyster house. First thing, Efran went up to the workroom to report to his administrators.

DeWitt and Estes listened attentively, then DeWitt said, “Yes, a check on our prisoners is overdue. When did we ship them out there?” He looked between Efran and Estes.

Efran looked up at the faerie tree, thinking. “That would have been two, two and a half months ago.”

“But Wyse was out there before Alberon and the others,” Estes said thoughtfully.

Efran said, “Yes, Kirill confirmed that he had been receiving ‘corrective training’ for ten days when he and his team arrived here. They’re the ones who took back Alberon and the Treasury robbers. Would-be robbers. Incompetents.”

DeWitt snorted, “Yes, watching the Librarian pack them away in the book was fun. Alberon as well. But—he was stripped of his power, wasn’t he?”

“Most of it,” Efran said cautiously. “But Minka seems to think he had means of replenishing it, or some of it.”

“Oh, then you do need her,” DeWitt said. “Not only is she faerie, but Lady Sovereign.”

Estes looked dubious. “Does her authority extend outside the Lands? Does yours, Efran?”

Efran nodded slightly. “To a certain extent, as far as I can tell.”

“Like when you set fire to the palace at Eurus?” DeWitt laughed.

“I’m still not sure about that,” Efran said, conflicted. “But it was definitely operating when I got Lilou and Calix out of Surley’s house.” Larisse had locked the door by faerie magic, and it had opened upon his order.

Estes nodded. “That’s good to know. Who are you taking besides Minka?”

Efran said, “Wendt wants Aceto, Ure, Conte, Lorient and Dango to go.”

“Lorient?” DeWitt mused.

“Master Crowe’s senior lieutenant, who was at Sasany Fields with Melchior,” Efran explained.

DeWitt nodded in acknowledgment, but Estes looked dissatisfied. “Take a few Southerners as well—Shane, Hawk.”

“Yes,” DeWitt seconded, and Efran agreed. So those seven men were summoned for duty tomorrow.

Meanwhile, on the chapel’s back patio, Minka had just told Marguerite about the trip and her concerns regarding Alberon. “Can he regather power, Auntie?”

Marguerite looked off thoughtfully, adjusting her comfy caftan around her knees. “He shouldn’t be able to, but if he’s gone fully bad, he may tap into a dark stream.”

“What can you sense of him?” Minka asked.

Marguerite shook her head. “Very little. Either he doesn’t have much power, or he’s cloaking it. But I’m glad you talked Efran into letting you come along. Cloak your own power, dear. You’re fairly glowing with it.”

“How? How do I cloak it?” Minka asked.

“Visualize drawing a cloak around yourself. When you need to exercise power, open it just a little,” Marguerite said.

“All right.” Minka paused to picture this. “How’s that?”

“Good,” Marguerite said. “Check it now and then, especially to see if anyone’s been poking around it.”

“Like Alberon?” Minka asked quickly.

“Yes, but you may not know who else,” Marguerite cautioned.

“Will you and I be able to communicate? Sasany Fields is almost as far from here as Eurus,” Minka said.

“Yes, easily. Our bond is very strong,” Marguerite said, smiling. Minka exhaled, gripping her hand. Marguerite added, “And Hartshough will provide backup if he’s needed.”

“He’s Toogood,” Minka grinned.

“Quite,” Marguerite smirked, and they heard him clear his throat in the kitchen.

By the time Minka made it back up to the fortress, Efran was out on the back grounds with the children. He had told them about his leaving tomorrow, and reassured them that it was practically a vacation. He also told them that she was coming, as well.

Toby said, “I’ve heard so much about the camp, I’d like to see it.”

Noah agreed, but Chorro interjected, “I would, most of all.” Aside from Pia, who was always in the woods, he was the only Polonti orphan at the fortress right now.

Efran told Chorro, “When you get old enough to start weapons training, we’ll take you out there.”

“Can I train, too?” Toby asked.

Efran hesitated. “I’m not going to guaranty it, Toby. I’m sure you’d do well, but, we really need you here.” Toby raised his brows, agreeing.

Minka swept over to catch Efran’s arm and hug Toby around the shoulders. “Well, Auntie thinks it’s good that I’m going, Efran.”

“I know,” he sighed. “Wendt would tell us straight up if he thought it was a mistake. I’m just—always trying to lock you up like a treasure.”

“But you sometimes take treasures out to use them,” she murmured, a hand on his chest.

He looked at her ears. “Don’t wear the gold and diamonds.” So that day she removed the Treasury earrings and put back in the little gold hoops.

Before sunrise the following morning, August 1st, Efran and Minka met the hilltop men of their party in the courtyard, then they all rode down to the lower barracks to join up with the rest. Besides their personal provisions, they carried bags for the camp, particularly of desirable seeds.

Wearing a simple cotton shirt, work pants and boots, Minka was riding the sturdy dun mare. She had also gathered her hair in a top knot and covered it with a wide-brimmed hat. After the first dubious glances, Efran had to approve. It was far more practical for a long ride than having her hair blow everywhere. Still, he sighed.

Gradually, the men became aware that there was a woman in their traveling party. The new Polonti Aceto and

Ure only looked askance at her while the messenger Kocak began expostulating in Polonti, gesturing at her. Efran shook his head dismissively, but Conte made the effort to educate Kocak on her status in his language. Still, once outside the wall gates, Kocak remained immobile on his horse, staring her down.

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Chapter 4

Minka looked Kocak in the eye; Efran turned Kraken toward him in aggravation, but the Southerner Hawk barked in laughter, “*Wahine weli!*” (which loosely translates, “dangerous woman.”) Kocak promptly backed off to assume his position as guide for the party. Throughout the day-long ride, including rest stops, he carefully avoided her. And at one point or another during their trip, Shane and a few of the Polonti (except Efran) quietly approached Hawk to find out what the words meant.

They rode at a steady lope for hours, during which Efran made determined efforts to not watch her. But she seemed to be doing fine. The guide was necessary because the route to the camp was not marked at all. After leaving the Passage environs far behind, they loped generally north through woodlands mostly of basswood, maple, and beech. When they came upon the occasional brook, they stopped to let the horses drink and rest.

As Minka dismounted at one such stop, Efran came over to ask her, “What do you want to eat?” He was digging through his pack.

She had her own provisions, of course, but seeing that this was important to him, she said, “Oh, just the flatbread. I’m not hungry yet, so I’ll just eat when we get there.”

“It’s another five hours, at least,” he muttered.

“I’m fine, Efran, really,” she said, uncorking her water bag to take a drink.

“Don’t drink too much,” he cautioned.

“I know,” she smiled, recorking it.

He looked vacantly at the men, a few who were waiting to talk to him. Then he turned back to ask her, “What did your auntie think about this?”—which Minka had told him yesterday.

Nonetheless, she said, “She thought it was a good idea, and gave me some advice. Also, I should be able to communicate with her, but I want to wait until we get there to test it out.”

“All right,” he breathed, looking over as one of the men addressed a question to him.

Shortly, they remounted to resume the ride, and she began experimentally reaching out, just to feel for what was in the area. Not surprisingly, all she detected close by were birds and small woodland animals. There was a particularly piercing whistle that baffled her for quite a while—every time she sensed it, she glanced to Efran. But he was never the one whistling. An hour later, they passed the whistler, sitting on a high branch. Minka slowed her horse, holding her hat on with one hand to look up in confirmation.

Efran slowed, practically turning Kraken full around to demand, “What is it?” The other men were then forced to slow.

“A cuckoo,” she said thoughtfully.

Kocak looked dark at the unnecessary delay, but Shane noted, “Good thing you spotted it, Lady Minka—some renegade bands use the bird calls as signals.”

“True,” Dango verified.

So they proceeded, Minka smiling secretly at her defenders. But within another hour, she could sense the camp ahead. From then on, she would have needed no guide.

While they rode, she continued to probe what she could feel of the camp, always careful to keep herself cloaked. The three Treasury robbers were conspicuous for their complaining, snarky, scheming thoughts as they carried out menial duties. She studied their thought patterns for a while, trying to differentiate them. That was difficult because she hadn’t known them at all beforehand. Eventually she determined that one was exceedingly restless and angry, the second was slow and dispirited, and the third quite a bit smarter than the other two. He was watching and waiting.

She could feel nothing distinct of Alberon or Wyse, so she reached out to feel around the camp as a whole. The general sense was that of intensity of purpose. There were several hundred men here in various but complementary pursuits, all feeling the value of what they were doing.

She lit upon one mind, however, that sprang up to look back at her. Because she was still cloaked, he could not quite break through to study her, so he shut down her view of him. This was interesting. She sifted through the residue of impressions. Was it Alberon? Wyse? Something evil? Or merely a leader at the camp? She felt fairly sure that she could rule out the first three, but had nothing to go on to determine the fourth.

At that time, Minka suddenly became aware of the close presence of—“Efran!” She pulled up on the reins abruptly. “Six men, armed, following us—” She was searching the beech trees to her left, in full leaf.

The party wheeled; Efran whipped his bow off his shoulder to nock and aim. “Show yourselves!”

“Don’t shoot!” a young Polonti voice called back. Most of Efran’s group lowered their weapons, but he himself was waiting for their trackers to present themselves.

As Efran’s party waited, listening, six Polonti teenagers appeared noiselessly at the edge of the beech trees, hands slightly raised. They were mounted, but their horses wore boots that apparently diminished sounds. The leader, who looked much like Jehan or Coish, peered at Minka in disgruntlement. “How did you hear us?”

Minka was shaking her head, about to answer, when Efran asked, “Why shouldn’t she?” He had lowered his bow, but not his scrutiny.

The boys turned to him, and the one who had spoken replied, “We are the Pamua—the silent riders. We have trained our bodies and our horses to ride silently on any ground.”

Efran’s party studied them: they rode with cloth or rope tack that did not creak or clank; their clothing, quivers and sheaths also showed no leather but the softest, most worn skins. Evaluating them, Efran said, “Ride out here to me.”

The boys obeyed, and everyone was silent, listening—especially to the horses' steps. But even in the detritus, they were virtually noiseless. Then Minka said, "I did not hear you; I felt you." She wanted to justify them.

They quickly looked back to her. "You are *aina*?" the first asked.

"No, I am—sensitive," she said. "What is your name?"

The leader said, "I am Musco."

"I am Minka," she said. "That is my husband Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. We are on our way to the camp at Sasany Fields. Is that where you are from?"

"That is where we are training," Musco said.

"Then ride with us," she smiled. "I would like to see more of your skill."

They looked to Efran, who said, "Fall in," with the barest glance at his wife.

The Pamua riders gathered around Minka as the group started off again at an easy lope. Efran's men collected around and behind the Pamua to watch and listen. The beeches were dwindling at this point, so the riders were better able to group themselves.

After several minutes, Dango uttered, "How are you doing that? I don't even hear the hoofbeats."

"Training," Musco said.

Catching Loriot's half-smile, Efran asked, "What do you know about that?"

Loriot lifted his craggy face to look back at the silent riders. "They are well trained, Captain, but there is also mental cloaking. It's like salt—Polonti use it in everything."

Efran nodded, looking over his shoulder at the boys clustered around his wife while she leaned over to listen. "Minka has new pets," he sighed.

Another hour brought them within view of the camp, from which riders came out to meet them. Once they learned who were in the group of visitors, two of the scouts returned to alert the camp leaders. And Minka relaxed enough to begin chatting to the boys, who listened with mouths slightly agape—a facial expression familiar to Efran among his wife's pets.

The camp leaders were standing at the open gates of the compound when the group approached. Efran dismounted and lifted Minka down from her horse, then took her hand to walk over. "I am Captain Efran from the Abbey Lands; this is my wife Minka and my men, some of whom you know: Aceto, Ure, Conte, Dango, Loriot, Shane, and Hawk."

Those men dismounted to salute the leaders—large, rough Polonti very much like Kirill, who had transported the prisoners now incarcerated here. One of the leaders extended his hand to Efran. "Captain Efran, I am Wymond; this is Hob. We welcome you to Sasany Fields. We wish to give you drink and dining and then rest and comfort for your lady wife. Come all in now."

Efran shook his hand, then his riders handed over the bags they carried of wheat and rye seed, but especially sweet clover, timothy and sorghum, which were badly needed for horse and livestock feed. Efran and Minka were led to a central tent which appeared to be the camp visitors' quarters. Hearing Kraken snort behind them, Efran said, "Ah, he's my bodyguard. Please have him groomed and fed and brought into the tent. He'll be fine."

There was some confused chatter as to what the Captain was requesting, which Aceto translated for the grooms. They bowed to Efran in respect of his regard for his horse, and did indeed bring him into the tent an hour later. For now, their welcome committee (so to speak) showed Minka and Efran into their private quarters within the tent where they could freshen up after the day's travel.

Minutes later, Efran escorted his wife out, her in a fresh shirt and hair unbound. She smiled at their attendant, who bowed repeatedly. Then he brought them into the dining area where the men were waiting, standing at attention. Wymond bowed and said, "Lady Wife sit first." He swept a hand toward a long, low table.

Minka appraised the large cushions on the tent floor around the low table, then sat cross-legged on the one Wymond apparently indicated with a broad hand. Efran immediately sat on the cushion to her right, then his men sat themselves. Efran glanced over to see Hawk assertively claim the cushion on Minka's left, which was fine. The Pamua riders quickly sat around her party.

The rest of the table filled up with large Polonti men, obviously the most prominent members of the camp. Wymond sat directly across from Minka while Hob entered to sit across from Efran. Aceto, Ure, and Loriot stood again to bow to the camp leaders while they were taking their seats, so Conte and Dango sprang up to participate in this show of respect. Efran nodded to them from where he sat. Then they all settled down.

The camp Polonti sat gazing straight ahead while Efran's party sat in silence, looking around. Minka looked up to the ceiling of the tent. In late afternoon, the sun's light was beginning to diminish beyond the Green Hills, so candles in clay saucers were set all along the table. The tent flaps were open, allowing a light breeze to ruffle the candle flames. Also, many brown faces were peeking in.

Minka, still looking up, said, "A tent is such a nice place for a summer dinner, don't you think? You get the air and the color of the sun going down, but your dinner doesn't get spoiled by a sudden rain shower like it would on a picnic. And the cushions are so nice! You don't have to worry about moving around chairs! And if I stuff myself and get sleepy, I could just lie down right here, couldn't I?" She looked at Efran as if expecting praise for this revolutionary idea.

He blinked at her; Wymond, across from her, turned to Aceto and rumbled something. So Aceto began obviously translating Minka's monologue for him. Hob and the other camp residents listened as well. After a long exposition, Aceto fell silent and Wymond turned to Minka to say with weighty consideration, "We delight to feel you pleased with silly efforts of men." Hob nodded in earnest endorsement, not having Wymond's grasp of the language.

"Oh, it's wonderful!" Minka cried, beaming on him. "I know you don't have guests often, and I'm sorry that we couldn't give you notice of our coming—or at least my coming—poor Efran didn't want to bring me at first. But I'm so glad to be here!"

Since the sense of what she said required no translation, her listeners smiled with brown teeth, watching the candlelight glint off her golden curls. A server (i.e., an off-duty man) came rushing up to her with a clay goblet that had been painted and enameled. He proclaimed the name of the liquid before setting it down in front of her.

Chapter 5

Minka leaned over the cup, from which the strong aroma of alcohol wafted up. Smelling it from where he sat, Efran looked wary. Minka picked up the cup to take the tiniest sip. With wide blue eyes, she breathed, “Oh, that’s wonderful! It’s so heady! May I have water to go with it?”

Aceto rapidly translated Minka’s request for water, so Wymond turned to roar to the servers behind him. Meanwhile, she admired the goblet. “Isn’t it beautiful, Efran? Can you believe that men who are learning to kill still take time to make elegant things? I often think that Polonti have such poetic souls.” A half-dozen faces swiveled to Aceto for the translation; once rendered, Wymond looked off as though composing a sonnet on the spot.

Meanwhile, a server ran up to place another goblet in front of Minka. She tasted it to confirm that it was water, then she poured a little alcohol into it. “There! That should make it perfect for me. If I drink too much, I get chatty, don’t I, Efran?” Sipping the enhanced water, she turned her blue eyes to her husband, who didn’t even attempt a response for watching her.

Everyone watched while she sipped, then put the cup down to definitively state, “That’s perfect! It’s so refreshing, but not so strong as to make me silly. Thank you!” she effused to Wymond across from her, who evidenced the gaping mouth of infatuation. This short speech Aceto translated with two words along the lines of, *That’s good*, but no one was attending him.

Another server rushed up to plop a decorated clay bowl in front of her. And she looked down at a mass of crinkly brown things that she was evidently supposed to eat. The large table was utterly silent as she stared at the unknown entree. Blinking, she picked up a bit with her fingers, put it in her mouth, and began chewing. The men hung on every movement of her jaw.

Her eyes widened; she swallowed and cried, “That is *amazing*! Spicy and crispy and so good! And you people cook, too, of all things! How is it that men living out in the wilderness can master all the home arts as well? But—” she looked around the table in dismay. “Why am I the only one eating? I can’t eat alone!”

Aceto shouted, “*Meano a pau!*” (“Food for everyone!”) So servers began rushing around the table with more drink (*piet*) and spicy fried boar intestines (*pipia*). Just to show off, they also threw great bowls of mashed wild yams (*kuala*) and goat curds (*kao paki*) onto the table. Efran solicited utensils for his crew, and the resourceful servers found spoons for everyone.

So while Minka filled up on yams and curds, and Kraken clopped in to lie down behind her and Efran, the men ate and drank and talked and laughed until deep in the night. Then Efran carried Minka, sound asleep, to their quarters in the tent. The rest of his party stretched out to sleep on the dining hall cushions. Kraken finished off the mashed wild yams.

When Minka woke the following morning, Efran was gone. She sat up unsteadily on the lumpy cushion, looking around. There was a chamber pot and a large basin of water, so she used the first, sliding it to the outside under the edge of the tent. Then she washed up in the second.

Emerging into the dining hall of the tent, she found on the table a platter of brown bread, a pitcher of water, and

some type of wild fruit. She helped herself to all of it, finding it all quite good. Then she opened the tent flaps to walk out and look around.

She glimpsed the bustle of morning camp life while the Pamua leader, who had evidently been stationed at the doorway, turned to bow to her. “Good morning, Lady Minka. I am to take you to Captain Efran.” He was very proud for having memorized this opening.

“Thank you!” she said, smiling on him. “It’s Musco, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he grinned, then offered his arm to escort her. She put her hand properly on his arm, and they set off. Men stopped in their tracks to watch the girl with the curly hair pass by.

They came to a long, narrow row of wooden buildings on the edge of the camp. At the main door, Efran stood talking with Wymond. It was apparent that Efran and his men had received a cursory tour of the camp while Minka was still asleep. They had also written out the agreement between the camp leaders and the Abbey Fortress. The camp kept one signed copy (in Polonti), and Efran the other (in the Southern Continental language), to take back to the fortress.

All the men turned at her approach. When Efran walked over to her, Musco handed her off. Efran told her, “Here’s where they keep the prisoners. Do you want to see them?”

“Yes,” she said, adding, “I won’t chatter.”

He raised his face in an acknowledging laugh, then told Wymond, “The lady wants to see them.”

“Yes. You sleep good, Lady Minka?” Wymond asked with a slight bow.

“Yes, wonderfully, thank you!” she said. “And I had a delightful breakfast. You’ll have to show me where the fruit came from.”

“Yes, is dragonfruit,” Wymond said proudly.

She arched her brows. “Now I like it even more.”

Wymond gestured to the armed man standing at the door, who opened it. Wymond, Efran, and Minka entered a row of cells with iron bars much like the holding cells at the lower barracks in the Lands. Standing before the first occupied cell, they looked in at a hollow-eyed man on a cot. He surveyed them listlessly, and Minka recognized him as the dispirited one she’d felt. Efran said, “This is Protch, one of the Treasury robbers.”

“You haven’t got a Treasury,” he muttered.

“So you discovered,” Efran said, smiling ironically. He looked at her for what she might have to offer, but she shook her head.

The cell next to him was empty; in the next cell, they looked in at a red-eyed man who glared at them from his cot. His face was bruised and the fingers of one hand were splinted. “When I get out, you’ll all regret it,” he uttered.

“This is Rugg, another Treasury robber,” Efran said. He looked at Wymond to ask, “Are they working?”

“Yes, they dig,” Wymond said. A look of amused pity flashed across Efran’s face, as the ground here was very hard. He looked at Minka; again she shook her head.

After another empty cell, they looked in at the third Treasury robber, who raised his face from a book. With a surprised lift of his brows, he said, “Ah. The Lady Minka. *Welina a Sasany Fields* palace.” His Polonti welcome was heavily ironic.

Minka regarded him, then leaned over to whisper to Efran, “He greatly underestimates them.” Efran nodded; with a hand on her arm, he stepped over to whisper likewise to Wymond.

The big man grinned, gesturing to Owsin, “We will get you more books. You will learn.” Owsin’s smug look faded. Minka raised her brows in cautionary confirmation as they moved on.

Past the next empty cell, they looked in at Alberon, sitting on his cot. He looked out blankly through the bars as Minka studied him. Making sure she was well-cloaked, she put in a query to Auntie.

Shortly, Minka heard back from her: *I’m not getting anything from him. But there is someone powerful in the camp.* Minka replied, *Yes, I felt that, too. Thank you, Auntie.*

Moving on from there, they passed two empty cells until coming to the last. And they all looked in at Wyse sitting listlessly on his cot.

Loizeaux’s son Wyse—known to the Abbey as Lyte—had insinuated himself into Abbey life at the very beginning, buying cartloads of food for Efran and Minka’s wedding feast. Then he had demonstrated courage and perseverance in bringing up Arenado’s fireballs from the base of the hilltop, saving them and winning a Meritorious Cross. Largely on the basis of that, Efran had named him Commander of the Abbey Army.

Then when DePew had incited insurrection in the Lands four months ago, Wyse had joined him, walking Efran to the gallows himself. The insurrection failed; DePew died, and here was Wyse—Minka lowered her head and walked away.

Efran and Wymond followed her as she left the building. Having collected outside to wait for him, Efran’s men watched as she exited to begin pacing in circles, twisting her hands. “Auntie,” she murmured. “Auntie. . . . Yes. Can you hear? Yes, that’s Wyse. How? What is he—?” She broke off to listen hard. But she was still pacing, twining her fingers in anxiety.

Wymond addressed a question to Efran, who endeavored to explain something of Minka’s faerie abilities. Aceto deferred the translation of this to Ure, who appeared to have more knowledge in this area. When she finally settled down and looked to Efran, they all went quiet. Carefully, she said, “Wyse is the one that Auntie and I are feeling great power from. He is building himself up as a—*hopui*.”

This was a Polonti who could control the minds of other Polonti. The last and only *hopui* that the Lands had dealt with was De’Ath, whose visit of a few days about three months ago almost destroyed them. And her statement caused an immediate reaction among her listeners, which was summed up by Efran’s sputtering, “That’s impossible. He’s not Polonti; he’s Eurasian.” All the other Polonti around him firmly agreed.

She shook her head. “He has connected with someone or something through Alberon—that is, he’s turned Alberon into a—conduit through which to receive power from this other—entity. And he’s almost there.” Ure urgently translated this.

“*Hopui*? To control us? *Us*?” Wymond asked in disbelief.

“Yes, and he’s very close to getting it,” Minka said firmly.

“How can we stop it?” Efran asked.

“Put Alberon out of play,” she said, distracted.

Wymond turned to issue an order and Minka said, “Wait, what are you going to do?”

“Kill him,” Efran said as if that were obvious.

She objected, “No, that won’t work! Alberon is faerie; freeing him of the physical will just make it easier for Wyse to suck power through him.”

“How so?” Efran asked, bewildered.

Minka was wringing her hands again. “It’s—mental, you see. Spiritual. You need to block Alberon’s mental power.” Ure was bravely continuing to attempt to translate these concepts.

“Put him to sleep? Drug him?” Efran asked.

Minka squirmed. “Yes, but—that’s dangerous. If it heightens his mental power at all before knocking him out, it might give Wyse the last little bit he needs. And he has to come out of some time, or he’ll die.” Efran raised his hands helplessly, but Minka calmed, listening. “Yes, that might work. Thank you, Auntie.”

Then she looked up to Wymond. “You have books?”

“Yes, many books,” he said defensively.

“All right,” she said, thinking hard. “First, separate Alberon to a secure place across the grounds. Then get men to read to him—anything. But they need to fill his mind with words that he can’t ignore. This has to be done day and night, constantly, to block anything else that Wyse is trying to suck out through him.”

Ure and Aceto both contributed to translating these instructions to Wymond. He finally said, “Come,” and started giving orders to his men, who brought Alberon out of the cell block.

He walked as though hypnotized, unblinking, unseeing. With a gesture, Wymond began leading Efran, Minka, and their party with the unfortunate Alberon. Other men began following, especially when Hob came over to ask what they’d found out. Several men covered that with him in restrained excitement. After all, it was outrageous for a Eurussian to appropriate a great Polonti evil.

Before they got to Wymond’s evident destination, Minka stopped abruptly at a tent. Loud laughter and talking were emanating from it. “What is this?” she asked, stepping toward the closed tent flaps.

A half-dozen men threw themselves in front of the tent opening, holding up panicky hands against her entrance. Ure, Aceto and several others cried, “Bath house!” “Is bathing room!” “No, no!”

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Chapter 6

Minka stopped, but asked, “Is it that noisy all the time?”

“Mostly, yes,” Aceto said. Calming, the men nodded.

“Confine him here, then,” she waved. “This is perfect, and it will save your men some effort. Just make sure that there is someone to talk to him, sing to him, or read to him constantly, day and night. Fill his brain with *meaningful* sounds, and don’t give him *any* quiet time. Do you understand?” she asked anxiously. Aceto nodded as he translated this for Wymond and Hob. Unlike humans, faeries of Alberon’s kind did not require sleep to survive.

Shortly, Alberon was secured via chains to a bench in the bathing tent, and a roster of men drawn up to serve an hour each around the clock. All of the men were informed as to the threat, what must be done, and what must not be done. (Meanwhile, men who emerged naked from the bath house were quickly shooed out of the lady’s range of vision. Seeing a few despite their efforts, she judged them all inferior to Efran.)

“Make sure they know that he needs to be fed; he needs to be kept alive,” Minka pressed Aceto, who dutifully repeated this to both camp leaders. She did not know how much his loss of faerie power might affect his ability to go without eating.

When Alberon was all set up, Efran went into the bath house to view his situation, then came back out to report to Minka, “All right, they’ll keep food and water on a little table near him. Lanterns are kept burning all night anyway, because men come in to clean up whenever they get off duty. They started stressing cleanliness when they found how it cuts down on disease.”

“They’ll have to clean up after him,” she said reluctantly.

“Yes, that’s just another discipline,” he shrugged.

At this time, the visitors were called into the great tent for the midday meal. Minka went in with a frozen smile, dreading more boar intestines, but today there was not only dragonfruit, but mayhaws, crab apples, brown bread and goat cheese. So Minka ate and chatted happily.

After a pleasant meal, Efran’s group remained around the table. Leaning his elbows on his spread knees, Efran said, “All right, now that Alberon is packed away safely, what about Wyse?”

“Oh, yes,” she sighed, closing her eyes. She leaned on Efran to murmur, “Auntie said she’d think on that, but we need to do something before we leave, to . . . prevent him using it. . . .” Then she was asleep.

Efran laid her head on his shoulder and quietly told his group, “Go let the men show you all around; just, look at everything. Lorient, I’d like for you to feel around for the mental disciplines—see if they’re doing any of that here like you did under Master Crowe. I want to know if Wyse could have picked up on that.”

“Yes, Captain,” Lorient said, and the men dispersed to tour the camp. Efran leaned back on the center tent pole to hold Minka, smoothing her curls from her face with one hand.

Some minutes later, she sat up abruptly and said, “Drain him.”

Efran adjusted his arms around her. “Wyse? Can we just kill him?”

“No,” she said, blinking. “Then you have the same problem as with Alberon—if he’s built up enough power, killing him will just enable him to move around more easily.” Brushing her hair out of her face, she attempted to sit up.

“Then how do we drain him?” he asked.

She thought about that. “Who of the men, the Polonti, resisted De’Ath the most?”

“Me,” he said.

“I was afraid of that,” she sighed. “But the best way, the only way I can tell you to drain Wyse is to engage him. Challenge him mentally. If he’s close to full power, he could overwhelm you.”

“I was the only one to stand up to De’Ath,” he reminded her.

“But he hurt you,” she said despondently.

“I got over it. And I’m stronger now for it,” he said. “So, what do I do? Go in and sit in front of his cell? Look him in the eye?”

“That should do it,” she said tightly. “But I have to sit in there with you, to—keep in view of what’s happening. And have two of your men—Southerners, Hawk and Shane, who won’t be affected—stand by out of sight, to pull you away if it starts getting bad.”

He reluctantly considered that, and she said, “Do it just as a concession to me, even if you feel you won’t need it.”

“All right,” he smiled. He stood and stretched, hoisting her. “Let’s go find Wymond.”

Two men were standing at the doorway, so Efran asked one of them to find Wymond and the other to find his Southerners, Shane and Hawk, and have all of them meet him at the holding cells. As those two ran off, Efran posed to Minka, “If Wyse, a Eurisian, is gaining the Polonti power through a faerie, then how do we know that his power will affect only Polonti?”

“We don’t,” she admitted.

“But you want to sit in there with me?” he asked, reluctant.

“I can cloak myself,” she said stubbornly. How much that would actually help, she didn’t know.

From there, they went back to the holding cells. Wymond met them there, and Efran told him his intentions. Wymond gave him his blessing, then returned to his duties. Shane and Hawk also arrived, along with the rest of Efran’s men. Lorient told him, “They do practice mental exercises, like the Pamua, but nothing like Master Crowe’s illusions, since you cracked him, Captain.”

“So, whatever Wyse is channeling, it’s not coming from here,” Efran said.

“No, definitely not,” Lorient said.

Efran said, “Then, I’m going in to confront him. Hawk, Shane—I’ll need you in there with me.”

His Polonti looked stricken. Dango said flatly, “You don’t trust us, Captain.”

Efran exhaled, glancing aside. “No, I do, but I’m trying to use the men who should be least affected by whatever power he’s got.”

Lorient shrugged, “Some of us weren’t affected at all by De’Ath, and Wyse isn’t close to that.”

“That’s correct, Captain,” Conte said, stiff in his woundedness.

Efran raised his hands. “Whoever wants to come in, can. But keep an eye on each other; pull out anyone who appears to be affected.”

“Yes, sir.” “Yes, Captain,” the men agreed.

So the nine of them entered the building. They passed the cells of the robbers, who watched in great curiosity. After Alberon had been removed, they knew something was in the works.

Proceeding to the last cell, Efran drew up a chair for Minka—presumably out of range—and another for himself. He sat directly in front of Wyse on his cot, who still declined to look up. Efran’s men spread themselves unobtrusively on the floor, against the wall, or on the edges of the view into the cell.

Efran checked Minka to make sure that she was looking down, unengaged, then he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, to eye his antagonist through the bars.

They sat that way for minutes, Wyse not stirring, speaking, or looking up. Someone else came into the building; Efran nodded at Ure to go explain matters so that there would be no interference. Ure did that; the intruder left, and Ure reseated himself. And they waited.

When nothing more happened after another five or eight minutes, Minka looked up at Wyse and thought, *Coward*. He blinked. Efran saw him blink, but couldn’t see if it were important or not.

Minka went on, *You attack from behind. You attack the unsuspecting. And you waited for cover from DePew before making your move. That’s sneaky, and cowardly.*

Wyse’s eyes shot up to her, then, and she gasped, falling back a little. Efran dropped out of his chair to kneel in front of her in Wyse’s line of sight before he could look away. So Wyse then engaged him.

Instead of clawed hands as De’Ath had used, Wyse shot out mental bursts like fists to Efran’s face. At first they rocked him so hard that he almost passed out. But knowing that all he had to do was hang on, he braced himself to absorb the barrage. They were such strong blows, however, he didn’t know how long he could stay conscious.

Wyse’s attack was so broad that it spread beyond Efran, filling the corridor where the men stood or sat. Minka went limp, so Efran fell away from the blows to lay her in the corridor out of Wyse’s range. After Efran had reengaged him, however, she sat up and climbed back into her chair. The men stood firm under the thrashing; Lorient and Ure, in particular, seemed to be reaching out to gather the onslaught to themselves.

Gradually, Efran became aware that something had changed. First, he heard Minka chatting. Yes, she was chatting to her Auntie. After a moment more, he saw that she was laying some kind of thread which diverted a portion of Wyse's power away from Efran to travel a great distance to the chapel. There, Marguerite studied it before dousing it with ginger beer, which was important, somehow.

Whether Wyse was aware of the leaks or not, he ramped up the power so that Efran was pressed into the chair back, hardly able to breathe. Then he noticed a falling-off on his left. Unable to turn his head, he nonetheless felt Loriot beside him create a channel which separated off probably a fifth of the flow. This he seemed to direct out into the void of space.

That gave Efran an idea. He looked partially away from the white-hot blast to ask, *Sir Nomus? Can you open the door to the Firmament here?*

And on the wall behind him, he glimpsed a rectangular shape open to reveal the stars in the black void, with the sun on one side and the moon on the other, the planets whirling in their orbits and the great waters cascading down from above. Returning to look in Wyse's direction, but not straight in his eyes, Efran moved out of the way for the power to surge past him through the doorway into the vastness of the universe.

Released from the brunt of the flow that roared around him, Efran heard Shane, Hawk, and Dango shouting, "*Bom bom COWARD! Bom bom COWARD! Bom bom COWARD!*" They couldn't help laughing while calling out the war drums. This particular version was a deep dig at Wyse: it was how the Abbey army had incited him to accept Efran's challenge to fight, thus making him forego what would have been a certain victory.

Probably sensing that something was slipping, and being inexperienced in the use of the great power he had appropriated, Wyse doubled down on his attack. Efran had to tighten up to stay out of the way of the blast, and heard Minka on his right yelp before exclaiming, "Oh now, that was rude!" Then she and her auntie laughed.

Aware of another distraction, Efran looked back at the flow to see Ure wade into it. He reached down to lift a mass of power which he hoisted over his head to throw back at Wyse. It must have hit somewhere, for Ure pointed and laughed. Aceto soon joined him, and they brought up balls of fire to toss back and forth to each other before hurling them at Wyse.

When Conte stepped into the flow of power, he fell down. So Ure and Aceto helped him get his footing, then all three of them were tossing massy balls of flame at each other before flinging them back to where they came from. And when Hawk, Dango and Shane ventured into the flow to play with the fire, pelting each other with it, Efran realized that its force had greatly ebbed. Wading through it, Conte was singing a Polonti children's ditty which described cutting off an enemy's head.

Then he heard Minka say, *Efran, can I play in the stream with them?* And he laughed, *No!* At that point, it was only a matter of minutes before Wyse would give out. Ure lay down in the stream to make a fire angel, sweeping his arms and legs out. The others tried to shovel enough fire over him to cover him, but he threw handfuls back at them.

Finally, the men grew bored with the play, and exited the stream to sit on the floor opposite the cell. Here, they just waited for the end.

It didn't take much longer. Wyse was listing, glassy-eyed, before he finally apprehended that he was almost empty of what had seemed to be an ocean of power. Slumping, he stopped the flow to blink at his feet. The door to the Firmament closed.

Rising from his chair with a sigh, Efran gestured his crew out. Then he sent one of the camp Polonti to Wymond to ask that Wyse be fed bread and piet, and to pack a jug of piet to send back with them tomorrow morning. Efran said, “Tell him we need it to keep Wyse docile for the trip. We’re taking him back to the Abbey Lands.”

On hearing that, Conte said, “It seems inevitable, Captain, but please tell us what you’re thinking.”

Efran said, “If we leave him here, how do we know he won’t make contact with his source again through another intermediary? Or none at all? We’ve got to cut that line for good. I’d like to know who was behind it, but that may not even be possible.”

“What about Alberon?” Minka asked quietly.

Efran inhaled, arching his back. Deflecting that early burst had strained him a little. “I sure don’t want to make it easy for them to resume their arrangement. So we’ll leave him here and let the Polonti clean him out in the bath house like your auntie suggested.”

Dango asked, “But now that Wyse is drained of his power, why can’t we kill him?”

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Chapter 7

Efran looked to Minka, and she said, “Wait, let me ask. . . . Auntie? Yes, the men want to know if they can kill Wyse.” She listened, then exhaled a dismal, “Ohhh. All right. Yes, if you will. We should be back tomorrow night.”

She looked back at Efran to say, “Auntie said that you can’t safely kill him until you cut off the source of his power, which has now gone around Alberon. Wyse and his source are joined mentally, not physically, so, it’s the same thing as with Alberon—if you kill him while he has contact with his power, that just frees him to assume any other form he wishes.”

Efran looked off, thinking, “So, whenever Wyse wakes up, he’ll just start regathering power.”

“Not if you block his concentration. For now, we have to do the same thing with him as with Alberon—surround him with meaningful sounds that he can’t just ignore—talking, singing, reading,” Minka said. “Meanwhile, Auntie is looking for what we can do to cut him off from the power even if we can’t locate it.”

“Ah, dear Marguerite. That will help,” Efran said. “For tonight, we’ll bind him in the bath house and then keep him occupied on the ride back.”

“Oh, who was singing in the stream? He had such a lovely voice,” Minka said, scanning the men.

Tongue firmly in cheek, Hawk said, “That was me, Lady Minka.”

When Minka looked at him dubiously, Conte harrumphed, “Was it really, now?”

The others laughed; Efran said, “Whoever it was gets to sing all the way back.” Hawk generously extended his hand to Conte.

After Aceto communicated their plans to Wymond and Hob, the party had a quiet dinner. Efran's Polonti requested more *pipia*—fried boar intestines—while Minka discovered that she really liked goat cheese. And they all hit their blankets early.

As Efran had requested, they were awakened before daylight to prepare for the return trip. The six Pamua riders had asked to return with them to the Lands, offering to take charge of Wyse. He was to be set on a horse tethered to one of theirs, and they had committed to keeping him engaged for the length of the ride.

Shane asked wryly, “Won't that be hard for 'silent riders' to do?”

Musco stiffly replied, “Silence and speech are both things to master.”

Saddling Kraken, Efran said, “And speech can be used to subjugate.” He was careful not to look at Minka, though he checked over her horse.

“‘Subjugate' means what?” Musco asked.

“Enchant, entice, enslave,” Efran said, smiling now.

Another rider said, “We don't know all these words.” But they looked at Minka. She glanced around at all the eyes as she knotted her hair up on her head and put on the hat.

They mounted up, declining a return guide, and the party set out on a southeastern course. The Landers noted that the Pamua riders dropped their efforts to be silent, especially mental cloaking. There was no need on this trip, and their companions were not amenable to any cloaking in the company.

So they rode amiably while one or more of the Pamua lectured Wyse on great Polonti heroes of past Southern Continental wars, using a rather comical pidgin: “So the *nui* Almario kills vast curly-haired, more than thousands in steel boots.” Still, several Abbey men noticed that the Pamua horses were quieter than the others, whether they were trying to be or not. Shane leaned down to look at their hooves: no, they were not wearing boots today.

When the party came within sight of the Passage to their left, all they had to do was keep it in view to know they were homeward bound. The trip was relatively easy, though warm, being early August. But Efran was uncomfortable for most of the way. He couldn't settle on where in their formation to ride.

He preferred to be in the lead, as was his habit from earliest captaincy, to spot hindrances or attacks. But the Pamua riders had surrounded Minka right from the start, with Wyse in their midst, so that Efran kept looking back at them. So Kraken dropped back to ride behind them, but Efran couldn't discern much ahead on the road from the rear, so he prompted Kraken forward again, to keep looking back. This disrupted Kraken's stride.

Therefore, after their first rest stop, Efran had Minka ride up front beside him, and the Pamua had to deal with Wyse on their own (although Aceto, Dango, and Shane were riding rearguard, to watch him as well). He rode passively at first, as there was not much else he could do. But after a few hours, he began looking around. The rearguard saw this, while noting how he studied the slender strap tethering his horse's bridle to the boy's saddle on his right.

So Shane abruptly rode up on his left, between Wyse and the Pamua rider. As Wyse glanced at him sharply, Shane felt the shock, and called, “Ayup, Captain!”

“Pull up!” Efran responded at once, turning Kraken. The riders all stopped, and Wyse lowered his eyes. Efran trotted back to look at him, then shot a glance to Minka. She nodded, raising her brows, to indicate that Wyse had begun regathering power.

Efran looked around. “What do you suggest, Lorient?”

Crowe’s lieutenant, the one most experienced in mind games, trotted over to pull up before Wyse face to face. Wyse lowered his eyes. Lorient studied him a moment, then leaned over to take his head in both hands and press on his temples. Wyse fell forward over his saddle, unconscious. “That should hold him till we get to the Lands, Captain, though we’ll need to lash him on.”

“Who’s got rope?” Efran asked.

Dango rode over and dismounted to detach the rope from his saddle and shake out the coil. While he tied the rope to Wyse’s saddle and lashed his hands around the horse’s neck, he said, “He’ll be concentrating on how sore he is when he wakes up, Captain.”

Efran nodded his consent, then asked Lorient, “Could you get any sense of who he’s drawing power from or where they are?”

“No, it’s not clear,” Lorient said.

Efran looked to Minka. “Can your auntie tell if it’s someone in the Lands?”

“Possibly,” she allowed. “But I think Wyse would need to be awake.”

“All right, let’s get there,” Efran said. He remounted for the party to resume riding at a fast lope.

They made good time, though had to stop twice more to rest the horses. Minka walked around, stretching her legs, and Aceto had to call the Pamua away from her so that she could stretch her legs privately.

As they approached the old stone bridge down the main north-south road, they heard the wall gate alarm bell clanging, and (almost) the entire party drew a breath at the sight of the white fortress on the hilltop, surmounted by the flitting green and copper of the faerie tree. The fortress symbolized not only everything they fought to protect, but everything that gave them strength.

They rode through the gates to a crowd of welcomers. When Minka glimpsed the Commander trotting down the steps of Barracks A without any help or hesitation, her heart swelled in gratitude. But she looked over to tell Efran, “I’m going straight to the chapel.”

“Yes, thank you,” he said, saluting Wendt while watching Wyse being untied from his uncomfortable seat. He was groaning now, coming around.

Impatiently stopping at all three crosswalks for the ladies in their new outfits to cross Main (and back again), Minka rode on up to the oyster house. After almost falling from the saddle, she ran to the front doors in tears to see them standing open, Marguerite waiting for her. Minka made it up the steps to fall onto her with a tight hug.

“There! Did you have fun?” Marguerite demanded.

Minka looked up in surprise. “Yes! I did. Isn’t that strange? But yes, I’m so glad I went. I’ve got to tell you all about it, but first, Efran is anxious to know what we can do about Wyse. He started regathering power on the way back, and Loriot had to put him to sleep! Auntie, have you found out anything?”

“I think so, dear,” Marguerite said. “Come walk around back—you won’t believe how large the cabbage tree is now! Would you like to try Hartshough’s new blackberry drink?”

“Oh, *yes*,” Minka gasped.

Meanwhile, the rest of the returning Abbey men—and the Pamua riders with them—were sitting down to an early dinner in the conference room of Barracks A. While it was not fortress fare, it was still more advanced cuisine than that available at camp. The Pamua riders looked at each other, at the food and the plates and the range of utensils and condiments set before them. But since no one was scrutinizing how they ate, they shrugged and, ate.

In between bites, Efran updated the Commander and his officers on Wyse and Alberon, and why they had brought Wyse back. Presently, the Lands doctor Coghill was looking at his injuries from having ridden several hours while unconsciously tied to a hard saddle.

About that time, a sentry opened the door to announce, “Lady Minka.” The men turned in surprise, especially Efran. Windblown and sunburnt, she was still dressed in her riding pants, but her face was alight with deviousness.

“Commander! You’re looking more healthy by the day. I feel I should salute. But I’m not Lieutenant Commander anymore, am I?” she pouted. Before anyone could reply, she said, “Oh! Where is Wyse?”

Wendt said, “Receiving the doctor’s attention, Minka. Have a seat. Would you like dinner?”

Minka sat as she said, “Oh, no thank you, I need to clean up and change and see the children. But Auntie gave me an idea for a short-term solution to our problem with You-Know-Who, and I wanted to see if it works.” While Efran gestured to the back door to indicate a summons for Wyse, she said, “Oh, Gabriel, isn’t it wonderful having your Commander back in full form?”

“Yes, Minka, it is,” Gabriel said warmly. “And yes, Geneve is pregnant.”

Efran looked at her quickly, but she was just happy. “Oh, that’s so wonderful! I’m so glad for her. How did I know that? I don’t know. But won’t Melchior be a wonderful father? He’s so funny!”

At that time, Wyse was brought into the room from the back. The whole side of his face was painfully abraded from riding hours with his cheek pressed against the horse’s neck. Minka only glanced at him to say, “Sit him down, please.” She gestured to the chair across the table from her.

Stourt shoved him down into the chair, and Minka leaned forward on her elbows to look in his eyes. She said firmly, “Wyse.” He looked up at her almost involuntarily, and she said, “Uoy kaeps sdrawkcab.”

He stared at her for a moment. A look of surprise flashed across his face, and he lurched up to shout, “On! On! ON! Odu ti, uoy—!” And he reached over the table to grab at her.

Efran leapt up, but the Commander was already ordering Stourt and Goss to take Wyse back to his secure cell. He was thrashing in frustration and anger, so that Stourt had to subdue him with a few sharp slaps before he consented to be led away. Minka watched complacently.

When the echoes of his incoherent ranting died away, all the men in the conference room looked at her. Wendt said, “Well, Lieutenant Commander, what did you do?”

She grinned. “Oh, that’s so sweet of you to humor me, Commander. I want a hat. Anyway, it’s just a silly faerie trick, to make someone speak *and think* backwards. It’s all right to use on the Lands, Efran, because it will only work on someone who needs correction for something bad they did. We can already tell it will jam up his getting any more power for a little while, anyway.

“Auntie believes that his mentor, as she called him, will get around it eventually, but it will take time and effort that may help her pinpoint where he is. Also, you can test Wyse by ordering, ‘kaeps’—that’s ‘speak’ backwards, of course. Then he has to answer with whatever he’s thinking at the moment. If the correction is still holding, he’ll blurt out gibberish. If it’s fading, he’ll either speak normally or have to think about how to answer,” she said.

“How long do we have?” Efran asked.

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Chapter 8

Minka said dubiously, “Normally, the backwards speech wears off after about two weeks. But depending on how powerful Wyse’s mentor is, Auntie said he could break it within days, so you have to check him frequently. Oh! And she said if his mentor is particularly powerful, he will not only undo the trick, but enable Wyse to mimic it by speaking backwards deliberately. However, she said if he does this, you’ll know, because he’ll be speaking *deliberately*, and not just blurting it out as he did just now.”

She thought for a moment more as the men absorbed this. Then she added, “Auntie is looking at other ways to disrupt the connection.”

Wendt said, “Thank you, Minka. That’s good to know.”

“You’re welcome,” she sighed in exhaustion. “I have to go bathe now,” she said, removing the kerchief from her neck. Efran stiffened at the men’s suddenly glassy eyes.

Wendt smiled, “You’re dismissed.”

She smiled back at him from under her brows. “Efran has to teach me to salute properly,” she murmured, standing to turn out.

Efran followed her promptly, then remembered to turn and salute. Wendt nodded him out as well: “Dismissed.”

Efran caught Minka outside the barracks in time to help her up onto her mare, then he swung up on Kraken to ride at a walk down Main with her. He was silent for a moment, torn between thanking her for getting her auntie’s help, and chastising her for talking about bathing in front of the men.

Since he couldn’t get out one comment over the other, he said nothing. She reached out to lay her hand on his as

he held the reins. He let go of the reins to hold her hand, and she said, “Thank you for being so kind about letting me ramble in front of all the men at camp. I’m sure it must have embarrassed you, but they seemed to take it well, and—then you let me come in with you while you drained Wyse. That worked out very well, too, and I was very glad to see it, so I would have a better idea what to ask Auntie.

“And then I announce to everyone in the room that I had to take a bath—as if they couldn’t smell me.” She let go of the reins to put a hand over her eyes in exasperation. “You’re so patient with me, I don’t know how you do it. But maybe they didn’t notice what I said. Do you think they noticed?” she asked plaintively.

“Nah.” He shook his head, smiling at her. Their horses had to walk close together up the switchback so that their riders could hold hands.

“I hope you’re right. Oh, I’m so tired, but I’m so glad you let me come. I couldn’t endure seeing you go again after losing you for *a whole month*—! That was so hard. The camp was interesting. I don’t know how they survive on what they eat. Anyway, between you and Auntie and the Commander, you’ll figure out what to do with—with Wyse. I almost called him ‘Lyte.’ Anyway—” She broke off as they rode through the gates. She slid down from the saddle in the courtyard, where the men were patting Efran’s shoulder and bowing to her.

Efran greeted them, then took her hand again to lead her up the fortress steps to their quarters. Dropping her pack to the floor, she glanced around as though getting acquainted with the space. Finally, she opened her chest and her wardrobe for clean clothes, taking up a key from the small table in the outer room. “I’m going up to the vacant third-floor room with the waterfall”—

“Can I come with you?” Efran stood before her, smiling, with his fresh clothes somewhat wadded up in one hand.

“All right,” she grinned.

They came downstairs greatly refreshed, and sat at their usual back bench in the dining hall for the Abbey wards to swarm them. The children were mildly outraged that Efran had left again for three days after having disappeared for a month. Although he had told them about this trip, they apparently expected it to take a few hours, at most. So he promised that he was back to stay for a while, and listened while Noah, Elwell and Hassie updated him on their most important concerns, which involved apparent thefts of produce from their individual gardens.

“Tourjee said it’s rabbits, but we don’t believe him,” Noah pronounced.

“Did you have a plot, Noah?” Minka asked doubtfully.

“I’m helping Elwell with his,” Noah clarified. Efran lifted his face to quietly laugh. Toby, passing behind him with Tarrant, patted his shoulder on their way out to somewhere.

Glancing past Efran, Minka clutched his waist to lean behind him and hiss at Ella, “What are you wearing now?”

“Do you like them?” Holding onto her father’s left shoulder, she leaned behind his back to touch the cluster on her ear. “One of Dallarosa’s students makes the beads from paper, and they’re so lightweight that she can do all kinds of things with them.”

“I love them,” Minka said intently. “Wait. Is the dress new?”

“Yes, it’s from Elvey’s,” Ella said, extending her arm. “I got it on sale because it’s not so—trendy as her bestselling clothes.”

“Oh, I love it! Then I have to get back to Elvey’s. You’ve become the fashion plate she always tried to make of me,” Minka said in mild despondence.

“I doubt it,” Ella laughed. But Quennel glanced over wryly, which Efran acknowledged with a sympathetic snort.

When Joshua was brought to sit on his lap, he clutched his father, patted his shoulder, and fell right to sleep. Efran looked up at the nursery worker Cordelia, who had paused behind their table. She explained, “He just was determined to stay awake until you got back, Captain.”

“Oh,” Efran winced, laughing.

Minka ran her hand along the toddler’s back as he lay heavily on his father’s shoulder. “A few more years, and I won’t be able to tell you two apart,” she murmured. Efran closed his eyes, inhaling. He never knew, never imagined how important this little guy would be to him.

He looked up as DeWitt approached their table. “Welcome back, you two. We’ve heard bits and pieces of your experience at the camp, but we’ll wait to hear more from you tomorrow. Only—Wyse is here, again? And contained?”

“Yes,” Efran said, smoothing his son’s thick black hair away from his face. “He’s in a holding cell in the lower barracks, under control, for now. But it’s a good thing we went, and a good thing Minka came.”

“Naturally.” DeWitt looked smilingly to her, and she blinked sleepily in satisfaction. He added, “Well, the latest we’ve heard is that the trolls appear to be taking out their frustrations on Eurur—our scouts can’t get close enough to see the situation from the inside. However, Whobrey heard from the locals about something called a Trollbrunnen.”

“Trollbrunnen? Again?” Efran asked. “What is it?”

“He doesn’t know, but it’s related to the trolls, and he says it must have come down with them from the Fastnesses. The locals are terrified it of—says it spits trolls,” DeWitt shrugged with a laugh.

Efran eyed him. “The locals wouldn’t be—exaggerating the danger in order to get our attention, would they?”

DeWitt admitted, “I honestly can’t say. They very well could be, although trolls alone are enough to get our attention.”

Efran shifted Joshua to be able to start cutting his sausage with his fork. “Anyway, I’m glad the Council is feeling the results of luring the trolls out of the Fastnesses. I suppose it’s inevitable that they’d head south again, though.”

“Yes, we’ll cover that more tomorrow. Good night, Minka,” DeWitt said.

She looked up from leaning on Efran’s arm. “How is Tera?”

He paused, then said, “Due shortly. Huge and uncomfortable.”

She came right awake. “Oh, DeWitt, let me help with the delivery. I helped Bethune with Adele and Kelsey. You’ve got Bethune as midwife, don’t you?”

“I think so, but I’m sure Tera would appreciate your help,” he said sincerely.

“Good. Let me know,” she sighed, looking down at her untouched custard.

As DeWitt moved away, he nodded to Efran. He, in turn, whispered down to her, “At least eat your custard.”

“All right,” she said. And shortly thereafter, he stood with Joshua on one shoulder and her on the other. After returning Joshua to the nursery, he carried Minka to bed. She did wake, however, when he fell into bed with her after stumbling over Kraken in the bedroom.

The following morning, August 4th, Minka could hardly decide whether to go to Elvey’s or Dallarosa’s first. So she headed for the chapel instead, feeling a tingle of excitement. Her decision was so abrupt that she began running down the switchback (sideways, as she had learned from the men) before she even had bodyguards. Therefore, the courtyard gate guards were scrambling to get someone after her.

Shortly, Caswall and Elrod were pursuing her down the switchback, also at a crab run. Caswall indignantly called, “Lady Minka! Wait up!”

“I’m only going to Auntie’s!” she called back.

“You know you can’t go without us!” Caswall roared. The men in the courtyard were laughing hard.

“Then hurry!” she shouted back. She was running up the front walk before they were two-thirds of the way down the switchback.

Hartshough met her at the front doors with a fruity breakfast drink. She kissed him violently on the cheek and ran with it, trying not to slosh, back to the patio where Marguerite was sitting, as usual. As her great-granddaughter plopped into the chair next to her, Marguerite turned with a devious smile.

“Auntie!” Minka gasped. “You know something!” Caswall and Elrod erupted onto the patio.

“Yes,” Marguerite placidly admitted. “Hartshough, drinks for the men, please. Sit down,” she ordered them, and they complied, panting.

“Yes, Lady Marguerite,” Hartshough said. Shortly, he was placing two tall, cool glasses in front of them. Elrod picked his up immediately while Caswall was trying to catch his breath.

“About Wyse? His mentor?” Minka demanded of her.

“Yes,” Marguerite confirmed. The bodyguards followed this conversation intently.

“What? What?” Minka cried.

Lips pursed in amusement, Marguerite said, “It’s a troll.” Minka gaped at her. Elrod put down his drink. Marguerite told the bodyguards: “One of you please go tell Efran I’d like to talk to Wyse. The other stand out front, if you would.”

Minka nodded. “Yes, Caswall, run up to the workroom and tell Efran. Elrod, please watch the door.”

“Yes, Lady Minka.” Both men rose to go inside the chapel to the front doors.

Minka turned back to study her auntie, whose face was still devious. “I have something else to tell you,” Marguerite said. Minka waited eagerly.

In the second-floor workroom of the fortress, Efran had just finished giving Estes and DeWitt a thorough account of their visit to Sasany Fields and what they had discovered about Alberon and Wyse. During this recounting, Efran periodically checked on Joshua under the table with Nakam, the hairless dog. Joshua had apparently decided that he needed to keep an eye on his father so he wouldn’t run off again somewhere.

Estes asked, “So, Wyse is in a holding cell in the lower barracks, under control?”

“Yes, as far as I know,” Efran said. “I expect we’d hear pretty quickly if anything changed. But this—backwards trick seems to have blocked his channel, for now. Minka made clear that it was only temporary. When he comes out of it, we’ll check with Marguerite again. Now, what is happening in Eurus?”

DeWitt said, “Well, last night we got back our first two scouts who managed to get in for a good look. Before setting out, they bought up all the jasmine perfume and lotion that Besiana’s Bath and Bed Supplies had in stock, and put in an order for more. Doused with that, they got past the trolls pretty easily.” He had to pause for Efran to sit back and laugh. Yes, they’d discovered during their last troll attack how toxic jasmine was to trolls.

DeWitt continued, “The upshot is, after terrorizing the population for a while, the trolls discovered the Council. So now they’re sitting on the Council—literally—to issue proclamations and such to their liking.”

“Who is Surchatain?” Efran asked.

DeWitt looked to Estes, who said, “Ah, one especially intelligent troll named Gopnik. The Grand Councilor is one Foulsham, and other new Councilors are Marblemaw, Maggott, and, Clutterbuck—all trolls. Clutterbuck is particularly advanced, in that he can write letters.”

“Letters? Correspondence?” Efran asked.

“No, letters of the alphabet. A, B, C, D, and a few more,” Estes said.

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Chapter 9

“That’s—” Efran began, eyes glazed. “Then the next thing the trolls will do is attack us again.”

“We’re expecting so, yes,” DeWitt said. “Right at this moment, they seem to be caught up in revising taxes to be paid in livestock instead of royals.”

“Livestock,” Efran repeated.

“Yes, to eat. Trolls have little use for gold as currency,” DeWitt said.

“How is that affecting Marguerite’s son Verlice in Wirrin Valley?” Efran asked with a touch of anxiety.

“That, we don’t know,” Estes said. “The scouts who just returned didn’t go that far east of Eurus.”

Efran leaned back in his chair, pressing the heels of his palms to his forehead. At that time, the courtyard gate sentry Fellowes appeared at the door to salute. “Captain. Administrator. Steward. The Lady Marguerite has discovered Wyse’s contact to be a troll, and requests to visit his cell to talk to him.”

The three administrators stared at each other, then Efran slowly rose from his chair. “Yes, but have her wait in Barracks A until I get down there.”

“Yes, Captain.” Fellowes saluted and left while Efran got down on the floor to look under the table.

Scooping out his son, Efran told him, “You have to help Tourjee for a while, but I’ll be right back. All right?” Joshua leaned down to look for Nakam, who was sitting by Efran’s feet. So Efran took them both out back before hauling himself up on Kraken’s bare back.

When he arrived down at Barracks A, he found Minka and her auntie already there, waiting. Commander Wendt was also there, talking with Barr. “All right. Hello,” Efran said distractedly as Minka cuddled him in excitement.

“Oh, Efran, this is going to be so much fun,” she said.

“Not too much, I hope. The troll, or whoever was behind it, packed a pretty good punch before we got Wyse drained,” Efran said, cautious.

“I know! But you didn’t have Auntie,” Minka said confidently.

“Well, then.” Efran began to sweat. “Are you sure about this, Marguerite?”

“Mostly,” she said honestly, which didn’t reassure him at all. “The thing is, I could accidentally enrage his troll mentor,” she admitted.

“As opposed to their usual tranquility,” he muttered. “All right. Commander? Do you want to watch?”

“I sure do,” Wendt said. “Follow me, please. You as well, Gabriel, Caswall, Elrod.”

Gabriel saluted, as did Caswall, saying, “Thank you, Commander.”

“Yesss,” Elrod let slip, also saluting.

So the seven of them, along with the barracks guards Capur and Quoid, went down to Barracks C, which was unlocked for their entrance. They walked down the corridor to the very end cell, where they looked in. Wyse, blinking, regarded them angrily to burst out, “Odnusih erofeb I llik uoy lla!”

“It seems he’s still backwards, there,” Efran observed, looking to Marguerite.

“Yes,” she said. “May I have—yes, thank you, Commander.” He had gestured the men to bring over two chairs for her and Minka.

The two women sat about four feet away from the bars of Wyse’s cell; Efran sat on the floor in front of them while the Commander and the other five men arranged themselves to stand around the women. Wyse watched all this in deep suspicion. The whole right side of his face was scabbing over from the abrasions received while he had been carried unconscious on the horse.

Glancing at the men around her, Marguerite said, “I’m going to attempt to make it so that you all can hear what I hear. But this is my first time connecting with a troll, so bear with me.”

The men smiled; Efran looked sick, but Minka squeezed her auntie’s hand in perfect confidence. Then Marguerite looked back at the prisoner to say, “You may now speak normally, Wyse.” He abruptly let down, breathing in relief. But she continued softly, “Look at me.” Reluctantly, he did.

And once she had his eyes, he was unable to look away. She lowered her head slightly as though looking through a tunnel, or a tube. “Hello . . . hello. . . . Who is there? I sense a strong, masculine presence. Yes, there is a majestic figure on the other side, of great stature.” Her voice was low, soft, seductive.

“WHO IS WOMAN IN DUMBHEAD BRAIN?” a voice roared, and several of the men winced at the volume.

“I am Marguerite. Whom do I have the honor of addressing?”

“AM RULER GOPNIK FOOLISH WOMAN,” he rumbled.

“A ruler! Of course,” she said. Efran turned around to nod at her, mouthing, *Of Eurus*.

Marguerite’s eyebrows arched in surprise, but she nodded. “Then you must be the new Surchatain of Eurus. What a great victory for your troop.”

“FOR ME ONLY ME I DID IT ME,” he said petulantly.

“Of course. You are the start of a new dynasty. And you have such great mental power!” she marveled. “How did you get it?”

“MINE FOR ME SHEEP BRAINS,” he said, taunting.

“Sheep brains,” she repeated, looking down at Efran. He turned back to her with a conflicted, cautious look and mouthed, *From where?* So she looked back at Wyse to ask, “Where did you get the sheep brains?” All this time, Wyse himself was sitting still and vacant, as if asleep with his eyes open. It reminded Efran of what Alberon had looked like at the camp.

“UNH UNH UNH,” Gopnik laughed. “FARMER PENSUM SHEEP BRAINS IS GONE.” Efran swiveled with a sick look on his face, then pulled Minka down to whisper in her ear.

She, in turn, whispered to Marguerite, who looked back at Wyse’s vacant eyes to say, “I have a young friend here who would love to talk to you, Surchatain Gopnik. May she?”

“YOUNG GIRL CURLY HAIR TALK TALK UNH UNH UNH,” he said.

Efran turned back in alarm to whisper to Minka, who whispered to Marguerite, “Can he see us?”

She whispered back, “Only me and you, because you are close beside me.”

“Ohhh,” Minka said, leaning down to repeat this to Efran. He again whispered to her, and she asked Marguerite, “Can you see Gopnik?”

As Marguerite was nodding in the affirmative, they heard, “YOUNG GIRL NOT TALKING TO ME!” He sounded angry.

Minka said, “Oh, I’m sorry, Surchatain Gopnik, I was just so overwhelmed by the opportunity to talk to someone as great as yourself, I could hardly think of anything to say. But I’m so curious about Farmer Pensum’s sheep brains! Did they give you this great mental power?”

“NO! I HAVE POWER FOR LONG TIME MANY YEARS BUT SHEEP BRAINS GOOD,” he said, and several of his listeners squinted in the effort of interpreting this.

Efran pulled Minka down again to whisper to her, so she said, “Oh, the sheep brains just gave you greater power. Is that right?”

“BIGGER. BIGGER BIGGER UNH UNH UNH,” he said.

Again Efran whispered to Minka, who then whispered to Marguerite, who nodded. So Minka said, “Oh, mighty Gopnik, you are so amazing. Did the sheep brains make you dance and whirl, too?”

“SPIN ROLL,” he said.

Minka and Efran looked quickly at Marguerite, and she nodded again, indicating that’s what she was seeing. Minka asked, “Dear Gopnik, did any of your friends eat the sheep brains, too?”

“ALL OVER SHEEP BRAINS!” he said, sounding drunk.

“They all ate it?” she asked again, unsure.

“DRINK! DRINK BRAINS DOWN ALL GOOD BURN!” he rumbled. Marguerite then mimicked a drunken man’s stagger.

She said smoothly, “Surchatain Gopnik, would you like to rest a while?”

“STOP SPIN. STOP.” He sounded tired.

“Will you let me help you stop spinning?” Marguerite asked.

“STOP ALL THE SPIN,” he insisted.

“Look straight at me, please.” This he must have done, because she pulled back, mildly wincing. But she continued to look steadfastly in Wyse’s eyes until he fell forward on his cot, unconscious.

Marguerite sighed, sitting back. “Well. I drained Gopnik, so he is out. Hopefully, he can’t replenish his power without more—sheep brains.” She paused, looking dubious.

Wendt said carefully, “Ah, this is new to me. If you will all come back to the conference room, we’ll break out the Delano’s and talk.”

“That sound lovely, Commander,” she said. He extended his hand to help her up; Efran picked up Minka from her chair to set her on her feet (unconsciously, as he was preoccupied) and they all returned to Barracks A to sit at the long conference table.

While Caswall and Elrod went down to Delano’s to buy mild ale (and lager for the ladies), Wendt looked around and said, “I can hardly wait to hear about Farmer Pensum’s sheep brains.”

With a subdued laugh, Efran said, “Yes, that was about—fifteen months ago, before you came to us, Commander. Ah, we were having problems with the Graetrix at that time—large, winged creatures that ate horses, sheep, and people. We were looking for a way to eradicate them, and Justinian guided us to Farmer Pensum, who was something of a—researcher, especially when the mad sheep disease erupted about, six years ago now.”

Wendt leaned back in comprehension. “Yes, I remember that. It was always fatal, and the infected sheep would start staggering around, rolling, falling down. . . .”

“Yes, Commander,” Efran said. “Well, this Farmer Pensum kept samples of the brains from sheep that had died of this disease, and explained to us how easily it spread. So we paid him for a sample, and I fed it to one of the Graetrix, who must have spread it around to all the others, because we never saw them after that. Anyway, the trolls eat raw meat, you know—any part of an animal, but especially brains, which they think make them smarter. So, it looks like Gopnik and his troop located Farmer Pensum and his samples, and . . . ate them. Drank them.”

Wendt looked at Marguerite. “Did it appear to you that Gopnik could be infected with this mad sheep disease?”

“Possibly,” she said. “When the trolls took over Featherstone, they put Justinian, me, and Hartshough in the kitchen. There, Justinian said something about Farmer Pensum’s sheep brains, and they bragged that he had no brains left. We weren’t sure what that meant, exactly,” she said thoughtfully.

Wendt said, “That was about—two months ago?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. Elrod and Caswall entered the room at that time with a case of ales, which they began passing around. Everyone took one.

Wendt took a swig of his mild ale, then asked, “So how likely is it that Gopnik will die?”

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Chapter 10

Glancing at Marguerite, Efran said, “It sure looks like Gopnik is infected, and if he is, he’ll die soon. Also, it’s highly contagious—only one Graetrix needed to swallow the sheep brains for all the others to become infected. And it was a small bottle. So if Gopnik and his troop are infected, then most of Eurus is at risk.”

Wendt nodded to Gabriel. “Go have the scouts who just returned put in quarantine.”

“Yes, Commander.” Gabriel got up and trotted out, leaving his ale rocking slightly on the table.

Wendt paused to note, “You’re awfully quiet, Lady Marguerite.”

She laughed lightly, “Yes. It’s certainly wise to take precautions against possible exposure to mad sheep disease, but—after joking about Farmer Pensum’s sheep brains, the trolls at Featherstone didn’t show any symptoms at all. With Gopnik just now, there was certainly a lot of uncontrolled movement, but—something doesn’t fit. He wasn’t falling down.”

“What else could account for the ‘spin roll?’” Efran asked.

“I don’t know,” Marguerite said. “Only that—trolls have little interest in communicating facts. They like stories, legends. And if Farmer Pensum’s sheep brains have attained the status of legend among the trolls, we can’t count on anything they tell us about them.”

Efran asked, “Well—when was the last time you heard from Verlice?”

“About three weeks ago,” she said. At Efran’s inquiring look, she added, “No, he mentioned nothing about trolls or mad sheep disease.”

Still thinking of controlling a dangerous communicable disease, Efran mused, “Wallace quarantined me, Hawk and Rigdon for two days to make sure we weren’t infected. So what do we do about visitors coming to the Lands?” he asked Wendt.

“Anyone coming from Eurus must be kept outside the gates for at least a day, but we need to come up with a less scary reason,” Wendt said thoughtfully.

“Sleeping sickness?” Minka offered. This was a real disease that could be serious, but slackers throughout the Southern Continent used it as a reason to take off work.

“Thank you, Minka; that’ll do.” Wendt nodded to Caswall. “Barr’s the new Gate Commander—go bring him here so we can brief him on this.”

“Yes, Commander.” Caswall saluted and ran out.

Minka then asked Marguerite, “Where is Justinian? Did he leave for Eurus?”

“Noo,” Marguerite said carefully.

“Noo,” Efran said, emulating her cautious tone. “What does that mean?”

“It means that he hasn’t left the Lands, but I want to be careful not to gossip,” Marguerite admitted.

Wendt leaned back in amusement. “I’m afraid that repeating gossip is mandatory here, Lady Marguerite.”

There was confirming laughter around the table, and Marguerite raised a hand in defeat. “He’s been seeing Lady Vories. She’s not divorced from Gladden, which apparently is how they all like it.”

“Ah. Now you understand—” Efran began, then abruptly shut up.

Those around the table smiled at his slip, but he pressed his lips together, rocking slightly as he looked out the window. No one followed up on what they should understand now.

Fortunately, Barr entered to salute Wendt and Efran. Still irritated at himself, Efran waved at Barr, “Don’t do that.” Efran didn’t want anyone of rank saluting him.

“Yes, Captain,” Barr said complacently, then Wendt directed him to a seat so they could inform him about the plague threatening Eurus.

Gabriel also came back to tell them that the scouts who had returned last night from Eurus, Eustace and Gaul, had amiably accepted quarantine in an isolated cell in the infirmary of Barracks B. In return, they were provided unlimited ale and whatever they wanted to eat. Neither showed any symptoms yet. Also, Coghill had been alerted to the (hopefully remote) possibility of the resurgence of mad sheep disease in people.

Gabriel added, “The next question is, should we alert the families like Minogue who keep livestock? Or Keyon, who’s over the Fortress sheep and goats, and Hereward, who’s over the Fortress cattle?”

Efran winced, shaking his head. “They have so much work to do already, I don’t want to panic them when we don’t even know if Eurusian livestock are at risk from this latest outbreak—*if* that’s what it is.”

Wendt agreed, “We’ll just take precautions at the gates, for now—the new north gates and the eastern gates as well as the main gates.”

Barr stood. “Permission to be dismissed to see to it, Commander.”

Wendt nodded him out, and Efran cut threatening eyes to Barr to ensure that he didn’t ask permission of himself. A few men observed this, noting that the Captain wanted it clear that the Commander was head of the army. Efran did send Caswall up to the fortress to pass on to Estes and DeWitt everything they had just learned.

They covered a few more incidentals just to give everyone a chance to finish their ales, then Wendt said, “Well, we’ll keep the Fortress apprised of what we hear, Efran, but for now, you’re all dismissed.” Everyone rose from the table, and the men saluted him.

Then Wendt added, “May I walk you to the chapel, Lady Marguerite?”

“That would be appreciated. Thank you, Commander,” she replied mildly. Minka immediately assumed an innocent face. Efran might have been the only one to notice it; however, notice it he did.

So when they exited Barracks A to find Kraken rolling in the dirt in front of the water trough, Efran ordered him up to whack dust clouds from his back with a spare saddle blanket. All the while he was muttering about saddling him wherever they went from now on.

Efran then lifted Minka onto his bare back. Grasping his mane in front of her, Efran swung up to sit behind her. As he nudged Kraken up Main toward the switchback, he could then comfortably encase her in his arms to whisper, “Why is it interesting that the Commander is walking your auntie back to the chapel?”

She glanced aside with a devious smile at the innocent pair, talking casually but not intimately as they strolled up

the sidewalk. Wendt glanced at Efran and Minka watching, but Marguerite pointed out something new about Delano's façade: "Are they painting over that beautiful tivoli stone?"

"It appears so. I wonder why," Wendt remarked, eyeing Efran.

"Well?" Efran breathed in Minka's ear. He was riding tightly up against her while she was trying to wriggle loose, but he wouldn't let her. So she finally brought her left leg up to ride in a partial sidesaddle. "You're not getting off that easily," he told her. She bent over Kraken's neck, laughing.

"Why must they be so demonstrative?" one exuberantly dressed matron at Averno's complained to another as they both watched the Lord and Lady Sovereigns being demonstrative.

The second woman was likewise dressed to impress, especially with the badge which she wore everywhere, signifying her status as Lady Member of the Abbey Fortress and Lands (and of which the other women of her set were intensely envious). Fingering the badge, Lady Neanne observed, "Lord Efran is simply a demonstrative man."

"Did he *really* kiss you like that?" the first woman fairly exploded (as this was something that Lady Neanne had repeated frequently to her set).

"Ask my footman Gabb," Neanne placidly challenged her. "He was so shocked, he could hardly get the carriage down the switchback." (Which was true.) The first woman sighed at this, having already talked to Gabb.

"Well?" Efran repeated in his wife's ear. He added, "You're making everyone stare at us." (It was also true that almost everyone was staring at them, but Minka was not primarily to blame.)

Still laughing, Minka sat up. "Scoot back and I'll tell you." So Efran backed off about three inches. She cut her eyes back at him and said, "While we were at the camp, Auntie had the Commander over for tea. And, he saw what she really looks like."

Efran's jaw hung open, unmoving, for most of the way up the switchback. Finally, he asked, "What does she really look like?"

"Not an old woman," she said, quickly adding, "I haven't seen her myself; I want to wait until she feels comfortable that no one will walk in while she's—showing me."

"Ohhh," he breathed out. Then he started trembling. "What do you really look like?"

"This," she said instantly. "This is my true appearance. I could change it, but I don't want to."

"Thank you," he exhaled, laying his cheek on her head. The courtyard guards had the gates standing open for them. Efran slid down off Kraken, but held her leg. "Stay there." And he walked her on Kraken around the fortress to the back grounds, where the children and Joshua were playing.

The children ran over to greet them, and Joshua cried out to ride Kraken. So after helping Minka down, Efran lifted him to the broad black back, but called over Salk to walk with him. Then the children showed Efran and Minka their newest project: planting reeds and ferns all around the hilltop cistern from which the Archimedes screw drew water. This was to give shelter for the green frogs who liked the water, but were being eaten at an alarming rate by the Gers (predecessors of the turkey), the crows, eagles, and hawks. (Not much later, the screw was removed to another hilltop pool, not as large.)

After Kraken and Gaunter had carted over loads of soil and compost, the children planted the frog cover, which sprang up quickly and thrived. The only problem now was the frogs' eating the dragonflies and their nymphs, which the children also loved. "They make life such a battle," Hassie vented. "Why can't they all get along?"

"The chickens and the fish are wondering that about you!" Noah laughed.

"That's different!" Hassie cried, chasing after him with a balled fist, but he was faster than she.

From there, Efran and Minka looked over to the children's garden sections, some of which looked sadly overgrown. Having gotten bored with the work, most of the children abandoned their plots, but Jera continued to tend her marigolds because she loved them. However, she didn't earn much because she either kept them in water by her bed, or fed them to the chickens, which was so much fun to watch.

Toby, Almund and Elwell continued to harvest from their own and others' neglected beds, so all three had earned enough for Froggatt's mechanical toys. "We can't bring them outside; they'll get ruined," Elwell explained to Efran. "So you'll have to see them at dinner."

"We'll do that, then," Efran promised.

At Minka's request, Verrin ran into the fortress to bring out a large picnic blanket, which she spread under an apple tree on the edge of the orchard. Here, she sat beside Efran, who stretched out on his back. Seeing him that way, Joshua fell off Kraken toward him. Far out of reach, Efran lurched up, but Salk caught the toddler to hand him off. Minka exhaled, "Oh, good catch, Salk!"

"Thank you, Lady," he said complacently, although his heart was hammering.

Efran lay back down for Joshua to crawl all over him, and Nakam immediately joined him. Minka then had Verrin and Telo bring out another blanket for children who wanted to sit with them, since Efran took up a great deal of space lying down. Also, Minka asked for and received a large basket of finger foods for the midday meal: twisty rolls, blackberries, apples, crispels, and jerky.

After getting what she wanted from the basket, Minka handed it to Efran. Since he just wanted to lie down with his eyes shut, he blindly transferred the basket to the second blanket.

Too busy to sit, the children mostly flew by to randomly grab something from the basket, which they ate on the run. Minka had a napkin full of blackberries waiting on her lap as she unwound a twisty roll to eat in pieces while watching the children, the gardeners, and the soldiers. Efran, lying beside her, had a hand on her leg. This was his habit when she was near: to use touch as a watchdog so he could safely relax.

Joshua eventually sat beside him to lay his head on Efran's chest and close his eyes. Nakam curled up on Efran's stomach to keep a sleepy eye on his wrestling partner. Minka smiled at that, then looked to Efran. He was watching her through barely open lids. "What is it?" she whispered, stroking his hair back off his forehead. It was getting in his eyes again.

"I just like to look at you," he murmured. Knowing there was something else, she waited.

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Chapter 11

Efran drew a deep breath. “So many of the times I’ve been attacked—Lues, De’Ath, DePew, Alberon—they used you, or tried to use you, to make it hurt,” he told Minka. “But that was a mistake. That called up something I never knew I had—I don’t even know what to name it. But Lues, at the end, showed me you crying, pleading with me to say the words that would allow him to stay. I believed it was you; I believed that would really bring me back to you.

“But what came out of my mouth was something else, something deeper, that didn’t allow me to fall for a lie. That had to have been of God—carrying me over an attack that just overpowered my reason—” *My will and my courage may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever*; came the whisper. [Ps. 73]

“Yes, Therese, that’s what happened,” he whispered back.

Voices wafted to them from across the back grounds: Justinian said, “Oh, he’s not here. Sorry.”

A woman’s voice replied, “No, there he is, lying down near the trees with a dog and two children.”

Justinian began, “That’s—”

“It will only take a moment, I promise,” she said. Justinian was silent.

Eyes closed, Efran groaned, “Are they headed this way?”

“Yes,” Minka said sympathetically. His eyes remained closed, his face turned away, one hand on Minka’s leg and the other on Joshua’s back. As the pair approached, Minka raised her eyes and put a finger to her smiling lips.

“I just need to talk to him,” Vories said in a stage whisper.

“No,” Minka said, quieter.

“Well then, we’ll wait,” she said, nestling down on the second blanket. Glancing around, she leaned over the basket of children’s treats to begin digging through it. One of the children spotted the transgression at once. There came a streaking comet to fly over the blanket, snatch up the basket and carry it away.

Left with a twisty roll in her hand, Vories cried out in surprise. Joshua startled up to look back at her over his shoulder; Nakam stood on Efran’s stomach to yap at her. So Efran opened his eyes.

“Oh, you’re awake,” she said, taking a bite of the roll. “I had some news to share with you. I just got a letter from a dear friend in Crescent Hollow; she and her family—all of her relations—are coming out here to you because the craziest fad has broken out over there. People are going mad doing St Vitus Dance, and then they drop down dead.”

Minka quietly gasped. Efran raised up to whistle at a sentry. When he ran over, Efran said, “Get DeWitt or Estes out here.” The sentry saluted and ran to the back door of the fortress, then Efran told Vories, “Let me see the letter.”

“Well, I have it tucked away for safety. Tell me you’ll let them in, and I’ll give it to you,” she bargained, tapping the front of her dress, where a bulge showed in the tight bodice.

Efran leaned over to reach into her bodice and bring out the folded letter with a broken seal. “Efran!” she protested, smiling. Then she rearranged her disordered bodice, glancing around for who might have witnessed the assault. Justinian, behind her, sighed.

Efran sat up to unfold the letter, holding it so that Minka could read it over his shoulder:

“August 2 [2 days ago]

“Dear Vorey, Quick note. Lassalle and I coming to you there in the Abby Lands, getting too crazy here with people dancing St Vitus until they fall dead. No good here anymore. Many others coming as well. See you soon. Huneke”

Efran looked up from the letter to ask Vories, “Where in Crescent Hollow does she live?”

“Oh, in the nobles’ district, of course, close to the palace, where all our dear friends live,” Vories said.

“Well, that takes care of Sughrue,” Efran muttered. He looked up to see both Estes and DeWitt trotting out of the back door. With Joshua still trying to climb him, Efran merely extended the letter up at arm’s length.

DeWitt reached him first to pluck the letter from his fingers. Estes drew up beside him to read it. DeWitt muttered, “We need to blockade the new bridge over the Passage.”

“And the old stone bridge,” Estes said.

“Right now,” Efran added. Several of the children were lingering nearby, listening.

DeWitt turned to whistle, circling a finger over his head. Men dropped whatever they were doing to run to him. Estes, meanwhile, gave the letter to Krall, telling him, “Ride that down to the Commander. Tell him we’re blocking both the old and the new bridges.”

“Yes, Steward,” Krall said.

As he turned, Vories said, “Wait a minute; that’s a personal letter. You can’t show it to just anyone.”

Krall glanced back at Estes, who motioned him to go. He did, running.

Leaning back against the apple tree, Efran looked at Justinian to say, “The blonde asked me about you again.” Vories’ hair was a ginger brown, profusely curling.

Justinian blinked. “What? Which blonde?”

Efran scowled. “I can’t keep up with them. But I want them to stop asking me where you are. I’m not your social secretary.”

Perceiving subterfuge, Minka closed her mouth tightly and looked off. Vories was peering at Justinian out of the corner of her eye. He straightened slightly, toying with his top hat. “I’m terribly sorry for the inconvenience, dear brother, but—was it the one with curls over her ears or the one with her hair pulled back?”

“She had it all piled up on her head like a bird’s nest. I’ve warned you about that type,” Efran said in disapproval.

“Ah. Noted,” Justinian said, chastised. “But as for the others—”

Vories abruptly stood. “Take me to Averno’s, Justinian. I’ve a desire for their spice cake.”

Humbly, he got to his feet. “Good choice, Vorey; it is excellent.”

As he put his hat on and walked her away with a hand at her back, she hissed, “If we’re going to be together, I have to know that you’re not sleeping around behind my back.”

“Heaven forbid, dear Vorey. Didn’t you hear him say that they didn’t know where I was?” he asked plaintively.

“Hmph!” she snorted. Justinian glanced back at Efran, who was barely smiling.

Minka murmured, “That was very naughty of you. I approve.”

Efran raised his face to laugh, but saw Toby bringing Calix forward. His face was white, and his knees shaking. “Toby? Calix?” Efran asked. Minka turned to look.

Toby said, “Efran, are we being invaded again? Calix heard about blocking the bridges, and he’s scared.”

Minka exhaled in distress. Efran raised an arm to the boys. “No, come here, Calix.” The boy dropped down at his side, and Efran put his arm around him. Joshua looked over from his other side. Efran said, “We have some excitement from time to time, but it always gets settled. This is our safe place, Calix. You’re safe here.” Holding onto Efran, feeling how solid he was, Calix stopped shaking.

Other children came up, and Chorro brought back the basket. Perceiving the problem, Noah said, “Oh, you should’ve been here when the Graetrix flew in, Calix! Great big birds that attacked the fortress! And Efran and all the archers on the roof shooting them down!”

Minka winced, but Calix sat up in concentration. “Did they kill them all?”

“Yes! All of them!” Noah exulted. “And we saw their leader, the Big One, go down in a mass of flames that exploded in the air!” Calix’s eyes got big.

“And you should have been here for the snobbles!” Hassie said in superiority. “Tiny little creatures with huge teeth that bite!” She bared her teeth at Calix to illustrate, and he shrank into Efran’s side.

Toby said reassuringly, “But then we got Jonguitud, the hydra. He eats them, you know.”

Calix sat up again. “Can we go talk to him?”—which was hugely entertaining for the children and their bodyguards.

“I don’t see why not,” Efran said, lifting his face to Willis nearby, who ran over, saluting. Efran told him, “Take three men with you for the children to talk to Jonguitud.”

“Yes, Captain,” he said, and the children congregated, cheering.

Toby helped Calix up, and Efran smiled at him. “Toby’s a great help, Calix. If I was ever in trouble, I know he’d be there for me.” Toby paused to look back at him, basking in the show of confidence.

Then the four guards took the children out to the west end of Chapel Road to enjoy a stimulating talk with Jonguitud, who had discovered a new food: “Rope fish tingle,” Jonguitud said.

“What?” “What does he mean?” the children asked each other.

Even the guards looked confused. “Show us,” Tourle said. So the hydra’s right head opened its great mouth to reveal the slender head of an eel poking out. There was a flash of red, a spark and a buzz. “A shocking eel! Get back!” Tourle ordered the children.

They screamed in excitement; Jonguitud chomped down on the head, severing it so that it flopped on the road. The hydra gulped down the rest of the body, smacking its lips.

“All right, enough of that. Back to the gates,” Tourle ordered. Noah and Calix were reluctant to leave, but the rest of the children scurried to the switchback.

While Minka remained out back to receive the children, Efran emerged from the garderobe in their quarters and immediately spotted the folded parchment on the table. He picked it up to read, “Efran, the Lord gave me John 15:16-17 for you—‘I chose you and appointed you to go and produce fruit that should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, He will give it to you.’ Will explain later.”

“Oh, yes,” he murmured. Madgwick had sent him that note about a week ago, after he had outlasted Lues. “I need to take that down to ask her about it.” But Minka was waiting for him, so he didn’t do that right now.

The following day, however, he was loping Kraken up Main when he spotted Madgwick emerging from Delano’s up the street. So he veered Kraken over to slide down from the saddle and land beside her. As she turned, he said, “Madgwick, I got the note, but. . . .” He was digging in his pocket for something that wasn’t there.

She said, “Yes, Efran. When I heard of your struggle with Lues, I realized that there was a great Power working on your behalf, and that verse explains it. On the day that Jesus first met his disciples and commanded them, ‘Follow me,’ he empowered them to share his ministry. He compared himself to a grape vine, and his disciples to the branches. The branches don’t produce fruit by themselves, but by the vine. So the *promise of answered prayer* is made to the believer who remains united—obedient—to Jesus as the fruit-bearing branch is united to the vine.”

Efran was shaking his head. “Madgwick, I’m not—I’m just not there—”

“Someone who *is* there prayed for your victory in that struggle, Efran,” she insisted. She wasn’t claiming that was her, as she didn’t even know about it at the time.

His face went slack. “Therese,” he breathed. “She always prayed for me. Lues mocked her prayers as futile.”

“But you saw her prayers answered,” Madgwick said. Efran blinked at the irrefutable statement. With a gentle pat on her shoulder, he turned back sightlessly to Kraken.

Over the next several days, the Landers watched the roads. There was almost no traffic from the northbound road, except for Delano and his son Wystan, who went back and forth from their brewery and fields near Westford. Since their operation was isolated, not visible from the main road, their workers had seen no one. Delano had warned them to be on watch for strangers, especially anyone who looked to be staggering.

They never saw anyone, so he and his son were always admitted back in, and their reports taken to the Commander. The scouts who had been put in quarantine after returning from Eurus, Eustace and Gaul, had been released the following day without any sign of illness.

Wendt had heavy gates constructed on the east side of the new bridge over the Passage. He would rather have blocked it on the west side, preventing attackers from entering the bridge at all, but that was impractical. He also suspended sending out scouts—they could come back infected, and no one would know until it was too late.

Then on the afternoon of August 7th, the wall gate guards began ringing the alarm bell: carts, horses, and staggering pedestrians were attempting to cross the new bridge over the Passage.

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Chapter 12

Efran, DeWitt, and the soldiers Connor, Mumme, and Stephanos rode out with Gate Commander Barr to have a cautious look at the travelers behind the bridge gates. (Having left Kraken to help Tourjee today, Efran was on Trud.) The three soldiers were chosen to ride out with the officers because they had been in Westford during the scourge of mad sheep disease, and had seen people who had been infected with it. These six men approached no closer than forty feet to the bridge gates to watch.

Horses and carts appeared to be riderless, but pedestrians were dancing wildly in between them as they tried to gain the gates. “Help,” they gasped. “Help us. We can’t—” They were falling down from exhaustion, and at least one fell over the side of the bridge into the water.

When they started trying to climb the bridge gates, the observing party withdrew to ride back through the wall gates into the Lands. They dismounted, looking at each other. Efran asked, “Did that look like the mad sheep disease?”

The three soldiers shook their heads dubiously. Mumme said, “Not really, Captain, not from what I remember. The people with the mad sheep disease were falling down as though their legs wouldn’t hold them up anymore. These people can’t seem to stop dancing.”

Connor began swaying, then stepping and moving his arms. Efran asked, “Like that? Connor? What—?”

Stephanos held his arms out to begin turning. “Captain, I’m not—”

But then Efran looked down to see his own feet moving. “No.” He planted his feet to hold them still, and his arms came up over his head. Focused on trying to keep still, he was unaware of the number of people down Main who suddenly dropped whatever was in their hands to begin dancing.

A tsunami of movement swept the Lands from the wall gates to the switchback. Then the courtyard guards began

moving to purely internal music. The impulse surged through the fortress to the back grounds, where gardeners dropped their shovels to begin dancing. The sparring groups were dancing in pairs, and the archers flung aside their bows to pirouette, Polonti and Southerners alike.

Only the children remained still, watching with wide eyes as the adults around them lost all control of themselves. “What is happening?” Almund whispered to Toby.

In a flash, Toby remembered the letter from Crescent Hollow about people dancing until they dropped dead. “I’m going to go look around,” he said. Turning to the other children, he ordered, “All of you stay back here and stay together. Noah, you’re in charge of keeping everyone together here.”

“Yes, sir,” Noah said seriously, saluting.

Toby started to move off, then saw Joshua crawling unattended through the orchard. The man who was supposed to be watching him was helplessly spinning. So Toby went over to pick Joshua up with a grunt and carry him through the back door into the lower corridor. Straining, he lugged the toddler to the open door of the nursery. Nakam followed.

Exhaling in relief, Toby let Joshua down to the floor, where he crawled into his bassinet. Then Toby looked around—there was another toddler and two babies here, but no grown-ups. So he went out, carefully closing the half-door behind him.

Running back to the grounds, he found the other children waiting anxiously together. “Hassie, you and Jera come with me,” Toby instructed. “No one’s in the nursery to watch the little ones.”

“All right. We’re good at that,” Hassie said.

To the others, Toby said, “The rest of you wait here with Noah.” They agreed, and Noah made them sit to wait.

Hassie and Jera followed Toby past rollicking dancers who shouted at each other, “What’s going on?” “Stop bumping me!” “Someone make me stop!”

“Here you are.” Toby and the girls drew up to the half-door of the nursery, where he let them in. Joshua looked over groggily from his bassinet. “Stay here until I come back,” Toby ordered.

“Find Efran,” Hassie ordered in return, and he nodded. Toby began trotting up the corridor, looking aside left and right as grown-ups were helplessly dancing, holding on to each other to try to make themselves stop. But then they would pull apart again.

Toby stopped dead at the door of the library where Minka was dancing with tears in her eyes. “Toby! Find Efran! He’s down at the barracks,” she gasped.

“Yes,” he said. Then he looked up at the Librarian, standing still and quiet. “Efran is the key, isn’t he?” Toby asked.

“Yes, Toby. Lord Efran is key,” the Librarian confirmed.

So, scared but determined, Toby ran up the corridor to the foyer, brushing past dancers who lurched into his path. In the courtyard, he ran to the gates to look down the switchback at Main. And—

He cried out in dismay. Chapel Road, Main Street, and all the side streets were clogged with people who had found their way outside to dance. Hundreds and hundreds of people were throwing themselves this way and that—and how would he ever find Efran down there? How could he even stay on his feet around grown-ups tossing about like that?

“Help me!” he cried, looking up to the sky. Someone brushed his arm and he backed away, startled.

It was Kraken. He would have been down on Main looking for his human already, but couldn’t unlatch the courtyard gates. He nosed Toby again in an invitation to hop on. So, wiping his face on his sleeve, Toby opened the gates, then looked around for something to climb on to reach Kraken’s back.

But the horse knelt down on his front knees so that Toby could swing a leg over him. Grasping his mane, Toby held on while Kraken stood and walked out of the courtyard to head down the old switchback.

The faerie trees at the bottom were dancing aimlessly as well, and Toby had to lean far down on Kraken to avoid being swept off his back by the swooshing branches. Then, sniffing the air, Kraken began looking for his human.

With so many other humans packed so closely together in the street, searching by smell didn’t work very well. So Toby and Kraken both just looked. Being higher up than anyone around him enabled Toby to see far and wide. Unfortunately, Efran’s hair was no longer white nor spiky, so right now, his head would look just the same as a hundred other Polonti heads Toby saw.

Worse, Efran didn’t even have the distinction of a red Abbey uniform, as he was wearing work clothes. So when Toby found any Polonti, he had to get a good look at their faces, which was hard when they were all dancing wildly.

For the next several hours, Toby and Kraken looked for Efran. Toby had the horse go in just a few shops to check, but they were all empty. And when Toby got to the end of Main, to the wall gates, he didn’t know what to do. The gates were open, and people were dancing all up and down the coastal highway as well as the north road. Should he abandon the Lands to look outside? Was there any reason Efran would stay on the Lands when he couldn’t control his feet? Not knowing what to do, Toby urged Kraken back up Main.

From there, Kraken led the search. He walked purposefully to separate groups into individual dancers, nudging them apart so that he and Toby could get a good look at any likely men. Kraken also went down alleyways between shops to look, where they could scan a limited number of dancers at a time.

Unfortunately, this became hazardous, because the longer people danced, the more desperate they were to stop. At the appearance of a large, stable animal, a score of hands reached for him, grabbing at his tail, neck or nose to try to stop themselves. They also latched onto Toby, almost pulling him off the horse’s back. Then Kraken had to bite at them or kick at them to make them let go.

Still, the searchers kept looking. But it was like trying to find one particular cork bobbing on the lake among a hundred identical corks. They didn’t stay put; they slid from wave to wave—when Toby thought he had covered one area, he looked again to see that there was a whole new group of people helplessly dancing there now.

After another hour of increasingly confused searching, he began to feel deeply anxious. The sun was lowering; twilight was coming soon. And if Toby didn’t find Efran before nightfall, he had no chance of finding him in the dark. And then what? How long could he search before he got too tired to stay on Kraken? How long could Efran survive while Toby looked for him?

Panic began gnawing at him as he looked around at mobs of indistinguishable heads. With a cry, Toby raised his face again. “God help me!” he cried. “Help me find him! Help me—”

Kraken lurched under him so quickly that Toby almost fell off. But he clutched his mane as Kraken, having caught a faint scent, pushed his way through the crowd to a shadowy side street. There, Toby cried out again as Kraken cornered a man dancing in the dark between Delano’s and Lowry’s. He was gasping, “Stop. Help me—stop.”

Toby slid down from Kraken to wrap his arms around Efran’s waist. But he just shucked him off in turning. Over and over again, Toby tried to catch and hold him—by his waist, his arm, even his belt. But Efran was so strong, he could easily pull away from Toby’s hold. The only reason Toby didn’t lose him altogether again was Kraken’s corralling him against the wall. He couldn’t very well push Kraken away.

The sky was continuing to darken: it was fully twilight now. And Toby was exhausted. But this was his only chance. If he couldn’t do it now, he would never do it.

Summoning a mighty yell, Toby balled his fists to throw himself onto Efran and cinch him around the waist. He gripped his wrists behind Efran’s back, and wrapped his legs around Efran’s, leg for leg. And there he hung on with fiercely gritted teeth while Efran stumbled around in his dance.

Minutes later, when Toby thought for sure he would pass out, Efran began slowing. His feet stood still; his body stopped swaying, and his hands came to rest on Toby’s back. Another minute more, and he was completely still, upright. “Toby,” he whispered.

“C-can you s-stay stopped?” Toby gasped.

“Yes,” Efran exhaled, and Toby let go of him to almost fall. But Efran caught him. Holding Toby on one arm, Efran turned to pet Kraken’s nose. “Found me again, did you?” he asked, only a little shaky.

Kraken nodded. *You are my human.*

“What do we do now?” Toby asked, looking out at now-dark Main Street where black shapes lurched in ghostly shadow dances. No one had lit the lanterns.

“Here.” Efran hoisted himself up on Kraken’s back to pull Toby up behind him. Then he nudged Kraken to Main, where he slowly began walking his riders up the dark street. Kraken nudged dancers aside as he made his way toward the gates, shuffling his feet to not step on human ones.

People they passed suddenly stopped dancing. Many of them fell down right where they were, but a few caught themselves or others. Then the people around those people stopped dancing. And a wave of release spread out from Efran on Kraken in all directions. In minutes, the whole of Main subsided into peace, and then a quiet resumption of normal activity.

Residents returned to their homes or their shops to light candles and cooking fires. Soldiers stumbled back to their duties, a number of them riding up the switchbacks to the fortress. Lamplighters came out to light the lanterns along Main, as it was now fully dark. And the lanterns at the courtyard gates suddenly came to life.

Efran stopped Kraken at Barracks A, where he let Toby down and slid off himself. They climbed the steps unsteadily for Efran to open the door, where candles and lanterns were being lit. Wendt, Barr, Gabriel, and several other men sat on the desks or chairs in exhaustion. Wendt just looked at Efran and Toby while he caught

his breath. Then he asked, “How did you break out of it, Efran?”

“My son found me,” Efran said, and Toby put his head on his arms on the Commander’s desk to cry.

“Well done, Toby,” Wendt said.

Toby righted himself, swaying just a little. “Thank you, Commander.”

Wendt nodded, “We’ll see if we can clean up matters down here. You probably need to check the fortress. Dismissed.”

“Thank you, Commander.” Efran saluted, then turned around to Kraken standing in the doorway. “They’re good here. Back out, then.”

Efran and Toby rode Kraken up Main, now almost vacant, to the old switchback. When they had ascended to the higher levels, they saw Minka with Joshua and the children sitting on the fortress steps, lit by great lanterns beside the doors. The group was waiting among numerous soldiers. Catching sight of the man and boy riding the black horse up the dark switchback, the children jumped up, cheering and clapping. Joshua clapped with them. The courtyard sentries swung open the gates, saluting.

In the courtyard, Efran let Toby down to be engulfed by his friends, then Efran slid off Kraken to hoist Minka. She stayed there only a moment before wriggling down, having too much urgent information to share: “I asked the Librarian what happened to us, and he said that the dancing mania is well known, and that it just breaks out in certain areas for no reason that anyone can see. He also said that there was no explanation for how the last big outbreak finally ended, although hundreds of people had died by then. It just seemed to fade away.”

“Is that right?” he murmured. “Tell that to—Loseby, did you hear all that? Good, ride down and tell that to Commander Wendt. I’ll be down tomorrow morning, and we’ll talk more.”

“Yes, Captain,” Loseby said, weaving slightly. They were all utterly spent, of course.

Minka had to bend only slightly to hold Toby’s shoulders. “Now tell me how Toby found you!”

“Let’s go find something to eat,” Efran sighed, gesturing to the open fortress doors. He took Joshua off Milo, and they all headed inside.

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Chapter 13

There was a muted celebration in the dining hall, with people hugging each other, sharing stories, shaking their heads, or just sprawled on the benches, looking around blankly. The kitchen put out the fastest, easiest food they could scrounge up, and many men ate just enough to put their heads down on the tables and go to sleep. Their bench mates roused them again to kick them out.

Seeing neither Estes nor DeWitt at the head table, Efran took for granted that they were with their wives. But Ella and Quennel were beside him as usual, exhausted but happy. Everyone at Efran’s table wanted to know how

he was able to stop dancing, so he told them, “All I know is that when Toby clamped onto me, I could finally stop. But I don’t how he found me.” There was a forceful nudge in his back, and he glanced behind to amend, “How he and Kraken found me.” Kraken’s tail swished in vindication.

Toby said, “Kraken’s the one who found him. We looked for hours, everywhere—I’ve never seen so many people out on the streets at once, and all I could see was black heads going out forever.” His hearers laughed, but Toby was close to tears again. “It started getting dark, and I was so tired and scared, I just cried out for help. God must have heard me, because that’s when Kraken smelled Efran and went right to him. Then all I had to do was grab him and hold on.”

“How did you know that would work, Toby?” Minka asked in admiration.

“It was all I could think to do,” he said, blinking heavily.

Efran regarded him a moment. “Toby, do you understand that you saved everyone in the Lands?” Toby looked dubious, and Efran added, “That’s pretty amazing for anyone, but especially a nine-year-old.”

“Oh, I’m ten now,” Toby said quickly.

“Are you? When is your birthday?” Minka demanded.

“Yesterday, I believe,” he said tentatively.

“Then we’ll have a party for you tomorrow,” Minka decreed, and the children cheered. Birthdays meant special treats for everyone.

Toby looked hazily satisfied. But he said, “I don’t understand why we weren’t dancing, too. None of us children had the mania.”

Efran and Minka stared at him and each other. Then she got up to clamber awkwardly off the bench. “I’m going to ask the Librarian.” Efran put a hand out to her, wanting her to wait till tomorrow to do that, but she was off. So he ate, and told the children to eat.

Soon, she returned to steady herself on Efran as she climbed back over the bench. “The Librarian says that it’s unprecedented for the children to be unaffected—usually, they’re the most susceptible to it. He said the only thing to account for it is the Abbey’s charter to care for children. They are under special protection here.”

The others silently absorbed that. Efran observed, “Then that saved us as well, because our children are smart and brave enough to keep their heads when we lose ours.”

Hassie said, “Yes, and there was no one in the nursery, so Jera and I took care of the little ones until the nursery workers came back.”

The other children affirmed this. Noah said, “And I kept all the children together so no one would get hurt.”

“I helped him,” Alcmund said quickly.

“We all helped us stay together and not be afraid,” Elwell said. The other children agreed that this was so.

“Then we will celebrate all of you tomorrow,” Minka said firmly. Shortly, the children headed for their beds

victorious, and Efran took his youngest son to the nursery. Cordelia and Felice were there, tired but on duty.

The following day, August 8th, Efran left Minka sleeping while he went upstairs to check on Estes and DeWitt. Perturbed to find neither here yet, he summoned Koschat and Pieta to man the workroom. Then he sent Mathurin off to see what was keeping his administrators, and told him to report to him at Barracks A.

Following, Efran took Kraken to check in with Commander Wendt. Gabriel met him in the office to direct him back to the conference room. "I'm sorry that the Commander was called away briefly. Since he's expecting you, I'm sure he'll be here quickly."

"I don't mind waiting," Efran said, sliding down into the stiff-backed chair.

"Thank you, sir." Gabriel began to leave with a salute, then stepped away from the door with a startled laugh. Efran looked back quickly at the familiar clapping, and Kraken came right in to snuffle Efran's hair.

"So you have privileged entry now, do you?" Efran muttered, stroking his neck. Kraken nodded. Efran got up to help himself to a breakfast platter on a side table of sausages, twisty rolls, and blackberries. He extended an apple back to Kraken, who took it delicately from his palm. Then Efran sat with his plate.

He had finished it before the Commander came in. Glancing at Kraken behind Efran's chair, Wendt said, "I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Efran."

"I haven't suffered," Efran said, with obvious reference to his empty plate.

"I'm glad to hear it," Wendt said, sitting at the head of the table as usual. He looked up to nod to Barr, "Yes, thank you." Efran glanced back at him, then waited for enlightenment.

Wendt provided it. "We forgot all about Wyse in his cell until the men checked on him this morning. He's dead."

"Oh," Efran breathed. "From the dancing mania, I assume."

"As far as we know. Coghill can't find any wounds or bruising," Wendt said.

Efran sat back, absorbing that. So Wyse's years-long subterfuge in hiding his true identity, in working tirelessly to gain power, ended in an ignoble, accidental death when no one was there to help him stop dancing. For a moment, Efran was pierced all over again by the treachery of a good man. After seeing Neale's repentance, Efran was unconsciously hoping to see something of the same for Lyte. But now. . . .

Shaking off the regrets, Efran asked, "Had he reestablished a connection with another—mentor?" He was remembering what Minka had said.

"I don't know," Wendt replied. "But I've left a message for Lady Marguerite to stop by this morning. I understand she also suffered from the mania, but she may have information about that and Gopnik for us."

Efran was nodding in agreement when Mathurin entered to salute. "Commander. Captain. Administrator DeWitt and Steward Estes will be delayed a little while longer this morning, as Lady Tera and Lady Kelsey immediately went into labor when the dancing ended."

Efran gasped, "Are they all right?"

“Yes, sir, and the babies as well, though both were a little early. Both are girls. Lieutenant Wyeth’s wife Lady Cyr also went into labor, but she was a little farther along, so hers was easier. She also had a girl. I’m told all are doing well, though Wallace, Leese, and Bethune had a night of it. Coghill, too, as some ladies on the Lands also went into labor,” Mathurin said.

Efran began to get up. “Minka will want to see them,” he said, though sweat was forming on his lip. As much as Minka wanted a baby, especially a girl, he didn’t know how she would take the news.

But Lady Marguerite entered the room at that time, so he rose to seat her at the table.

As it was, Minka had already heard about the three newborn girls when she went to get Joshua from the nursery. (The nursery workers had just now put in a request for two more helpers with the women’s matron Gayla.) Immediately, Minka sprang into action. She collared the first man she found in the corridor to take Joshua and Nakam out to play. She wasn’t even sure who that man was.

Then she grabbed another man, who happened to be Seagrave, and said, “If you’re on duty, get me a man who isn’t.”

“I’m available, Lady Minka. What can I do for you?” he asked.

“Come,” she said, taking his fingers without thinking, and he complied.

She took him directly to the cold storage room where she had dumped a mountain of baby paraphernalia that she bought before finding out that she wasn’t pregnant. Glancing around, she pulled out the frilly white bassinet first, then loaded it with adorable little dresses and such until it was overflowing. She said, “Take this, please,” and he picked it up, endeavoring to keep it all intact.

Then she flew to the stairs to begin running up them. Mildly alarmed, he said humorously, “Please slow down, Lady Minka, or you’ll lose me. I can’t keep up.” With the bulky bassinet, he was already five steps below her.

“Oh, yes. I’m sorry. I’m just so excited,” she said, pausing. And she really was.

Upon reaching the third floor, she walked briskly without running to the far north end of the corridor, where she knocked on the door of the occupied suite with a shaking hand. In a moment, the door was opened for Wyeth to look down on her.

“Oh! Wyeth,” she said, twisting her hands. “How is she? And the baby? And—I brought—if it’s possible, mayI—?”

Smiling, he opened the door wider. “Please come in, Moiwahine.”

“Oh, thank you. I won’t stay. Oh, and Seagrave has a few things you may need.” She gestured sightlessly to her mule while looking toward the open door of the bedroom.

Wyeth went to the door to sign to his deaf wife, then turned to Minka. “She says, come in.”

“Thank you. I won’t stay. I just want to know they’re both all right,” she rambled on her way to the door.

She looked in where Cyr was sitting up in bed with a bundle in her arms. Smiling, she gestured her visitor in, so

Minka tiptoed to her bedside to look down on the little face peeking out of the blanket. “Oh! She’s beautiful!” Minka cried. Somehow, she remembered to sign “pretty” to Cyr, who laughed. “Oh, I’m so happy for you,” Minka breathed.

The baby began squirming, uttering a demand, so Cyr opened her nightdress to put the newborn to her breast. (Seagrave was waiting in the outer room.) Minka watched in delight as the little one latched on to suck, blinking in contentment. “Oh, that’s wonderful. Oh, Cyr, you’ll be a wonderful mother. What . . . what is her name?” Minka asked as though prying into a family secret.

Reading her lips, Cyr replied, “Isla.”

“Isla,” Minka repeated in wonder. “Oh, that’s beautiful. That fits her perfectly.” Then she turned away to pat Wyeth’s arm. “I’m so happy for you, Wyeth. Oh, I am so glad they’re both all right.”

“Thank you, Moiwahine,” he said. His eyes were moist.

Blinking, she left the room to exit quickly into the corridor, Seagrave behind her. The loaded bassinet was left in the outer room of the suite.

As Wyeth closed the door, Minka looked around. “DeWitt and Tera are up here somewhere, aren’t they?”

“Yes, Lady Minka. He has his name on the door there.” He pointed down the corridor.

“Oh, good. All right. Oh! We have to go back down,” she said absently.

“Then we’ll do that. Let me go ahead of you, please,” he said. She seemed amenable, so he led down the stairs back to the cold storage room on the first floor.

Minka loaded him up with a box and three canvas bags of baby girl things, then she preceded him up the stairs again. Glancing back in concern, she asked, “Can you see where you’re going?”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he lied, so they ascended to the third floor.

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Chapter 14

Minka led Seagrave down the corridor to the door with the hand-lettered sign “DeWitt” on it, and knocked.

DeWitt himself opened the door in mild impatience, but when he saw her, his face relaxed in warmth. “Minka! Come in.” He paused in alarm at the loaded man following blindly behind her, then relieved him of the box, placing it on the floor.

“Oh, DeWitt, how is Tera? How is the baby? Can I see them? If it’s not a good time, that’s fine; I’ll just leave these and come back later. I just had to know that they’re doing all right,” she said, not quite as anxious, but intent.

“Come back here, Minka,” he laughed lightly, opening the door into a bedroom.

Tera was sitting up in bed, sedate and cheerful, while a helper was changing the newborn’s wraps on a side table. Minka cried, “Oh, Tera! You look wonderful! How are you feeling?”

“Just fine, Minka. It wasn’t nearly as bad as I feared it would be. Would you like to hold her?” She nodded toward the helper, who was lifting the baby from the table.

“May I?” Minka gasped.

“Of course,” DeWitt said. He took the baby from the helper’s arms to carefully place her in Minka’s.

“Oh, DeWitt, she’s so beautiful. She’s going to have such beautiful blonde hair. You’ll have to beat the boys back with a stick. Oh, look at those eyes! She’s so alert already. Are you going to teach her numbers yourself?” Minka asked.

“I suppose I have to, now,” he said.

“Oh, you’ll be such a wonderful father. You deserve all the children in the world. What is her name?” Minka asked.

“Tica,” DeWitt said. “That was my mother’s name.”

“Oh, I’m going to die. Oh! Look at those tiny little fingernails! Oh, is she hungry?” Minka asked anxiously, handing the thrashing baby back to him.

“Possibly, but we found out what to do about that,” he said, transferring the baby to Tera’s outstretched arms.

“Oh, I’m so proud of you, DeWitt, although Tera did all the work,” Minka said.

“Yes, that’s how it went,” he laughed.

Minka began backing toward the door. “All right. Take care of Tera, and don’t worry about the work. It will get done.”

“Ah. Is that from Efran?” DeWitt asked, interested.

“If it’s not, it will be,” she said, leaving to his wry laughter.

She and Seagrave descended the stairs once more to the first-floor cold storage room. Here, she pulled out all the rest of the baby things, pausing to smooth ruffled dresses and play with little pink booties. She sighed deeply, then said, “All the rest of this needs to go to Kelsey. She and Estes have a house in the western section.”

“Yes, Lady Minka. If you’ll wait here, I’ll go get reinforcements,” Seagrave said.

“All right,” she whispered. But after a moment, she turned away from the boxes of baby things to wait in the corridor.

Shortly, Seagrave returned with Graeme, Finn and Martyn. The four of them carried out a total of ten boxes of baby paraphernalia with Minka following. These they set in the courtyard to wait until Arne drove a one-horse

cart around. Then the men loaded the boxes into the cart while Minka sat in the driver's seat next to Arne. She patted his arm fondly, and he teared up. He knew that Minka wanted a baby.

Minka's four bodyguards/box carriers walked their horses behind the cart down the switchback to Estes' and Kelsey's house on the second street of the western section. When Arne pulled up to the curb, Minka climbed down by herself to fly to the door while the men dismounted to begin unloading boxes.

Estes opened the door at her knock, and Minka said, "Estes, how is she? How is Kelsey?"

"Doing fine, Minka. She's sleeping right now. Come in," he said. She did, but he paused in astonishment at the caravan of boxes approaching his door. "What—?"

"That's all right; I don't have to see her, Estes, I just want to know that she and the baby are all right," Minka said. Noting the men pause in the front room with the boxes, she said, "Just put them all down here." They did, and then stood back.

"Wait right here," Estes said. She blankly nodded, then turned to see that all the boxes were brought in. Arne had to sit with the cart and the men's horses in the street.

Shortly, Estes reappeared with a bundle in his arms. "Here," he said, placing the sleeping baby in Minka's arms.

"Oh," she gasped. "Oh, Estes." She began crying over the baby. "Oh, I don't want to drip on her. Oh, Estes, she's perfect. What is her—her—" She couldn't speak for crying.

"Her name is Broгна. That was the name of the matriarch of my father's clan," Estes said gently.

"Oh, Estes, that's so wonderful. Oh, I am so glad for you and Kelsey. Such beautiful children. Oh, Estes, you are so special to Efran. He couldn't do any of this without you," Minka said, eyes and nose dripping. Her bodyguards watched stoically, pretending their eyes were dry.

"It's an honor, Minka. Come here." He took the baby in one arm to place his other arm around her shoulders, and she just cried on him for a minute.

Then she straightened, wiping her face on her sleeve. "God bless your beautiful family, Estes. I don't know where Efran is. Probably with the Commander. He'll be by later."

"I know, Minka. Thank you for the—bounty," he said, looking around.

"You're welcome." She patted his arm and turned out, accompanied by four bodyguards who were squinting or blinking rapidly.

But Minka had stopped crying. She was done. She climbed into the driver's seat beside Arne to hug his arm. He patted her little hand with his beefy paw, then turned the cart to head back up to the courtyard, where the gates stood open for them.

Climbing down from the cart, Minka thanked her bodyguards. "You're so sweet to help me. But that was important and now it's done." They acknowledged her, and she turned to the fortress steps in composure.

Pale but clear-eyed, she let herself into her and Efran's quarters, then went back to the bedroom. Here, she paused to study again the beautiful crèche with Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus surrounded by animals,

worshippers, and angels. Then she dropped onto the bed to fall asleep.

Meanwhile, Efran was sitting in the conference room of Barracks A with Commander Wendt, his Second Gabriel, Gate Commander Barr, and Marguerite. Wendt was saying, “Thank you for coming so early, Lady Marguerite. I understand that you were inconvenienced by the dancing mania, as well.”

“Yes, I was, and it was quite a shock,” she admitted ruefully. “But then I also discovered that Hartshough is actually a very graceful dancer, among his other talents.”

The men laughed; Wendt asked, “Then perhaps we’ll see him perform in the chapel?”

“Not unless you get him very, very drunk,” she said pensively.

There was more laughter. Wendt said, “Please make a note, Gabriel: hard ale for Hartshough.”

“Sounds like the beginning of a lyric, Commander,” Gabriel said, making a point to dip his quill and write it down.

At that time, Heus stepped in to salute. “Commander, Captain—Coghill is getting reports of a few deaths on the Lands from the mania.”

Everyone sat up in concern. “How many?” Wendt asked.

“Five so far, Commander. The doctor doesn’t know what happened with them, only, they were all alone when it hit, and didn’t ever get out,” Heus said.

“Like Wyse,” Gabriel murmured while Wendt nodded dismissal to Heus. To Marguerite, Wendt said, “Wyse died in his cell last night, and we don’t know if he ever reestablished his connection with his troll mentor, or anyone else.”

Half-listening, Efran turned his eyes to her. He was trying to imagine what she really looked like. Probably aware of this, she glanced at him before looking off. “No, I don’t sense anything from him,” she replied to the Commander.

Wendt said, “I see. Now, we want to know whether you heard anything of our friend Gopnik during or after the mania.”

She said, “Yes, last night. Because of our previous connection, I was able to reach him without going through Wyse. I was surprised to see that the trolls were affected by the mania as well—apparently, that’s what the ‘spin roll’ was. And I am fairly sure that they are on their way down to you here.”

Efran mildly startled. “They’re attacking again?”

“No, I believe they think you can make them stop dancing,” she said.

His eyes widened. “Can I?”

“Yes,” she said. “Just as you did here.”

After a moment, he asked, “Is there any reason I would want to?”

She crossed her arms, settling back in contemplation. “I don’t know. It may secure their goodwill to prevent their attacking you in future.”

Efran narrowed his eyes skeptically. “Would they remember not to attack us?”

She laughed, “They might not, Efran.”

But he had thought of something else. “The Hollowans—Vories’ friends from Crescent Hollow—are they here? Were they relieved of the mania as well?” he asked Wendt.

“Yes and yes,” Wendt replied. “There’s about twenty of them, staying at Croft’s or Firmin’s right now—at Fortress expense, I understand.”

Efran was shaking his head. “If they intend to live here, they have to either work or stay with friends who are willing to support them—the Fortress will not be responsible for them. I want men sent to them today to tell them *and* Croft *and* Firmin that.”

“We’ll do that,” Wendt said. Looking over to a pair of men standing at the wall, he said, “Coxe, you and Goss go check Croft’s; get you two others to check Firmin’s. You’re to interview the Hollowan refugees, give them the Captain’s instructions, and note their names for Steward Estes. Report back to the Second Gabriel and the Steward.”

Efran turned in his chair to add, “I also want to know about the mania in Crescent Hollow, especially whether it hit the palace.”

“Yes, Captain. Commander.” They saluted and turned out. Shortly, two other men replaced them at the wall.

“Do you have any other concerns?” Wendt asked Efran.

Efran pressed his lips together as he studied notes floating in a stream of sunlight from the window. “Let’s send the Pamua riders back to Sasany Fields to find out how Alberon is doing now that Wyse is dead. He may latch onto Gopnik or another troll for the power—”

He broke off to look at Marguerite. “Is *Gopnik* on his way down to us? And his Council?”

She focused on the distance. “Let me look.” She appeared to be searching intently for a few minutes while the men at the table sat in silence. Barr got up to attend some business in the outer office.

Marguerite finally shook her head. “I’m getting nothing from Gopnik this morning, which may mean he is dead. I’m not hearing anything from his Councilors, either, but I wouldn’t without a connection like Wyse. Last night Gopnik was definitely dancing with the mania. I’m afraid all that is not very helpful.”

“No, but it is,” Efran said. “It tells me that if we see them coming, we pull out the drums at once.”

With that, their meeting ended. The Pamua riders were sent back that day to Sasany Fields. Efran took Kraken out to hoist himself up on his back, and Wendt walked Marguerite home again.

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Chapter 15

At that time, Vories had just brought two of her Hollowan friends into the fortress. (The gate guards and door guards, having seen her here several times with Justinian, had no qualms about letting her in today.) When she and her two women friends were alone in the corridor, she had them stop at the stairs.

Glancing around cautiously, she said in a low voice, “I’m going to talk to Efran in the workroom upstairs—that’s where he always is. I can’t understand why he’s being so stingy with guests after we’d all been so afflicted with the mania. Can you imagine any of us getting a *job*? That’s ridiculous. Anyway, *that* room [pointing across the corridor] is a storage room for an *unbelievable* amount of babywear and accessories. Take all the boxes and bags you can carry and just walk out as if you own the place, then take them to Besiana’s Bath and Bed Supplies—where we just came from—and sell them to her. They’re in perfect condition; never been used. She’ll snap them right up. That’ll get you enough to live on for a while, until I can bring you back up here again. There are other storage rooms in this corridor that have a lot of nice wares in them as well.”

Her co-conspirators nodded. With a last look around, Vories turned innocently up the stairs and they slipped innocently into the storage room as a pair of soldiers entered through the back door.

The two women looked dubiously around the dim room. One went over to the shelves to inspect the contents. “Well, there are towels, and soaps . . . some baby wraps, but they’re definitely not new. . . . Blankets, also not new, but mended. Candles that have been burned. . . . Empty jars. Honestly, Vories has gotten so common. I don’t see anything here I’d want in my boudoir.”

The second woman was looking at another door in the room. “There’s light coming from under that door.” The first woman barely glanced over, still trying to find something worth reselling. But the second woman walked over to open the door of the closet. “There’s a *trap door* in the floor of this closet, and there’s light coming out from under it!”

The first woman came over to look. “So?” Then she paused. “Do you hear something? A—buzzing noise?”

At that time, Vories appeared at the door of the second-floor workroom. Pieta and Koschat, both working over ledgers, looked up. “Where is Efran?” Vories demanded.

“Not here,” Koschat said.

“Well, when will he be here?” she demanded.

“We don’t know,” he said.

“Well then, I’ll wait,” she said, sitting in the chair at the head of the table. She looked suspiciously at the faerie tree growing up from the table. The tree appeared to be shaking its leaves at her, as though it were . . . laughing.

At that time, Efran had just slipped down from Kraken in the courtyard to whack his haunches. “Go on around back; Minka and I’ll be out soon for the children’s party.” Kraken turned to trot over to the west side of the fortress. Efran entered the foyer to go straight to his quarters.

Opening the door, he glimpsed Minka in the next room, so he closed the door without thinking to lock it. He came into the bedroom to see her sitting on the bed. She had just awakened from her nap. Still half-asleep, she

looked over with red lips, slightly flushed cheeks, and mussed hair. He bent down to take off his boots, first, then pull off his shirt. She began working her way out of her riding dress, and he came over to help her.

At that time, Vories' first friend was looking skeptically at the trap door while her second friend was trying to pry it up with her fingertips. "Find me something to get this door up!"

"Unless there's something to sell down there, I'm not interested. That's not what we're here for," First Friend said. She pulled Second Friend out of the closet and shut the door. "Come on, now."

They exited the storage room to look around. First Friend noted, "Vories said there were other storage rooms along this corridor." They slowly walked back toward the foyer, passing the open doors of the dining hall and the kitchen on their right. The library, with its door standing open, was the last room on the left, and there was only one more door across the corridor before it opened to the foyer.

Looking along the curved wall of the foyer, First Friend saw a small receiving room and the small dining room. Turning back to the corridor, she contemplated the first door on the left, that across from the library. "This looks like a good place for another storage room," she said. So she opened it and went in.

Second Friend glanced into the partly open door to see a small table and a standing mirror. Glimpsing a second doorway, her eyes widened at the realization that this was not a storage room—and there were clothes on the floor. So she swiftly backed out to stride through the foyer toward the open fortress doors. First Friend then came streaking past her to fly out the doors to the courtyard. Startled, Second Friend ran after her.

At that time, Vories rose from the chair in the workroom to declare, "Well, this is ridiculous. I'm not waiting a moment longer." Pieta glanced up; Koschat ignored the buzz. So Vories swept out to trot downstairs and up the corridor. As she was almost to the foyer, a door on her right flew open to reveal Efran in his breeches, looking around and breathing heavily.

"Efran! I've been looking for you," Vories said in a teasing, yet aggravated voice. Given his audacity to appear in the corridor mostly undressed, she felt justified to pertly take him to task.

He spun to look down at her and breathe, "You found me."

She paused, not liking his tone, but his little wife came up behind him to put her hand on his arm, laying her head on his shoulder blade. "Efran, the children will be looking for us," she murmured.

"I'm coming," he said, kissing her head. Then he drew back to shut the door on Vories and pointedly lock it.

"Well. How rude!" she huffed, marching to the fortress doors. They were manned by sentries who stood straight-backed, faces frozen, so as not to guffaw.

Shortly, Efran and Minka were dressed and heading down the corridor toward the back door. Stepping out, they saw three long tables arranged in a U shape, still being stocked by kitchen workers. The first two tables were loaded with the children's favorite food and drinks; the last table was almost empty but for several tin contraptions.

Seeing their adoptive parents emerge from the back door, the children screeched and came running toward them, demanding their attention to everything all at once. Efran lifted Toby to throw him in the air a few times while he protested, "Wait! I have something! To show you!" So Efran put him down and took Joshua from the arms of a nearby soldier. The toddler was peeved that he was not likewise tossed up in the air.

First, Efran and Minka went over to the nearly empty table to look at the mechanical contraptions from Froggatt's that Toby, Almund, and Elwell had put together. As the birthday honoree, Toby was entitled to show his first. Kneeling at the table, Efran asked him, "Now, are you ten or thirteen?"

Toby paused to think. "I'm not sure," he admitted.

Flashing a smile up at Minka, Efran said, "Well, we'll settle on ten, since you get higher privileges anyway."

"That works," Toby said. "Now here's mine. Watch. I have to be careful not to overwind it." All the children gathered around, and Minka bent to get a close look as Toby slowly turned a key in the side of a four-wheeled cart about ten inches long. The tin representation of a dog wearing a hat sat in the cart as if to drive it.

When Toby released the key, the wheels on the cart began turning, which made it roll slowly down the table. The children cheered, and Efran grinned. Not only were the wheels rolling, but the dog's tail was wagging. Occasionally, his jaw lowered as though he were barking. "That's very clever," Efran murmured, bending to try to glimpse the movement underneath.

So Toby picked it up by the sides to turn it upside down, careful to leave the wheels free to move. Minka pressed next to Efran to watch gears turn, powered by the gradual release of the wound coil. She murmured in wonder, "Toby, how did you get all that together?"

"It comes with a drawing to show you how the pieces fit," he said. He put the cart back down on the table, where it began to roll again. "It even carries light things." Toby picked up a piece of toffee from another table to place in the cart with the dog, who carried it away. Everyone laughed and clapped, then the cart slowed to a stop.

Noah plucked up the toffee to pop it in his mouth. "Good job."

When the cart's moving parts were still, Efran picked it up again to study it. Joshua made a grab for it, but Efran held it out of reach as he glanced at a man nearby. "Find Gerard." This was one of the Fortress' building engineers (along with Thrupp). The man saluted to run off.

"Now I want to show you mine," Almund said, and everyone looked on attentively as he brought over a pair of figures about eight inches tall, joined at the base. These were painted as a finely dressed man and woman, with the winding mechanism at the back of her full skirt. As he wound them up, Almund said, "It was hard. I had to take it apart twice and put it back together."

Everyone watched as he set the figures down at one end of the long table for them to begin "walking." The onlookers laughed in amazement as the woman rolled forward smoothly while the man's legs pumped up and down. His left hand was permanently attached to his hat, which he raised and lowered continuously. Meanwhile, the woman's head swung in a half-circle from side to side as her parasol twirled over her head. "That's *amazing*, Almund," Minka breathed. He modestly agreed.

Meanwhile, Gerard came up to Efran with an inquiring look. Efran handed him the cart and asked, "Can you replicate that on a larger scale?"

Gerard looked it over, then put it down. "Show me how it works." So Toby wound it just a little so they could all watch the dog ride again. Gerard glanced over at the man and woman walking, then picked up the cart again. "Have you got a schematic, Toby? A drawing of the insides?"

Toby said, "Oh! Yes, sir," and pulled the drawing of the parts from his pocket.

Gerard studied this as well, then picked up the cart again. "May I borrow this?"

Toby looked pained, so Efran reached in his pocket to hand him a royal. "Go buy another."

"All right," Toby grinned.

"Now, show us yours, Elwell," Efran said.

The boy looked down in mild despondence. "Mine isn't nearly as fancy as those two."

Minka cried, "Elwell! There are uses for the simplest things! Show us."

"All right. He doesn't walk or spin," he warned them, placing a fat little man on the table. He was sitting with a great drum between his knees. Elwell wound him with a key in his back, then the man began striking the tin drum with tin sticks. It did produce a nice beat.

Efran and Gerard stared briefly at each other, then Gerard asked, "Have you got a drawing for that, son?" He picked up the drummer to look at the bottom.

"Yes, but it's in the playroom," Elwell said.

Efran gave him a royal. "Go get it."

"If I can find it," Elwell said a little desperately.

"I'll come help you look. I saw you working on it," Jera told him, so those two ran back into the fortress.

Watching them go, Almund cried, "What's wrong with mine?" His walking pair had stopped for a breather.

Shifting Joshua, Efran promptly gave up his last royal. "Go get the drawing."

"I have it here!" Almund said victoriously, surrendering the parchment for the gold coin.

"Have you got a basket over there, please?" Gerard asked, looking toward a kitchen helper who was stocking one of the food tables.

"Yes, take this one," Asti said, handing it over.

By the time Gerard had loaded up the mechanical toys, Elwell and Jera came running out. "Here it is!" he cried, waving the valuable plans.

"I found it on the floor!" Jera crowed as Elwell gave it to the engineer.

"Well, I have something to do in my spare time, now," Gerard said wryly. Efran patted his shoulder as he walked away, and the children turned to raid the snack tables.

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Chapter 16

The party was a success not only for the food and games, but for rides on Kraken, who let the children climb all over him. Also, the boys' profit from the moving toys rekindled the children's interest in their garden plots, resulting in additional harvests for the kitchen and earned income for the harvesters. So Efran authorized a return trip to Froggatt's, who sold out of his mechanical toy kits that day.

Late that afternoon, when the party tables were being dismantled and taken inside, Efran and Minka walked up the lower corridor to deposit a sleepy toddler in the nursery, along with his bunkmate Nakam. Then Efran paused at the foot of the stairs. "Do you . . . want to go see how Tera is doing? You asked to help with her delivery."

Minka sighed. "I saw her and her baby, Tica, and Cyr's baby Isla, and Kelsey's baby Broгна, but Kelsey was asleep at the time. 'Broгна' was the name of the matriarch of Estes' father's clan," she said dreamily.

Efran blinked. "You went to see all of them this morning?"

"Yes, but I had help. I gave them all the baby things in the storage room. Oh!" she suddenly vented. "I forgot about the basket of baby things in the workroom!"

"Leave it there. Estes said they'd raid it as needed, right?" Efran said, studying her.

"Yes," she said. She was settled, composed. He was surprised; he'd been sure that just talking about their babies would make her cry.

"Then, do you want to go finish—resting?" he posed.

She cut her eyes up at him. "All right." So he walked her back to their quarters with an arm around her shoulders, and did remember to lock the door.

Two days later, on August 10th, Commander Wendt sent Lund up to Efran in the workroom to ask him to come down and have a look over the gates. "Yes," Efran said, standing. "What is it?"

Estes and DeWitt were both there today, and looked over in halfhearted curiosity. "Trolls, Captain," Lund said.

Efran froze; his administrators dropped what was in their hands. DeWitt demanded, "Why don't I hear alarm bells?"

"The Commander wasn't sure there was reason, Administrator, which is why he wanted the Captain's input," Lund said, not panicked.

"I'll be right down," Efran said, trotting out to the stairs to descend quickly but carefully. Estes and DeWitt went to the second-floor balcony to look out to the wall gates.

Kraken was waiting at the courtyard gates without saddle or bridle, so Efran just sprinted toward him from the rear to leap onto his back by vaulting over his haunches. Kraken accepted that to begin loping down the switchback with Efran balancing in the center of his back.

Looking down Main, which had cleared of traffic, Efran saw a mass of swaying, flailing trolls clustered at the

closed wall gates. Soldiers had torches and tar pots waiting, should fire arrows be needed, but the men were just watching at the moment. Efran glanced aside where Marguerite was looking on with the Commander.

Drawing up on Kraken, Efran saluted. "Captain Efran reporting as summoned, Commander," he said, studying him and the lady.

"At ease, Captain. Well, they came," Wendt said.

"That looks like the dancing mania," Efran observed. "Is it, Marguerite?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Are they infected with mad sheep disease?" Efran asked her.

"No," she said definitively.

"Well . . ." Efran mused. Then he prompted Kraken toward the gates, about forty feet away. Kraken momentarily resisted, finally obeying with a reluctant huff.

The Abbey defenders fell back as Efran on Kraken drew up to the gates. The faerie trees were holding their trembling branches up as far as possible from the trolls' reach. But with Efran sitting there above them, the trolls closest to the gates began falling down, passed out on the ground.

A wave swept through them from the front to the back, and within minutes the whole group of them, about 60, was flat on their backs, mouths open in troll snoring that made the ground shudder. Efran looked over at Marguerite and Wendt cautiously, and she said, "Congratulations. You stopped the mania among the trolls, as well."

"What . . . do I do with them?" Efran asked, wincing.

Wendt exhaled, "Let's just watch them for now."

Surveying them again, Efran asked, "Marguerite, do you recognize any of them? Gopnik? Or any of those who destroyed your mansion?" As he asked, he studied her. She was still Minka's Auntie, and still elderly, but she had dropped the old lady antics (for want of a better word).

She walked over to the gates to take a closer look. Wendt and a number of the men encompassed her with protection, and Efran slid down off Kraken. "No," she said. "In fact, these are relatively young, and some young females are with them."

"Seriously?" Efran breathed.

"They need water," Marguerite said, cutting her eyes up at him in a manner disturbingly like Minka's.

Efran expelled something like a whine. "How do we give them water when they're out like that?"

"Just douse them," she said.

Efran gripped the gate balusters to lean on them in dismay. "Water jars!" he called. Only a few men peeled away to go get them at first, then more followed. And only one or two noticed Minka riding up on Rose.

Efran took up the first two jars, instructing, "Open the gates. Narrowly."

One gatesman unlocked them so that Efran could slip out. "Volunteers are welcome to join me," he said almost sardonically. So Minka promptly dismounted to pick up a heavy water jar and make for the gate.

Several men held up hands to block her way, but Marguerite said, "Let her through." At this time, Efran was in the midst of the front line of trolls, upending his jar in a wave over them. Minka slipped out of the gate to follow, pouring out a flow as best as she could control it. Other men pushed out with jars just to have an excuse to stand over her. But once out of the gates, they had to administer their water, as well.

The trolls began stirring, sitting up, weaving as they looked around. The troll nearest Minka looked up at her, then put a gnarly hand out to touch her riding skirt. Efran looked over for the first time to see Minka here. She leaned down to the relatively small troll to help it stand. "Oh, my, your dress is all torn"—the "dress" being an unknown, coarse material in an indefinable shape. "You must have walked for quite a while. Do you need more water?" Minka asked it. The troll, only inches taller than she, blinked at her.

Minka turned to ask, "Can we get more water over here? Auntie, what should we give them to eat?"

"No meat," Marguerite said. "If you want to domesticate them, give them grains, fish, insects. They'll even eat grass if they're very hungry."

The troll beside Minka reached down to pull up a weed growing under the gate. This the troll stuffed in its mouth and chewed like a cow. All the while, it was pensively regarding Minka.

Meanwhile, the men brought more water jars which they upturned over the trolls, most of whom were awake by now. Two of Firmin's helpers came up with bushels, one saying, "These 'ere turnips has gone bitter on us. Think they'll eat 'em?"

"Oh, yes, put them out there," Marguerite said. So the bushels were passed over the gate for the men to begin handing them out. Minka handed one to the troll beside her, who took it to chomp down on it.

Efran was right beside her, watching. Once the turnips had disappeared, other merchants sent up baskets of old, damaged, or downright spoiled fruits and vegetables, which quickly disappeared in large troll mouths. They began ranging over the meadow to pluck heads of grass, or snatch up grasshoppers and caterpillars.

Averne sent over a half dozen loaves of old and moldy bread. Minka broke off a chunk to give to her new friend, who swallowed it practically whole, watching her with its black eyes the whole time. This made Efran very nervous, but it was completely docile. Marguerite came over to study it and the other trolls through the gate for a while, saying nothing.

As the afternoon wore on, the trolls began dispersing, one large group heading north again. A few trolls broke off to head northeast, and a very few began following the Passage north. (Trolls generally avoid bodies of water, as they can't swim, but sink decisively.) The men reentered the wall gates, and Efran made Minka come back in.

But she looked back at her troll friend, who was watching her through the gate balusters. Finally, it sat at the edge of the road. A few men fed it bread, which it accepted, and another man set a water jar out beside it, which it drank from. But as long as Minka was in view, it watched her.

"Oh, Efran," she began to plead, turning to him.

“No,” he said. “For all we know, it could be looking at you as dessert.”

“I don’t think so,” she said, sulking.

“Come in now. It’s getting late,” he said. Twilight was creeping over them.

“But it’s all alone. It’s the only one left out there,” she said, pitying.

“And by morning, it will be gone,” he said.

Dismally, she looked toward Marguerite for help, but she was talking to the Commander. She paused to smile reassuringly at Minka, which did not relieve her at all. But she condescended to climb back up on Rose. As they rode to the switchback, Minka looked one last time at the lump on the edge of the road outside the gates.

The following morning, August 11th, Efran was in the workroom early to update Estes and DeWitt on what they might have missed over the past few days. But first he remembered to ask, “How are your babies? And Tera? Kelsey?”

“Tera’s a champion,” DeWitt said flatly. “I have to tell you, that was the first time I’d ever witnessed a birth, and I almost passed out once or twice. Baby Tica is eating, sleeping, and pooping the most unbelievable stuff I’ve ever seen. It’s a whole new experience for me.” He looked believably dazed.

Efran, laughing, looked to Estes, who agreed. “I’ve been through this with Malan, but it’s like—I didn’t remember any of it the second time around. I just trusted Bethune and stayed out of the way. Frankly, I don’t know how women do it.”

Efran nodded, remembering the trauma of Joshua’s birth. Adele had recovered, but, she’d never be able to have any more children—With a jolt, Efran remembered that Adele no longer existed. There was only baby Ruth.

He was contemplating that when Minka appeared at the door. She said almost accusingly, “It’s still there.”

Estes and DeWitt looked inquiringly to Efran, who explained, “Minka has a new pet.” Then he told her, “We’re going to ask Marguerite what she knows, and then we’ll think about the best thing to do.”

“The horses are in the courtyard,” she said coolly, turning away. Efran shot a look to his administrators, who were watching in amusement. Then he turned to follow her down the stairs.

She was taking them too rapidly for his comfort, so he called, “Slow down.”

“You’re just dragging your feet,” she said, exiting to the corridor.

He lengthened his stride to catch her arm, turning her. “Haven’t I always done what you wanted?” he asked quietly.

“This is different,” she said sulkily.

“Yes, it’s a little more dangerous. Trolls eat people,” he whispered. She looked unrepentant.

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Chapter 17

Sighing, Efran went out with Minka to the courtyard, where Kraken, all geared up, looked over. *Which of us is carrying the troll?* Rose, also saddled, turned her head.

“Neither,” Efran laughed, and Kraken shook his mane vigorously.

He and Minka mounted, but he led over to the new switchback. “We’re going to ask your auntie what she knows about it first.” She glanced at him from under her brows.

On the way down, she looked very close to rebelling against his precautions, but ultimately dismounted to go to the door of the chapel. She told Eryk, “Leave the horses here, please; we’re coming right back for them.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said. She paused, almost asking him about Windry, but decided this was probably not the best time.

Efran joined her at the door to tell Hartshough, “We won’t come in right now; Minka is anxious to get to the wall gates. We’d just like to hear what Marguerite can tell us about the troll that’s still there.”

“I’ll ask immediately, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said.

“Yes, thank you,” Efran said, glancing down at Minka to make sure she didn’t ride off without him.

Shortly, Hartshough returned to say, “Lady Marguerite says that as far as she can tell, it’s a young female.”

“Ah. Could it be cloaking itself or disguising itself?” Efran asked.

“The lady does not seem to think so, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said gravely.

“All right, we’re counting on that, then,” Efran said, wishing the reassurance could have been a little more definitive. He turned to see Minka already mounting again. “Wait for me,” he warned her.

“A young female,” she repeated.

“Who, as a class, are very dangerous,” he said, lowering his face at her while he climbed up on Kraken’s saddle. She scoffed at him, but Kraken said, *You see how much harder it is to ride with all this leather?*

“Shut up,” he said. When Minka turned wide-eyed to him, he said, “That was meant for Kraken.” She tried to look offended anyway, but he wasn’t fooled.

They walked their horses toward the gates, as there was no reason to hurry. Upon their approach, the young female troll stood to walk along the gates to the center, grasping the balusters. Minka dismounted to ask the gate guards, “Has she had anything to eat this morning?”

Noting the pronoun, Lambdin said, “Yes, Lady Minka, she’s been given water, bread, and a little fish that was

left over from yesterday.”

Minka nodded, then walked over to where the troll stood. They just looked at each other a moment. Minka studied the bulbous red nose, the grotesquely fat lips, the mass of wiry hair, heavy eyebrows, and small black eyes. Then she said, “My name is Minka.”

The troll tentatively put out a large hand that was attached to a skinny arm. She touched Minka’s hair through the balusters, then withdrew her hand to sit at the gates almost in despondence. Minka looked back at Efran with large, commanding eyes. Dropping his shoulders, he groaned, “Open the gates.”

Minka stepped back for the men to comply. With the inward movement of the gates, the troll started and scampered backward on all fours. When they stopped moving, being open just enough for the troll to enter, she remained hunched in the middle of the road.

So Minka went out to stand over her and take her hand. “Stand up,” she instructed, pulling, and the troll got to her feet. The way her bony knees knocked together was almost comical. “Come,” Minka said, turning to pull her along through the gates.

The troll followed reluctantly, cringing away from the men with their weapons. Closing the gates again, the soldiers watched in alert curiosity. Lwoff, who had been drawn from the hilltop by the sight of a solitary troll at the gates, monitored all this from the sidewalk.

Minka led the troll toward Rose, who skittered violently, almost bolting. “That’s all right. We’ll walk. We’re going up there,” Minka said, pointing to the white fortress at the top of the hill. The troll stared earnestly at her pointing finger. Spectators lined the sidewalks on both sides of Main.

Muttering under his breath, Efran hoisted himself onto Kraken. Then he told him, “I’ll give you a choice. You can carry a troll, or learn how to herd cattle.” Kraken bucked twice in nervous aggravation, then said, *I’m ready.*

“Put her up behind me,” Efran said to the air. The men looked at each other, uncertain as to who should carry out this command. Then Aceto walked over to reach for the troll. She hissed, baring her teeth and crouching with fingers clawed. Aceto backed away.

So Lwoff came over to bend before the creature as it cringed in the middle of the street, carts and horses giving her a wide space. “Hiya, now, c’mon,” he said, taking her by the hair with one hand. She balled herself up tightly, hiding her face.

Lwoff glanced up to say, “If you’ll go ahead and mount, Lady Minka, ’twill make it a tad easier. She seems drawn to you.” Minka scrambled up onto her horse and looked over.

With a hand firmly gripping the troll’s hair, Lwoff reached down his other hand to grasp her lower leg and lift her. She retained the shape of a lumpy ball which he swung up behind Efran’s saddle. “No stone touch,” Lwoff observed. Minka looked quickly at Efran, who didn’t meet her eyes.

Kraken twitched warningly under the troll bundle, and Efran said, “Cattle it is, then?”

Kraken stilled while Lwoff pressed down on the folded-leg lump to center it on the haunches. Then he separated out one clawed hand to fasten the knobby fingers on one side of the cantle, and wrestled the other hand to clutch the other side. “A lot of trolls have claws for fingernails. She’s just got the nails, long but not claws,” Lwoff observed conversationally.

“So she’s not going to scratch me,” Minka said loftily.

“Not likely, Lady Minka,” Lwoff said. “They’re more likely to bite, anyway.”

“Is that right,” Efran said flatly, and Minka jutted her jaw stubbornly.

With a few more pats and adjustments, Lwoff nodded. “All righty, you look good to go, Cap’n. I wouldn’t lope, ’twere I you.”

“We’ll walk from here. Thank you, Lwoff. Now please follow us up so that we can remove it in the courtyard,” Efran said.

“Ayah, Cap’n,” Lwoff nodded. He patted the lump of troll, which shuddered fearfully. “You’re okay there, girl.”

Minka turned Rose to walk beside Lwoff while he ascended the switchback on foot behind Efran. “Lwoff, that was amazing! I knew you had experience with a lot of strange animals, but how did you ever learn about trolls?” she demanded.

“Eh, I stumbled into a troll troop once or twice, Lady Minka. Had to be swift on the uptake to stay alive, you know,” he said easily. He had a limp from an old injury to prove his point.

“What did you learn that kept you alive around them?” she asked.

“Troll preferences. They can’t stand anything sweet, so I found some honeysuckle to roll in and wrap around my neck. They’re careless, and their eyesight’s not that good, so I covered myself with branches sticking all out of my clothes, and crept out of their troop a few inches at a time,” Lwoff said easily.

“Oh, dear. How can we help this one?” Minka asked. Efran sighed, shaking his head.

“It’s to be seen whether you can at all, Lady Minka. They have whole different thought patterns from people. But if yer aiming to keep ’er on the Lands, be careful that she’s fed no meat, not even chicken. Keep an eye on ’er all the time; confine ’er at night, as that’s when they get restless. But to be honest with you, Lady Minka, I don’t even know if it’s possible,” Lwoff said.

“I understand. But then, why do you think she waited at the gates, and stared at me so much?” Minka asked.

“Er, as a snack?” he posed, and Efran barked out something in agreement. At Minka’s black look, Lwoff said, “Sorry, Lady Minka, I just don’t know what else could be knockin’ around the cobwebby insides of that skull.”

“All right, Lwoff, I respect your knowledge, and I’ll be careful. I don’t want to get eaten, either, but I don’t think that’s it,” she said stubbornly.

“You have deep insights, Lady; that’s true, but do mind yer husband on this,” Lwoff lectured. Efran glanced back at them. The troll had been riding stiffly but still. Kraken kicked out a back leg occasionally, but that was all.

The courtyard guards had the gates standing open for them, and stood back as the party entered. Men collected at a distance to look on. Minka quickly dismounted Rose, who ran back to the stables by herself. Efran adroitly swung down off the saddle around the troll. Then he, Minka, and Lwoff looked at the thing still clutching the cantle so tightly that its fingers indented the leather.

“Pshaw, beastie,” Lwoff muttered as he began unfastening the saddle girth.

Efran said, “Let me do that; you get a hold on it. Her.”

“Aye, Cap’n,” Lwoff agreed.

So while Efran unfastened the saddle to place it on the ground, Lwoff jointly lifted the troll by its hair and leg to set it behind the saddle. He, Efran, and a number of men then regarded the configuration. Kraken stepped back to shake himself thoroughly, then look at the disgusting thing he had carried. The troll abruptly let go of the saddle to fold her arms around herself, keeping tightly balled up. Two rows of indents remained in the cantle.

“She’s scared,” Minka said. She came over to work her hand into the ball under the troll’s right shoulder and pull up. “Come on, I want to show you around. It’s all right; I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

The ball slowly began to sag, and the wiry head raised up to tentatively turn this way and that. “Stand up,” Minka insisted, pulling on the upper arm. The troll stood on shaky, skinny, knock-kneed legs. “Now. We’re going around to the back grounds. There are a lot of people, but they’ll just stare. That’s all right; they’ll stare at me, too. But they won’t hurt you,” Minka lectured, pulling her along. The troll shuffled beside her, blinking down at the hand that Minka grasped.

Efran and Lwoff followed close behind them, as did Kraken and several off-duty men. Hunched over, the troll looked back at them repeatedly, but Minka said, “As long as you don’t bite me, they won’t bother you.”

Passing the northwest corner of the fortress, they skirted the training pens. Here, the horses reared and whinnied in panic, lunging back to the stables. The sparring groups paused their drills to watch, and the archers lowered their bows as they turned to look. But Lwoff looked toward the armory in the woods. “My play time’s up, Captain; back to duty.”

“Yes, thank you, Lwoff. We may come dig you out again,” Efran said. Lwoff chuckled, saluting, and made for the gate in his funny half-limp stride.

The children were just now coming out from classes. Seeing Efran and Minka, they began running over to them, then slowed at the sight of the guest. When they saw clearly what it was, some of the younger children cried out, retreating to Tourjee and the grown-up workers in the gardens. But Toby, Alcmund, Noah, Chorro, Elwell, Calix and Hassie approached cautiously.

Tiras, holding Joshua, stayed back despite Joshua’s demand to advance: “Unh!” Tiras was watching the Captain for his word.

Led by Toby, the older children came within speaking distance. Toby said carefully, “Minka, is this a troll?”

“Yes, Toby,” she said. “She wanted to come look around, but she’s scared.” The troll was intently regarding the children, her small black eyes peering out from under thick brows.

“What’s her name?” Toby asked guardedly.

Minka shrugged, but the troll said, “Nibor.”

Minka—and everyone else—looked at her quickly. Concentrating, Toby said, “Hello, Nibor. I am Toby.” And he

held out his hand. Efran started to sweat, but did not interfere with this show of courtesy and courage.

Nibor stared hard at his empty hand, then slowly extended a knuckle to barely touch him. Toby grasped the hand to shake it, which mildly confounded the troll. Then he dropped it and asked, “Do you want to play?”

Minka waited a moment; when there was no answer, she said, “Thank you, Toby; she might need to just watch you for a while.”

“All right,” Toby said. He checked Efran, who nodded, then turned with the others to run back to the gardens.

Calix, however, paused to look at Nibor’s flat, spreading feet. “They have shoes here,” he informed her. Minka smiled warmly at him, and he went off after the others. Nibor blinked.

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Chapter 18

After the children had run off, Efran gestured to Tiras. He brought over Joshua, who was insistent in his demands to see the new thing up close. Efran took him in arm, but only followed as Minka led Nibor to the bench under the walnut tree. “We’ll sit here a moment and just look around. How’s that?” Minka asked. She sat to pull Nibor down beside her. Efran, with Joshua, sat on Minka’s other side. The toddler leaned far over to scrutinize the stranger.

Tiras and Suco stood behind the bench while Martyn casually sat at Minka’s feet, between her and the troll. Kraken sprawled on the grass in front of them to roll. The grass was fairly worn down to dirt by this time, as it was a favorite spot. Nibor regarded all this warily, but more than one man noted the absence of aggression.

Although she was certainly looking around and sniffing, the soldiers returned to their drills and the workers their duties. However, Estes and DeWitt came strolling out of the back door. The troll lowered her head in their direction, sniffing, and Minka thought Nibor could discern that these were men of authority. DeWitt said, “Hello, Efran. Minka. What’ve you got here?”

Minka said, “DeWitt, Estes, this is Nibor. She, ah, just wanted to come see the hilltop.”

Efran said, “Toby got her name out of her.”

“Really?” DeWitt asked rhetorically. “Well. We’re glad to have you visit, Nibor.”

Glancing over to the playing children, Estes asked Efran, “Is she alone?”

“Yes, apparently so. The rest left and she lingered by the gates. Minka compelled her to come in,” Efran said dryly.

Estes looked interested. “She stayed all night at the gates after the others had left?”

Efran said, “Yes. Why?”

Estes studied her. “They’re pack animals, you know—they stay strictly in troops. A troll may be driven out of a troop for some reason, but if they don’t find another to live with, they’ll die.” Minka looked up quickly.

Efran glanced at the men around them. “I didn’t notice any of them rejecting her. They just left while she stayed. Was anyone else down at the gates last night?”

“I was, Captain,” Leneghan said. “From what I saw, it’s as you say. They just seemed to ignore her.”

“I know how that goes,” Minka said, patting her hand. Nibor studied Minka’s hand, then lifted gnarly knuckles to pat it awkwardly in return. Minka raised her eyes to make sure that everyone around saw it.

Efran looked off, sighing, “Minka’s pets.”

But DeWitt murmured, “I wonder if that means that she wasn’t part of their troop to begin with.”

“There wasn’t just one, but at least three distinct troops,” Efran said thoughtfully. “After coming out of the mania, they ate and rested, then went off in different directions.”

“And she was all alone,” Estes repeated.

“Yes, clearly,” Efran said. Minka looked vindicated.

Estes knelt before Nibor, who lowered her head in fear. He asked, “May I look in your mouth?”

She scrunched down, but her jaw dropped slightly. Efran sucked in a breath as Estes carefully reached out to raise a corner of her upper lip with his thumb. Then he held her jaw to lift the other side of her lip. And he sat back on his heels while she shut her mouth tightly.

“Well, that’s interesting,” Estes said, standing. “Her canines, the eye teeth—” this he defined by poking his own right top canine—“are not normal troll fangs; they’re shaped more like human canines.”

“Which means that she doesn’t eat people,” Minka said definitively, crossing her arms.

Estes was expressing tentative agreement when DeWitt said, “I’m not doubting you, Estes, but—how do you know about troll teeth?”

“Captain Gores gave me a couple of cadavers to study,” he said wryly, and Efran nodded in remembrance. “That was before Wirrin Valley, obviously,” Estes added. This was the battle with trolls in which Captain Gores was killed. Efran looked off, his jaw tightening.

They all looked as Nibor slid slowly off the bench. She avoided brushing Martyn, who merely watched as she began creeping toward Kraken on hands and feet. He was lying on his side with his eyes closed. No one moved while Nibor drew up beside him. She reached out a hand to tentatively stroke his haunches. Kraken raised his head to have a look. She paused, but when he did nothing, she carefully resumed stroking his silky black coat. Kraken watched her for a while, then laid his head back down, sighing. A petting was a petting.

She scooted behind him to begin stroking down his neck to his back. She fingered his mane, then laid her head on his back to pat him awkwardly.

“Unh! Unh!” Joshua ordered, striving to get down from Efran’s lap to join her. His father held on to him for now.

Nakam, finally let out of the fortress, ran to do his business in the trees before coming over to investigate this grouping. Nibor raised up in alarm as he sniffed her, quivering in excitement. Because there seemed to be no point in barking, he didn't. But it was insufferable that he should not share in a petting, so he jumped up to sit on Kraken's side in front of her face expectantly. She rested her hand hesitantly beside the dog.

Kraken twitched under her knuckles, but that was all. When Nibor was not fast enough administering the pats, Nakam pawed her hand. So she lifted it to feel his soft, hairless skin. That being a good start, Nakam sat panting on Kraken's back, eyes half-closed, while Nibor ran a large, clumsy hand over him.

Arms still crossed, Minka said, "She certainly acts more like a little girl than a troll, doesn't she?"

"Stop gloating," Efran said mildly.

"There's a lot we don't know, Minka. We still have to be careful," Estes reminded her.

"I know," she admitted, eyes downcast.

"But I thought—" DeWitt began, and paused. They all looked at him, and he said carefully, "My understanding was that trolls' sense of touch is poor because of their thick, warty skin. It also explains why they're relatively unmoved by pain. So, it seems out of character for her to enjoy the feel of fur and skin."

Considering this, Estes went over to crouch in front of Nibor again. She stopped petting Nakam at once. Estes said, "Since you let me look in your mouth, may I look at your hand?"

She looked indecisively at the guilty hand, then put it out as if to be cut off. Minka asked pointedly, "Do most trolls understand people talk?"

DeWitt replied, "I think it depends on the troop, Minka." He was watching Estes take Nibor's hand.

He turned it palm up to run his fingers over the skin. His brows arched. "Yes, it has the roughness of a workman's, but not that of your standard troll." Releasing her hand, he bent to look in her face. "Where are you from, Nibor?"

She looked frightened, then, scrunching down almost into a ball again. Minka breathed, "She ran away."

"Perhaps," Estes acknowledged, standing. "Well. This is interesting. The only other thing I know—which I don't have any way of testing out on her—is that troll ears have a peculiar weakness to sounds in a certain range. Some species of hawks and screamers can cause them to bleed from the ears, and even faint or die."

The others thought about that, then Estes said, "Let me hear of developments."

"Yes, me too," DeWitt agreed, joining him to return to the fortress.

Most of the onlookers returned to their duties at that time, as well. But Martyn, Tiras, and Suco remained as they were. Nibor fell back when Kraken unexpectedly got to his feet to shake himself, but that was because a ball was sailing toward them. It hit the ground about six feet in front of Nibor, then rolled practically into her lap. She stared down at it.

"Throw it back!" Noah called. She looked up, blinking, as all the children urged her to throw the ball to them.

Martyn scooted forward to pick up the ball and put it in her hands. Then he pantomimed throwing it. “Throw the ball,” he urged her.

To get her started, he raised her hands over her head with the ball. Grinning, Minka cried, “Throw it, Nibor!” With a frozen face, Nibor threw the ball—not hard or well, but to the general area. Hassie outran Noah for it, then threw it back to the troll. When she got up to retrieve it, all the children were calling at her to throw it back.

She did. So then they called her to come play with them. Panicky, she looked at Minka, who said, “Oh, yes, Nibor! Let’s go—” She had started to get up, but Efran slid an arm around her waist. She turned to him, pouting, but he only smiled at her.

Meanwhile, Noah and Jera ran up to grab Nibor’s hands and run her back to their ball circle. There, they threw the ball to her and each other. She got bonked in the face a few times when she was not quick enough to get her hands up, but it didn’t appear to hurt her. She just learned to keep her hands in front of her face to smack away the oncoming ball with jerky troll movements. This was fine, because the other children got a lot of catching practice.

Efran remarked, “So, our girl troll plays catch with the other children.” Joshua was watching them from his lap in hopeless longing.

“Why wouldn’t you let me play?” Minka demanded in outrage.

“It’s fine for her to get hit in the face, but not you,” he said, with his arm still snug around her.

Suco, behind the bench, said, “Look at the second-floor window, Captain.”

They all looked to see DeWitt, Estes, Koschat, and a few others watching the troll play on the back grounds. Martyn remarked, “When I was at Sasany Fields under Master Crowe, we fought off a few troll attacks which included some young ones. We had no choice but to kill them, some smaller than her, even—they were deadly. The troll elders liked to use them against Southerners, because they always hesitated to hurt children of any kind, especially little girls. So while they hesitated, the little girls killed them. When the troll elders figured out that Polonti killed anything coming at us, they stopped wasting them on us.”

Nodding toward the ball circle, Efran said, “In other words, this is not normal troll behavior.”

“Not by a long shot, Captain,” Martyn said.

Minka, who had gotten over being vindicated, wondered, “What do we do with her at dinner? She must be getting hungry.”

“We can’t take her to the dining hall, with all the meat,” Efran said.

“And where will she sleep?” she asked, jumping ahead.

“Not with the children,” Efran said instantly.

“No, I know, but then, where?” Minka asked.

“She’ll have to be confined,” Efran mused.

“Where?” Minka asked.

“Some place we can lock her up,” he said.

“Efran, you’re not going to put her in a cell at the barracks,” she said, offended.

Suddenly the object of discussion ran up to them—specifically, Minka—to grunt at her in anxiety, fists at her lower parts. “She’s asking where to evacuate,” Minka said in wonder.

Efran said, “Suco, take her to the latrine over there. Then stick her in a water stall, dress and all.”

“Yes, Captain,” Suco said grimly. He stepped out from behind the bench to wave her forward. “Come!” She went with him right away.

Martyn was shaking his head. “I’ve never known a troll—child, boy or girl—who would let themselves be taken by a Polonti to evacuate. Or bathe. Or do anything. I don’t know what kind of troll this is, but it’s new to me.”

Efran was thinking while Minka watched Suco prompt Nibor into a latrine stall at the far edge of the grounds and stand outside it, hands on his hips.

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Chapter 19

By the time Suco returned with a moderately wet, minimally clean troll girl, Efran and Minka had settled on a plan. While Minka talked to the Librarian, Efran had soldiers bring a vegetarian dinner with water, a chamber pot, and a mattress into the library (mostly to protect the parquet wood floor, in his thinking).

Minka told the Librarian, “Thank you so much; I hope we come up with a better idea for the rest of her stay, however long that is. If there are any problems, you must tell me so that we don’t inconvenience you.”

“You are most welcome, Lady Minka. I shall not be inconvenienced in the slightest.” The Librarian then turned to Nibor, who stood paralyzed at the door of the library. “Please come in and sit for your dinner, Nibor.” In his black suit, with his white hair and humanlike black eyes, he must have looked to be something out of a hell for trolls.

Minka lugged her to the table and made her sit, but she did not take her eyes off the fearsome Librarian. So he reached down for a book. Opening it, he sat across from her and said, “Here. I always enjoy a book with dinner. These verses may put you at ease.” And he began reading,

““Stand back ye wretches!
Beware the tricks
Of Tediousness,
These wretches to bless.
Make room, I say,

Round every way!
This way! That way!
What care I what way?
Before me, behind me,
Round about wind me!
Now I begin
To sweat in my skin.
Now am I nimble
To make them tremble.
Bash head! Bash brain!
The knaves are slain.
All that I hit.
Where art thou, Wit?
Thou art but dead;
Off go thy head
At the first blow.
Ho, ho! Ho, ho!”

By the time he had read through that verse, Nibor was eating cheerfully (for a troll). Slightly perturbed, Minka looked at the title of the volume: *Poems for Trolls of All Ages*. With that, she was persuaded that their guest was in good hands.

When she and Efran went into the dining hall to seat themselves, the children all ran over to demand where the girl troll was. Efran explained to them that she was being isolated for the evening so that she wouldn't get hurt or get in trouble wandering around at night.

They accepted this, going to their own places to eat. While Efran received his ham steak and Minka her rice pudding, Ella observed, “Where did she come from? It took us forever to get the foals back out to the pens.”

She was sitting to Efran's left, with her husband Quennel to her left. Jehan, Coish, Tourse and Truro had secured places across from Efran and next to Minka tonight (which seats were often left up for grabs when the children wandered). Other men gathered behind them to hear the Captain give a true and complete account of Minka's salvaging the troll from outside the gates.

They listened in amazement. Efran looked at Tourse, sitting across from Minka, to say, “Aside from Estes, you're the one with the most troll experience in our regiment. What do you get from all this?”

Tourse thought about that while he took a swig of mild ale. But Minka demanded, “Where is Racheal?”—his wife.

“Girls' night out, Lady Minka,” he smiled. “But as to the Captain's question, this is like nothing I've ever seen from a troll. Therefore, she must have been drawn here.”

“By whom?” Efran asked quickly.

“Not an enemy. She has something to do here,” Tourse said. He looked pensively at Minka. “Your instincts are uncanny, Lady Minka.”

She was studying Tourse when Jehan blurted, “A girl troll. What can a girl troll do?”

“You never know,” Minka whispered. Efran inhaled, leaning back. So he almost fell off the bench.

The next morning, August 12th, Efran and Minka were both up early. Minka let Nakam out to feed him his morning scraps, and Efran collected Joshua from the nursery, then all three went to the door of the library to look in. Efran asked the Librarian, “How did she—?” He paused as they studied the mattress sitting up on its side to enclose a corner of the library.

“Good morning, Lord Efran, Lady Minka. And Joshua! Ah, you see the sleep tent which our guest erected,” the Librarian said.

Minka went over to pull the mattress away just an inch, so as to look down behind it. She released it to return to Efran’s side. “She’s all balled up, asleep,” she reported.

“Yes, and while we’ll still have Law class this morning, I don’t think we’ll disturb her. She may be very tired,” the Librarian said.

Efran asked warily, “Why would she be very tired this morning?”

“Sir Nomus took her into the Hall of Memories last night, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said.

“Wha—?” Efran gaped.

Minka looked confounded. “The Hall of Memories. What all did she see?”

The Librarian replied, “I do not know, Lady Minka; I did not accompany them. But she was gone for most of the night.”

Minka repeated “*most of the night*” soundlessly, but Efran muttered, “I don’t understand. What could she retain of it in that cobwebby skull of hers? It’s—overwhelming.”

“True, Lord Efran, but I have no knowledge to answer your question,” the Librarian said.

Efran turned to say, “Sir Nomus, may we have a word with you?”

After they had waited silently a few moments, the Atticitian appeared from the hidden door of the second library to bow. “Yes, Lord Efran, how may I be of service to you?” Wearing his suit of old written parchment, he doffed his top hat of the same material, with its faded red velvet band.

Efran was momentarily thrown off by this show of courtesy. The Atticitian normally appeared to consider himself the most senior resident of the fortress, so to speak. “Yes, Sir Nomus, may I ask—why you took Nibor into the Hall of Memories?”

“Yes, Lord Efran, you may, the reason being that I was instructed to,” Nomus said. He then turned to Minka. “Good morning, Lady Minka. I trust you are well?”

“Very much so, thank you, Sir Nomus. We’re just consumed with curiosity about our guest, and who she is, and where she came from, and what it is she’s supposed to do here,” Minka spilled out.

“Ah. Those are the questions we would all like answered, Lady Minka, but as of yet, they have not been,” the Atticitian replied.

Efran and Minka stared at him. Efran slowly repeated, “. . . that you would *all* like answered.”

“Yes, Lord Efran. This is unprecedented in the history of the Fortress,” Sir Nomus said.

Efran demanded, “Something else unprecedented? In the forty-seven hundred years that the fortress has stood, it’s never been subjected to a bog *or* a strange troll touring the Hall of Memories?”

“That is correct, Lord Efran. Hitherto, I have only shown the Hall to the highest echelons of Fortress leadership,” Sir Nomus said.

“And no one knows why a girl troll suddenly gets the tour,” Efran repeated.

“No, Lord Efran, we don’t know. But it is unquestionably a command from the Top,” Nomus said. “Also, I’ve been instructed to remind you that the Hall of Memories can cross realms.”

“The Hall of Memories can cross realms,” Efran repeated. “I saw that you can open the Firmament anywhere, as you did in Sasany Fields. But the Hall of Memories can cross realms, as well.”

“That is correct, Lord Efran,” Nomus said.

“Well,” Efran said, looking blankly at the mattress in the corner. “This is—interesting. Thank you, Sir Nomus.” The Atticitian bowed and faded back into the hidden library. Disoriented, Efran told the Librarian, “Please summon us, or one of us, if our guest needs attention.”

“Certainly, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said with another bow. “Lady Minka, it is almost time for Law class. Shall you—?”

“Yes, I’m right here,” she said, sitting at the table.

“Very good.” Efran turned out with Joshua to shortly appear in the workroom and report to his flabbergasted administrators.

That afternoon, three of the Pamua riders returned from the camp at Sasany Fields. Commander Wendt sent a query up to Efran: would he like to hear their report? Efran would. So he immediately rode Kraken bareback down to Barracks A.

Leaving Kraken to fend for himself at the water trough, Efran reminded him, “I’d better be able to find you when I come out again.”

Kraken spread his lips at him, and Efran entered the barracks to salute the Second Gabriel: “Captain Efran reporting as summoned.”

As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, Efran was required to salute no one. But going by strict military protocol, the Second outranked him now. Efran wished to regard this while Gabriel wished to ignore it. “Back here, Captain,” he said, opening the door to the conference room. He then followed Efran in to shut the door behind them.

Efran began to salute Wendt when the Commander said, “Thank you for coming, Efran. Have a seat.”

Acknowledging that, Efran nodded at the three Pamua riders who had stood from their plates to salute him. Waving them down, Efran sat to say, “You must have turned right around to ride back from the camp as soon as you got there.”

“Yes, Captain,” the leader, Musco, said. “When we come, we find the prisoner Alberon escapes the bath house. He is not found in camp.”

“Aha,” Efran said quietly. Looking at Wendt, he ventured, “Then when Wyse died, Alberon was released from his rôle as conduit, and . . . struck out on his own?”

“That appears to be the case,” Wendt said.

To Musco, Efran said, “But the three Treasury robbers are still there?”

“Yes, Captain,” Musco said.

Efran looked off to murmur, “Is Alberon regaining power, then?”

Wendt said, “I’ve sent that question to Lady Marguerite; we’re awaiting her reply.”

Efran nodded. “Then we wait.” This they did, during which time Gabriel offered Efran an ale, which he accepted.

He was taking a swig when there was a brief knock on the door before it opened. Lund saluted. “Commander, the Lady Marguerite says that she can see or hear nothing of Alberon, and if he has escaped, he is either dead or has gained great power. She suspects that he is not dead.”

“Ah. So do we all,” Wendt said. “Dismissed.”

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Chapter 20

Lund backed out to shut the door again, and Wendt looked wryly at Efran. “At least we know he’s on his way.”

“No doubt,” Efran agreed. He stood. “Which I had better go tell our administrators.”

As he turned to leave, Wendt said, “I’ll step out with you, Efran. As you were,” he nodded to the riders and his Second.

Efran blinked. Because this was unusual, he grew tense walking out with the Commander. Then he stopped to watch Kraken playing in the water trough, which was down two-thirds from its usual volume. But Efran just patted Kraken’s neck as Wendt stepped beside him, glancing around. “Efran, Marguerite and I are married.”

Efran nodded vacantly. Wendt continued, “We’re keeping it quiet for now, but Marguerite wanted you and Minka to know. Please don’t tell anyone else yet.”

“All right,” Efran said. “That’s no problem. Minka will be very excited, but she can keep quiet. She rambles, but, she can keep secrets. I’m fairly sure of it, anyway,” he rambled blankly.

“That’s good. Thank you, Efran.” Wendt patted his arm and returned to the barracks.

Efran unconsciously began walking up Main toward the hill with Kraken following alongside. “Married,” Efran whispered. He knew that Marguerite’s true appearance was not that of an old lady, but— “She must be very beautiful,” he murmured, gulping.

Then he stopped at an empty crosswalk to look pensively at Kraken, who raised his ears. “She had better not get pregnant,” he groaned, grasping Kraken’s mane to remount.

He rode Kraken on up to the fortress courtyard, then dismounted and slapped his haunches to send him around to the back. From there, Efran staggered up the steps into the fortress. He checked his quarters, but Minka was not there. He looked into the library to see only the Librarian, who bowed and said, “Our visitor remains asleep, Lord Efran.”

He looked blankly at the mattress standing on its side in the corner, then went to the stairs and ascended to the second-floor workroom. Here, he entered and shut the door behind him. DeWitt and Estes looked at him in alarm. Estes asked, “Efran, what is it? What happened?”

Efran sat in his chair to hold his head, gently rocking. “Wendt and Marguerite are married. She’s faerie, you know, and the old lady is just an appearance. She must be very beautiful. But I’m not supposed to tell anyone but Minka, only I don’t know where she is right now. I will have to tell her. I think she’ll be happy, but Marguerite had better not get pregnant. You can’t tell anyone. I’m not supposed to tell you.”

There was stark silence for a few seconds, then DeWitt said carefully, “We won’t tell anyone, Efran. Ah, thank you for confiding in us. But, why does this upset you so much?”

Efran sat up to think about that. “Yes, why?” he asked himself. “Why do I care? A married man can still be Commander; it shouldn’t distract him at all, should it? Wendt’s a normal man; he’s entitled to be married if he wants to be. You and Estes are married, and that doesn’t affect your work at all but commanding an army is different; it requires *total dedication*,” he finished vehemently.

He broke off for a moment, staring at the faerie tree. “How will Minka take it? She’ll want to be happy for her auntie, but, all of a sudden, she’s not just Minka’s anymore; she has someone else to love. That’s all right, isn’t it? She can still love Minka, but it’s different when she has a husband who will demand more of her time and attention.”

Efran broke off to look at them again. Estes said, “Go ahead and find Minka.”

“Yes,” Efran said, standing.

He went downstairs and out the back door to look around. Yes, she was on the bench under the walnut tree watching Joshua loll on Kraken while he was lying down. Nakam was on him, too, pretending to be king of the hill. So Joshua was swatting at him while Nakam was trying to catch his fingers in his teeth. Kraken was mostly indifferent to this, but Efran was glad to see Willis standing over them in case Kraken decided to roll.

Minka's head bobbed up the moment she saw Efran coming. As he dropped down on the bench beside her, she asked excitedly, "Is she up yet? Nibor?"

"No, she's still sacked out in her corner," Efran said, wiping his mouth. "But, a few of the Pamua riders returned today. Ah, Alberon escaped the camp; Marguerite doesn't hear anything from him, so she said he's either dead or regaining power. She thinks he's not dead."

"Oh, of course," she muttered.

"And . . ." he began, and she looked at him. Checking to see that no one was close by, he murmured, "We can't tell anyone, but Wendt and Marguerite are married."

Her face lit up. "Oh, I'm not surprised. I was thinking of her for him all along! Oh, Efran, I'm sure they'll be very happy. Why don't they want anyone to know?"

"He probably wants to protect her from the gossip. Almost no one besides us knows that she's not really an old lady. It could get intense," Efran said thoughtfully.

"Yes, I suppose so. I wonder if. . . ." She let the thought die, but Efran knew what she was wondering: *Would she get pregnant?* Marguerite could; she'd already had two children.

Then she stirred. "Oh, let's go down to see her! I don't know when she last saw Joshua."

"Yes, let's do that." He got up to lift Joshua, nodding to Willis. When Kraken started to lurch up, Efran said, "Stay here; we're walking down to the chapel." Kraken snorted at them.

So Efran, Minka and Joshua went around front to the new switchback, where Krall and Doudney fell in easily behind them. Minka turned to smile at them, and they smiled back; Joshua climbed up on Efran's shoulder to begin clapping the war drums, in which the bodyguards joined him at once. So their walk down went quickly.

The guards opened the chapel doors straightway for them. Efran led into the hall with Joshua, then they all abruptly stopped.

Xander was directing his orchestra in their rehearsal. But not only were his musicians rehearsing, so was the Bidderscombe Bell Ringers and the Ruddock Chorale. It was musical chaos, loud, exciting and penetrating. Fortunately, the faerie woods found nothing to riff off, in particular, so they were quiet. But the sustained musical din filled the hall. Minka turned to go right out again; Efran with Joshua and the bodyguards followed.

"Let's just sit," she said, looking toward the eateries lining Main Street. But they were filling up already, as it was late afternoon.

So Efran looked over to the Meeting Hall of the new inn going up next door. While the construction on the second and third floors of the inn was ongoing, the Hall was completely finished. In fact, a number of Lands residents met here for worship services on Dominica. "Let's check here," he said.

They walked over to the Hall for Efran to open the door and look in. It was vacant and quiet. Efran told Doudney, "Tell the gate guards where we are, if anyone needs us."

"Captain." He saluted to begin sprinting up the new switchback. Efran took Minka and Joshua inside; Krall

followed to stand at the inside of the closed door.

A few chairs remained in the Hall from the last function, so Efran and Minka sat in these while he let Joshua down to roam the floor. “This is a nice hall,” she observed, looking around at the whitewashed walls, the chandeliers, and the generous windows.

“It serves,” Efran agreed. “Except—” He leaned over to pick her up and put her in his lap. “I need this right now,” he explained.

She did not fight him today, only leaned her head on his neck to murmur, “I’m so selfish.”

“Why do you say that?” he whispered.

“I wanted Auntie all to myself. But I forgot how active she was in Eurus, how—helpful she was to so many people. I don’t know why I thought she would suddenly turn into a recluse here. And it’s not fair for me to expect her to be available to only me all the time,” she said.

“That’s my job,” he said.

She laughed, “Oh, that’s even more impossible. But you do try very hard to make time for me when I need it.”

“Because you’re there for me. And I have no problem expecting you to drop everything when I need you,” he said. She snuggled into him, and he looked over at Joshua trying to climb up on the platform.

She caressed his shirt for a few minutes, feeling the hardness of muscle and bone under the soft cotton. “She really must be quite beautiful,” she said. “She told me that she started making herself look old early on, to ward off attention. She likes people; she likes gatherings and music and everything, but she got so tired of men trying to seduce her, especially after her experience with—Verlice’s father. Making herself look old took care of that. But Wendt must have seen through that, somehow.”

“He is very perceptive. It’s one thing that makes him a good Commander,” Efran said.

“They’ll be happy . . . if, everyone will leave them alone,” she said tentatively.

“They won’t, so she and Wendt better have a plan to deal with it,” he said.

After another silence, she said, “I always wished I was beautiful. Now I’m glad I’m not.”

“You’re so blind,” he said in gentle exasperation.

“No, I have a mirror. You think I’m beautiful because I don’t cheat on you, when all the beautiful women you’ve known do,” she said.

He lifted his head in puzzlement. “That’s a perfectly coherent position.”

There was a sudden loud thumping at the door. Scowling, Krall leaned over to open it, and Kraken clopped in. Minka laughed; Joshua cried, “Kakan!” and began chugging over on hands and knees.

“We had our allotted time, I suppose,” Efran said, putting Minka on her feet.

Doudney leaned his head in the doorway. “Pardon, Captain, but the children and some others wanted you to be aware that the dinner bell has rung.”

“We’re on our way,” Efran said easily.

Outside the Meeting Hall, he lifted Minka onto Kraken’s bare back and put Joshua in front of her. Then he walked beside her on the left while Krall walked on the horse’s right. Doudney ran ahead (again) to let inquirers know that they were coming up the switchback now.

Before they got to the dining hall, Efran stuck his head in the library. The Librarian looked over attentively as Efran studied the mattress still propped in the corner. “Is she there?”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said.

“Is she all right?” Efran asked in concern.

“Yes, Lord Efran. I expect her to wake some time during the night,” the Librarian replied.

“Well, I’m glad she won’t disturb your sleep, at any rate,” Efran said with another dubious glance at the mattress.

“No fear, Lord Efran,” the Librarian assured him. So they went on to dinner.

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Chapter 21

The moment that Efran, Joshua and Minka entered the dining hall, the children inquired about the troll girl. Efran told them that they had just worn her out yesterday, and she was still resting. Possibly reading, as well, though he couldn’t be sure.

“Can trolls read?” Toby asked skeptically. Minka smiled up at Efran, who was about to get caught prevaricating.

He said, “No, not most of them. But we’re finding that Nibor can do things most trolls can’t.”

“Oh, yes.” The children agreed this was true. Efran raised his brows at Minka, who laughed.

Just as Wardly was bringing their plates over, they were rocked by Justinian leaning between them, plopping his hat on the table before planting his hands on the bench. “I finally did it,” he said, eyes ranging over the hall. Joshua looked up from Efran’s leg in friendly interest.

Efran and Minka stared at each other momentarily. She asked, “Did what, Justinian?”

“I found the only beautiful woman on the Southern Continent that Efran hasn’t already slept with,” he said in a voice tight with victory. He added, “You’ll meet her in a moment.” Minka looked wide-eyed around him at Efran, who looked wary. Then Justinian straightened in his impeccable Lands Clothing Shop evening suit. Placing his hat back on his head, he walked out.

Efran, blind to the aromatic ribs set before him, looked at Minka with half-sick eyes. “You’ve already forgiven me, right?” he whispered.

“Efran!” she laughed. “How can you assume the worst?”

“Because I just know,” he groaned. Joshua offered him a bite of soggy bread, which he ate. Ella, on Efran’s left, and Connor, on Minka’s right, pretended that they hadn’t heard anything.

Minka suddenly grabbed Efran around the waist to lean behind him. “You’re wearing copper earrings!”

Holding onto his left shoulder, Ella leaned behind him as well. “Oh, yes. These are yours! Tess and I were down near Whately’s today, and I picked them up for you. Do you like them?” They were the feathers.

“Oh, yes, but I can’t wear them,” Minka said in broken sorrow.

“Why not?” Ella cried.

“My hair. I can already tell the earrings would get all tangled up in this unruly mess. They look so beautiful on you, with your sleek black hair, that you’re just going to have to wear them,” Minka said.

“Oh. Are you sure? You may be wrong. Any time you want to try them, I’ll give them to you,” Ella said.

“Thank you, but I already know I’m right,” Minka said despondently.

Someone cleared their throat behind them, and the women sat up, looking back. Efran glanced over his shoulder as Justinian said, “Lady Ella, Captain Efran, Lady Minka, please allow me to introduce Lady Tortorie of Crescent Hollow. She’s one of the refugees who came to be refreshed from the dancing mania.”

Minka said, “Oh, welcome to the Lands! I’m so glad you’re better.”

“Oh, yes, indeed,” Ella said. Efran was occupied with a mouthful of rib meat.

The woman did rate as beautiful, with yellow-blond cotton candy hair, large, limpid gray eyes, and creamy white skin. She looked at Efran with something of a sneer, then leaned to the side to get a view of Connor’s face, which he was earnestly trying to hide in his plate. His wife Lyra was sitting to his right.

“Well, hello, Connor,” Tortorie said in a squished, grating kind of voice. At the same time, she poked him in the back with a long fingernail. “How are you doing? I didn’t know you were here. I haven’t seen you since you dodged my last soiree.” All this while, she was poking him as though wishing she had a knife. Efran, jaw tight to keep his mouth shut, was intermittently shaking. The two men across from Connor, Shane and Tourle, were likewise engaged in laughter suppression.

“What’s so funny, Efran? At least *you* were there,” she said. Justinian was looking off, about to pass out.

Efran immediately wiped his mouth and sat up to tell her, “No, no. You and I were never together. I never encroached on my men’s—oh, hello, Lyra. I didn’t see you at first. The dress looks very nice.”

Shane leaned on his elbows with his head in his hands to shake silently, and Tortorie reached over to hit him on top of his head with her silk handbag. “Shane, too! What is this, a gathering of wolves? Are you baying at the moon, or what?” She was flailing at him with the handbag, now.

Efran was hanging over his plate with tears in his eyes, so Joshua patted his shoulder. Men all across the hall were looking over to the Captain's table. "Tourle, too!" she said in surprise. "At least you were courteous. You were the only one who took off your boots."

Gasping to get his breath, Tourle nodded. "I'm glad you thought so. They were fairly clean."

"Oh!" She whacked him in the face with her handbag so that he fell backwards off the bench and hit the floor. He rolled to the side, laughing.

"Oh my goodness! This is ridiculous." Minka stood to brace herself on Efran's shaking shoulder and step out from the bench. "Come with me." She took the woman's arm so authoritatively that she was too surprised to do anything but leave the hall in the child's grip.

Tears running down his face, Efran looked over his shoulder, then back at the men. "Should I follow?" he asked breathlessly.

Justinian said, "No, no. Minka has matters well in hand. Excuse me, you have to move down a bit. A bit more." All the while he was pushing Connor to the right, who yielded when Lyra yielded, and so on.

Sitting in what used to be Connor's place, Justinian took off his hat to set it in the center of the table. Looking up to see Wardly watching with gaping mouth, Justinian flipped him a royal and said, "Hard ale over here, young man."

Wardly caught the gold coin. "Yes sir!" He turned to run to the kitchen.

"Well. Is everyone all right?" Justinian asked. He watched Tourle climb back onto the bench.

Minka swung back into the hall. She placed one hand on Efran's shoulder and the other on Justinian's to reseal herself. Wiping his eyes, Efran asked her, "What did you do with her?"

"Put her in her carriage and sent her down to Croft's," Minka said casually. "Oh my goodness, Tourle, you have a cut on your cheek!"

"Just a scratch, Lady Minka," Tourle said indifferently. "Well worth the entertainment." Connor glanced up, begging to differ, but said nothing.

Justinian, however, said, "Ahh, yes, Minka, but—Lady Tortorie is staying with friends." Wardly ran up with his bottle, which Justinian opened to take an authoritative swig.

"I hope she remembers who," Minka said, and Efran started shaking again.

"Thank you, Justinian," Efran said, wiping his eyes. "That's probably the first time in my life I've been made to look righteous—at least, comparatively so." He glanced over to see Connor grimacing. Realizing something of his faux pas, Efran attempted a correction. "What I mean is, when I said I never encroached—" Again considering this, he said, "Oh, well, talk to Minka, Lyra. She'll explain it to you."

Minka eyed him, then got up to lean between Connor and his wife to whisper to Lyra. She listened intently, then burst out laughing. Minka resumed her seat to raise an eyebrow at her husband. "I explained it."

Justinian lifted a finger to Wardly, who rushed over for Justinian to flip him another royal, requesting, “And a hard ale for my friend, please”—as he patted Efran’s shoulder. Biting his lip, Efran studied his smiling wife.

Later, in bed, Efran pressed his wife: “What did you tell her?” He moved his lips down her neck.

She grinned all over again. “I’ll never tell.”

“Yes, you will.” He held her just the way she liked best, and—there was a thumping on their outer door: *Bam! Bam!*

“Oh, no! Kraken again!” She began to rise.

“What did you tell her?” he asked, holding her down.

“Efran, go let him in. He’ll destroy the lock,” she insisted. *Bam!*

“Then you’d better hurry and tell me,” he warned complacently.

“Efran!” *Bam!* “I told her that men are happiest when their friends make themselves look bad to their wives, because that makes them look good in comparison. So now it’s your turn to make Connor look good,” she confessed. “Now go let Kraken in or out!” *BAM!*

Squinting dubiously, he got up to let Kraken in. Then he came back to bed to ask, “Is that really what you told her that made her laugh?” Kraken snuffled her, then lay down on the floor beside the bed.

“Yes. So now you have to make yourself look bad,” Minka said, adding, “Don’t blame me; those are the rules.”

“Huh.” He snuffed the candle, snuggling her, then lay awake wondering how he was supposed to make himself look bad without getting in trouble with Minka.

Early the following morning, August 13th, Efran stopped by the library before going upstairs to the workroom. Seeing the mattress still standing against the corner, he asked in alarm, “Is Nibor all right?”

“Yes, Lord Efran. She awakened some time ago to get to work,” the Librarian replied.

“Work? What work?” Efran asked in astonishment.

“Writing, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said.

“*Writing?* No, I don’t believe it.” Efran went over to look behind the mattress, noting the lantern sitting on a shelf above it. He looked down at the black wiry head bent over something in her lap. Without looking up, she lifted an empty plate over her head.

He took the plate in shock, looking back at the Librarian. “What . . . ? How . . . ?”

The Librarian explained, “When she expressed the need to write, I gave her the new inkless writing system that Shardlow the bookseller carries. You see, the stylus imprints on the paper without need of ink—clean and durable. It’s expensive, but I cleared it with Administrator DeWitt some weeks ago.” He showed Efran the slender stylus, the paper, and the support board.

“What is she writing?” Efran asked, gaping at the instrument.

“Possibly, what she observed in the Hall of Memories. I am collecting her finished pages. Here is a sample.” The Librarian handed Efran a sheet covered in small, neat rows of indentions.

“I can’t read this lettering,” Efran said.

“Oh, excuse me. I neglected to translate this section.” The Librarian took it back to study it a moment, then returned it to Efran. “Here you are. I am translating everything she produces, to keep it all here.”

Efran took the sheet to begin reading:

“Captain Efran!” came the loud command from above. Everyone looked up to where Surchatain Lightfoot stood with Adele by his side. Efran raised his face, but it was to look at her. Was she actually pleading on his behalf? He really wanted to fall in love with her.

Sybil silently looked up at her father. Having universal attention, the Surchatain continued, “Captain, you have been—”

Sybil sprang out of Efran's arms to raise both little fists to the balcony. “I hate you!” she screamed. “You are killing him for no reason! You are evil and horrible and I hate you, hate, hate, hate—” Efran attempted to hold her from behind but she wrenched away to stagger forward a few steps.

“He never did anything to me! He was kind and you are hateful! You are horrible! I will hate you forever!” Efran was leaning down at her side, talking determinedly in her ear, until she finally fell back on his neck.

Meanwhile, Adele was talking to her father, with frequent interjections from his clerk. People in the courtyard were looking at each other. The soldiers were staring ahead stonily. Pindar was watching with tears in his eyes.

“I have come to a decision,” Lightfoot announced, and there was a skeptical pause among his audience. Efran wasn't even looking at the balcony anymore; he was attending to the child in his arms. “My decision is that, in view of the service of this soldier and the regard of my children for him, his life will be spared.”

There was dead silence in response. Everyone looked at Efran, who seemed not to have heard. He was pressing his face to Sybil's as she hung in his arms. Then he stood with her limp body, carrying her to the back of the palace. Stopping at the walkway, he told a servant, “Show me her room, and bring me clean water. She has the fever.”

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Chapter 22

Efran raised glassy eyes to the Librarian. “This—this was when I was almost hanged by Lightfoot! And, Minka saved me—” He fell silent, looking back at the mattress. “Is this girl troll *writing our history?*”

“It would appear so, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said, delicately taking the sheet from Efran’s numb hand. The Librarian returned it to its place in the sheaf he held and tapped the pages together smartly. Then he said, “Oh, dear.”

Leaning over the mattress, he said, “Excuse me again, Nibor, but can you hand me *The Essentials of Composition?* Yes, on the second-lowest shelf there.” And Efran watched a gnarly hand lift a slender book over the mattress which the Librarian took in satisfaction. “Thank you, Nibor,” he said. The hand waved and withdrew. He added to Efran, “I had forgotten that the children’s tutor had requested it.”

Efran stood there a moment more, then looked at the plate in his hand. He took it to the kitchen before climbing the stairs to stand in the doorway of the workroom. DeWitt looked up from his worksheets; Estes, having just arrived, set his satchel on the table. “What is it now, Efran?” he asked.

“I . . . may have found out why the troll is here,” he said uncertainly.

“Yes?” DeWitt asked attentively. Efran sat down to narrate the story of his discovery.

At this time, two of the scouts that Wendt had continually covering the roads returned. Serrano and Finn saluted the Commander, and Finn told him, “Sir, a troop of at least eighty trolls are about five miles up the road, heading this way. But there’s . . . something strange about them, sir.”

“Explain,” Wendt said.

The two glanced at each other, and Serrano said, “They’re not advancing like trolls, Commander. They’re—silent, shuffling, not holding weapons, and, most of them look—very badly damaged. Gaping holes in their bodies, missing limbs or . . . heads.”

“Dead?” Wendt asked.

“If they weren’t moving, I’d’ve said so, Commander,” Serrano said, shaking his head. “Also, we rode out right in front of ’em—they took no notice of us at all.”

Wendt said, “Very well.” Turning to Gabriel, he instructed, “Sound the alarm; summon the war drum corps; prepare fire arrows. And send a man up for Efran.”

“Yes, Commander.” Gabriel quickly left.

Wendt looked to the south window of the conference room. He murmured, “I wonder if that could be Alberon coming to pay his respects.” Turning to Pleyel at the door, he said, “Ask Lady Marguerite to step down here.”

“Commander.” Pleyel saluted and ran out.

When Efran had just finished explaining what Nibor was writing in the corner of the library, they heard the

courtyard alarm bell echoing the wall gates alarm. Nodding to Estes and DeWitt, he stood to leave the room and trot down the stairs. Coming up the corridor to the foyer, he saw Kraken waiting at the courtyard gates, watching for him.

Efran trotted down the fortress steps, approaching Kraken at a run. He leapt up from the rear, propelling himself onto Kraken's back by shoving off his haunches. The gates were already open for Kraken to begin easily loping down the old switchback. Efran wrapped his fist in his mane and kept himself balanced on the broad back.

He heard the drummers as he loped Kraken up Main, which was sensibly deserted. Pulling up to the gates, he saw the oncoming mass proceeding without hesitation, although the drums were loud and powerful. Efran squinted at the partial bodies he saw in the mass.

Looking to the left and right, Efran whistled the signal for archers to nock, pointing to the torches. Shortly, a score of archers had fire arrows aimed, and Efran whistled the signal to fire. All arrows hit targets, which were soon engulfed in flames. Nonetheless, they advanced.

Efran looked down as Gate Commander Barr ran up to Kraken. "Captain, Lady Marguerite says that Alberon is behind the waking of dead trolls. They can't be killed again."

"Thank you," Efran said, looking up. "And dead trolls can't hear anything I tell them as Lord Sovereign," he murmured. They came swarming over the old stone bridge, many in the form of walking torches.

"However," Efran resumed quietly, "The Sovereign Lord of the universe has empowered me to defend these Lands, so as Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I forbid these creatures from encroaching past our gates or walls."

The Abbey defenders fell back as the flaming, insensible mob of trolls hit the gates, roaring silently with gaping mouths, reaching partial arms through the balusters. Soldiers hacked off any intruding limbs as though they were trimming hedges, which impacted the bushes not at all. The trolls in the front were pressed from the rear until they were flattened to a breadth of inches. Still they strained against a barrier other than the gates. Although they could not come over, they were still there.

"And here we have Abaddon all over again," Efran said, recalling his struggle in the Hall of Memories. "But Abaddon ruled itself; these are ruled by Alberon."

Efran looked up, thinking. "Alberon, show yourself." He did not, and nothing happened. Efran thought out, "Then he is outside the Lands. Of course, he can't enter. He can only attack from the outside." Soldiers looked over the walls to see the trolls being crushed against the stones—again, they could not climb them. But neither could they leave.

At that point, Efran heard Alberon's soundless voice: *Then we are in a standoff, you and I. You cannot make me leave; I can stay outside your gates forever.*

"No, that is unacceptable. I will not allow you to interfere with my chartered duty of bringing in abandoned children," Efran said. But he thought, *Where is he? How do I pull him down? How do I yank his teeth?*

You can't stop me, Alberon said.

Then Efran heard Marguerite say, *He is in the faerie realm.*

How do I get him out? Or reach in there to him? Efran asked her.

That requires a faerie, Marguerite said.

So he must send her or Minka into the faerie realm after Alberon? No, that was also unacceptable. Suddenly Efran wondered if he were really hearing Marguerite. Lues had convinced him he was really hearing and seeing Minka when he was not. Alberon could be doing the same.

Efran looked to the left and the right, just—observing. The faerie realm. He remembered Alberon carving out a bit of the faerie realm on top of the fortress in which to put Adele as Standing Goddess. But before that, in the third-floor room, Alberon had opened a doorway through which to lure Adele into the faerie realm. He had said that once she crossed the barrier, she would be transformed into faerie, and there was no going back.

But that was a lie, because when Aleph restored Adele's sight, she did return to human form. That was in the cavern, where Alberon had been lying in wait for Efran to fall in, and Minka had followed him. Then she cut Alberon's power in half by invoking the Provision for a Wronged Human.

Almost unconsciously, Efran slid down from Kraken. If Alberon, banned from the Lands, could still intrude to cause trouble from the faerie realm, then why couldn't the Lands' Lord Sovereign intrude into the faerie realm to stop him? And . . . *the Hall of Memories can cross realms*.

Looking straight ahead, Efran said, "As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I demand entrance into the faerie realm."

There was a crackle and blaze before him, and voices said, "No, you cannot enter." "No, human." "It shall not be." Their protests overlapped and echoed upon each other, but Efran walked forward into the blaze. The soldiers watching along Main saw him disappear in a flash. Kraken whirled and bucked at the fire in anger.

In the crackling mists of the unfamiliar realm, Efran watched shapes flitting around him and forms swirl in a mix of colors. "You cannot leave now!" they hissed. "You will die in this realm." "Ten years have now passed in the earthly realm you left," they whispered. These were not Abbey Lands faeries, which meant that he had evidently stepped into the faerie realm somewhere completely off the Lands.

"Alberon! Show yourself!" Efran shouted, his voice muted in the faerie stream.

There was laughter behind him, and Efran turned to see Alberon crowing, "What a mistake you made, you stupid man!"

As Alberon was covering himself with power, Efran shot out a hand to grab him around the neck. He was actually surprised, then, to feel a skinny neck in his grasp. So he said, "Sir Nomus, please open up the Hall of Memories."

Alberon laughed, "You can't—" And a doorway in front of them opened, beyond which Sir Nomus stood expectantly. Alberon suddenly lost a great deal of color, almost of substance.

Efran dragged him over the threshold onto the Firmament, then paused at the infinite starry space below his feet. It always made him dizzy to walk into this vastness, with the sun blazing on his left, the moon shining on his right, the waters pouring down and the windows above glowing with heavenly light. Alberon appeared to be likewise affected, hanging limp in Efran's grasp.

Efran looked over to the portal beside him, where the Atticitian was working in his shirt sleeves, arranging elements here and there with just a touch. “One moment, if you will, Lord Efran; this is an extremely complex memory.”

“Take your time, Sir Nomus. We’re just enjoying the view,” Efran said. “I begin to think this Hall is my favorite part of the fortress.”

“How kind of you, Lord Efran. And there’s the last . . . little . . . bit. Here we go!” He stood back in pride to view the portal showing the north portion of Main Street, the animated dead trolls at the gates, Efran on his horse, and the faerie realm encompassing them.

“Very nice reconstruction, Sir Nomus,” Efran said in genuine admiration.

“Thank you, kind sir. Now, if you’ll just toss his shadow in, that from the faerie realm,” Nomus said. So Efran lifted Alberon with one hand to fling him into the portal.

Alberon’s shadow landed on the street and rolled in front of Efran on Kraken. Scrambling to his feet, Alberon the Shadow shouted, “This isn’t a memory! It hasn’t ever happened!”

Nomus replied curtly, “No, it’s just a pre-memory, in which the past and the present merge. That happens when finite creatures such as yourself attempt to manipulate Time.”

Alberon, swaying, looked around. “How can that be?” he said almost soundlessly.

Efran blinked. “I don’t really understand either, Sir Nomus. How did he manipulate Time? And what do I do now?”

Nomus explained, “Here is what happened, Lord Efran: Alberon attempted to escape you by disrupting Time, leaving his past in the present faerie realm with you while returning his present self to the Lands. This he could do because you were gone. The last bit remains for you bring the present Alberon in from the Lands. When you retrieve him, he will be reunited with his past shadow in the pre-memory of the portal, which shall then assume its regular configuration.” Nomus stepped over to open the door onto Main Street.

“Interesting,” Efran murmured, uncomprehending. After glancing at Alberon’s shadow hemmed in the portal, Efran turned to the doorway.

He walked through the door into Main Street, and a hundred faces spun to watch him appear out of a crackling burst to approach Alberon, who whirled. He cried jubilantly, “Ha! Aha! You’re still in the faerie realm while your shadow sits here!” He pointed wildly to Kraken, but Efran was no longer seated on him—that was a past moment which did not exist in the present Lands. Alberon stared in bewilderment.

Efran said, “Actually, no. You and I are in the here and now. Your past shadow is waiting for you.” To be consistent with what he had seen in the portal, Efran leapt up on Kraken, then turned him to reach down and take hold of Alberon with one hand by his lapels. While Alberon flailed, dangling from his hand, Efran walked Kraken toward the widening door of the Hall of Memories.

Sweeping an ineffective hand, Alberon cackled, “Stupid mortal! *You are still in the faerie realm.* What makes you think you can enter it and walk out again? Remember Minka the Spider? Neither of you could get out without pleading me to release you! Who do you think you are?”

At the door of the Hall, Efran paused. “Why, after deposing you, I became King of Faerie. Didn’t you know?”

Alberon went limp. “That cannot be.”

“Watch.” Efran tossed him through the doorway, which had become as wide as a barn door. Everyone on Main was able to see the present Alberon roll into the portal to become one with the shadow Alberon. With that resolution, the earthly past and present separated to their assigned realms. The past settled into the portal, leaving the present to fill the Lands, as it always did.

Turning Kraken, Efran said, “You’re now nothing but a memory, Alberon.”

And in the portal, the troublesome one-time Faerie King hung on Efran’s hand, crying up at him, “Stupid mortal! *You are still in the faerie realm!*”

Efran in the portal replied, “You’re now nothing but a memory, Alberon.”

Watching from Main Street, Efran said, “Thank you again, Sir Nomus.”

The Atticitian bowed; the doorway closed, and Efran leaned over to pat Kraken.

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Chapter 23

After the door to the Hall of Memories closed, Efran glanced at Marguerite standing near Wendt on the sidewalk in front of Barracks A. Then Efran walked Kraken to the gates to look at the pile of dead, maimed, motionless troll bodies, some of them still smoldering. “Can I have volunteers to get up a funeral pyre in the meadow over here? Wear gloves,” he ordered. Two men ran toward barracks storage while others wrenched open the gates. But they waited for the gloves.

Looking again toward Marguerite, Efran dismounted to walk over to her. Without saluting Wendt or even regarding him, Efran asked, “Marguerite, did you talk to me while I was communicating with Alberon?”

“Talk to you? No, Efran. What did you hear me say?” she asked in concern.

“That’s what I thought,” he said. *That was Alberon, trying to lure me into the faerie realm because he thought I’d be trapped there.* Efran looked over as Barr began dispatching soldiers for shovels, oil, and torches. Two men ran boxes of gloves to the group waiting at the gates, then they all looked back at a disturbance up Main.

Minka was riding toward them on the dun mare, chasing a small, dark troll figure loping down Main on all fours. Minka was calling, “Nibor, stop! Don’t leave, please! Please tell me what happened!” The crowd on Main watched the troll girl approach the open gates with incredible speed. The men gathering up body pieces jumped aside as she landed in the midst of them.

Rose balked at the gates, so that Minka almost fell. Catching her off the saddle, Efran asked, “What happened?” Rose promptly turned to gallop back down Main toward the fortress.

“I don’t know,” Minka said, distressed. “She just knocked over the mattress and ran out of the library so quickly, no one could stop her! And. . .” Minka stopped talking to watch, so Efran turned to look.

Everyone was watching the troll girl pad around the bodies, scrutinizing them. “Was this your troop, Nibor?” Efran asked.

Surprisingly, she hunched, shaking her head. Then she leaned over to poke around the rags on the nearest troll before rejecting it. Going to the next troll, she searched the coarse, filthy bit of burned cloth that covered him, also. Not finding what she wanted, she went to another one to feel the remains of what had once been a human’s jacket. When the men realized that she was looking for something, they suspended the removal of bodies.

On the next body, that of a troop leader, Nibor found what she was looking for. She came back through the gates to offer a small object to Efran. He took it before whistling in surprise, juggling it from one hand to the other. “It’s hot. It’s—Alberon’s ring.”

“Alberon’s?” Minka asked, leaning over to look. “Are you sure? What is it marked?”

Holding it in the folds of his shirt, he turned the signet up and paused in surprise. “‘S.’ But the styling of the ring is the same, with the vines curling around the initial.”

Everyone began trying to think of whose name began with “S.” Mohr turned to Stephanos. “All right, what’ve you been up to, villain?”

Stephanos shucked off his gloves to walk back to the gates. “I admit, I allays lusted after that faerie power. Let’s have a try on, Cap’n.” He held his beefy hand out for the ring.

Although Efran had no suspicions that Stephanos had been dabbling in faerie magic, he handed over the ring. Stephanos could only set it on the tip of his pinkie finger like a crown. “Eh. I’m a wash-out.”

“For which we’re all grateful,” Efran sighed. The heat having dissipated, he put the ring in his pants pocket. “When this one burns a hole through my pants, we’ll know the owner’s close by. Unless—a troll wasn’t the owner, was he?” Efran glanced over to Marguerite as he asked this.

She was shaking her head. “No, it was merely left on one of the dead trolls. It’s a risky but effective way for the wielder of the ring to insure their obedience while he was in another realm.”

“The faerie realm?” Efran asked.

“That seems likely,” Marguerite said.

“But it wasn’t Alberon. Was it?” he asked, confused.

“Yes, Alberon wielded it, but that’s not his ring,” Marguerite noted. “He was apparently riding on someone else’s power.”

“Of course,” Efran said, then looked down at Minka. She turned her large blue eyes up at him. Nibor began skulking back up Main while horses shied away from her and ladies fainted into the arms of the nearest attractive man.

Everyone at the gates paused to watch the gathering of troll pieces for the bonfire. Wendt, nodding to the

barracks behind him, asked, "Might I have a word with you inside, Efran? Thank you for your assistance, Lady Marguerite."

"You're welcome, Commander." Marguerite moved off to take Minka's arm. "Come, dear; we have much to talk about."

Minka went with her but looked back at Efran. On the way to the chapel, they caught up with Nibor, still trudging up Main. She shied away from all the curious, annoyed, and disgusted stares.

Watching Marguerite take his rescuer away, Efran replied to Wendt, "Of course, Commander."

He went into Barracks A with Wendt following. Outside, Barr and Gabriel looked at each other in concern. Gabriel muttered, "Something's off."

Efran paused in the office, but Wendt gestured to the conference room. He entered and shut the door after Efran had joined him. Studying him, Wendt asked, "What's the problem?" Efran looked away, shrugging, and Wendt suggested, "Are you upset that I married Marguerite?"

Efran blinked. "Why should I be? That's none of my business."

"But I think you are, and I might guess why," Wendt said. Efran jerked his head in dismissal, looking toward the window. Wendt asked, "Should I resign as Commander?"

"No!" Efran said, wheeling to him. "After we went to all the trouble to get you here—you're the only one who could do it, and—" Wendt was regarding him with a familiar look from their shared history, a look which could be interpreted as, *Why are you being a blockhead?*

Efran dropped his head in comprehension. "I'm being a blockhead. I don't handle change very well. When I get things as they should be, I want them to stay that way. I do that to Minka, too," he muttered, looking away.

"I can understand that. But don't blame Marguerite. She still loves Minka best; she's still her priority," Wendt said.

"Yes, sir," Efran whispered, shame-faced at the accusation that he felt Marguerite should let Minka—or Efran himself—dictate her auntie's personal life. It was pretty much true.

"Now, is there anything you need to throw at me?" Wendt asked with a bare twist of his lips, recalling the times Efran would throw his Captain's insigne at him whenever he got frustrated with his own shortcomings.

"No, sir," Efran said with a halfhearted smile. "Permission to be dismissed, Commander."

"Granted," Wendt said.

"Thank you, sir." Efran saluted and walked out, musing, *I need to remember that his worst beatdowns are the ones he makes us to do ourselves.* Opening the outer door, he almost ran into Kraken. With his front feet on the top step, he was blocking anyone else from entering. Efran patted his nose. "Hop down; we're going to the chapel." So Kraken backed down from the steps.

Watching, Gabriel and Barr exchanged confirming glances, and Gabriel observed, "They got it straightened out." Barr nodded, then they both looked over to the progress on the pyre.

As Minka, Marguerite and Nibor walked up Main, Minka had her arm entwined with Marguerite's on her left while she had Nibor's arm in right hand. (The troll girl wouldn't hold hands, and kept trying to stealthily pull away.) Marguerite was saying, "Efran's mad at me."

"No! Why would you say that?" Minka cried in horror. Nibor grimaced, shrinking away.

"I'm a distraction to his Commander," Marguerite said.

"Efran will get over it," Minka said coolly. "If he can be married, then Wendt can be, too. Efran just has to adjust to new things. He's still getting used to me wearing earrings." She fingered the diamond earrings dangling from her ears. Since she let go of Nibor to do this, the troll girl began hanging back.

"Oh!" Minka exclaimed, and Nibor froze. "But he got me this cuff at the same time that he got the earrings! Aren't men so amazingly inconsistent?" She showed Auntie the gold bracelet engraved, "Efran ♡ Minka."

"Oh, that is lovely," Marguerite said, admiring it. But she glanced back at Nibor scrambling up the new, less-traveled switchback. She was ascending on all fours, scrabbling straight up the rough, steep incline between levels. And she veered off the switchback altogether when anyone else was ascending or descending.

At the top, the courtyard guards let her through the gates with curious stares, and the door guards permitted her to enter, as well. From there, she ran back to the library—where she froze in consternation. The mattress shielding her safe place was gone.

The Librarian bowed to her, opening the pierced-relief partition that now sat before the corner. "Welcome back, Nibor. I believe this will give you sufficient privacy to work while affording you more space. We definitely want you to be comfortable. Come see if it suits you." He extended his hand to the opening.

Hunching tentatively, she sidled over to look behind the partition at a small table and chair. In the corner was a basket of kitchen refuse for snacks. On the table was a small lantern which lit the writing board, stylus, and papers that she had been working on. Nibor immediately sat to find where she had left off. In satisfaction, the Librarian spread the partition over her corner again.

As Minka and Marguerite ascended the steps to the chapel doors, Minka looked around in dismay. "Oh! I lost Nibor. Where did she go?" She looked back toward Main, but only saw Efran riding up on Kraken.

Marguerite said, "She went back up to the fortress. Is she comfortable there?"

"I . . . don't know," Minka said slowly, watching Efran. "It was strange—when I just now came out and saw Efran and the trolls at the gates, she came out at the same time, and just blew past us all straight down the switchback! I was afraid she was leaving, so I got on Rose to try to catch her. She was too fast for Rose! But she just needed to find the signet ring for Efran. She must have felt it there."

Efran had ridden up close enough to hear this, and paused before sliding off Kraken. "So she came out because she felt the signet," he said, touching it through the coarse fabric of his pants.

"Yes, I think so," Minka said. "But then she sneaked back into the fortress. I don't know why."

"Ho, have I got something to tell you," Efran said. He included Marguerite in his glance as he took Minka's elbow to lead her inside.

Hartshough met them with a slight bow. “Lord Efran, Lady Minka, and Lady Marguerite, I have a late midday meal waiting on the patio table, if you’re inclined to eat.”

Efran admitted, “That would be nice, Hartshough; thank you.”

“Very good. Follow me, please,” he said, leading as though they had no idea where the patio table was.

They sat at plates of artistically arranged greens around baked salmon with a side sauce. One serving was conspicuously larger than the other two. Efran dropped into the chair at the correct plate to sample the salmon. He leaned back to breathe, “Hartshough, this is amazing.”

“You are too kind, Lord Efran,” he said, pouring his ale into glass goblet.

Then Efran looked up guiltily as Minka and Marguerite sat down. He began, “I—should have—seated you and waited—”

“Oh, now, Efran, it was so much nicer to see you appreciate Hartshough’s efforts than fuss over us. We like to think we’re capable of seating ourselves, don’t we, Minka?” Marguerite said smoothly.

“Quite,” Minka grinned into her glass. Efran looked even more disconcerted, but continued to eat.

When the salmon had been dispatched, he took the ring out of his pants pocket to hand it over the table to Marguerite. “Now, the signet with the ‘S’—is the owner a faerie, Marguerite?”

She picked it up to study it. “Yes, definitely.”

“Is it on the Lands?” he asked.

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Chapter 24

Marguerite closed her fingers over the ring, looking off. “I can’t tell where this faerie is, but he or she couldn’t be on the Lands—the signet implies rulership, which rôle only Kele is allowed here. And Alberon can’t have brought the trolls against you while here; that would be against Faerie Law.”

“No, he did it from the faerie realm. How did Alberon get it, then?” he asked.

“Oh, he stole it somehow,” Marguerite said, brows arched at the implied crime.

“Then, S is somewhere nearby?” he asked, holding out his hand for the ring. She gave it to him, thinking, and he noted, “It’s cold, now. Does that mean S went farther away?”

“Probably,” she said hesitantly. “It’s so hard to read these details when we know nothing of the faerie in question.”

“All right.” He returned the ring to his pocket. “Oh. Nibor. I suppose I should tell you what she’s been up to.” He looked teasingly at Minka’s wide eyes, then told her and Marguerite what he had learned from the Librarian. The more he told them, the more he laughed to see Minka’s eyes grow wider and her jaw drop farther in astonishment.

When he finished, she uttered, “You cannot be serious. I never knew that trolls could read, much less write! Do they even have a language? What language was it?”

“Something I’ve never seen before—the Librarian translated a bit for me to read. I read about my hanging—about your interrupting it, and screaming at your father while Adele was talking to him. Then he lifted the sentence, and you fainted with the fever. It was all there, very well described,” he said thoughtfully.

“She wrote all that down about the hanging, which you read?—after the Librarian had translated it?” Minka demanded, still disbelieving.

“Yes. The Librarian thought this was something she had seen in the Hall of Memories. He said she was there all night,” Efran related.

“Yes, I remember that. We came in to find her sleeping behind the mattress,” she mused.

“According to the Librarian, when she woke, she somehow told him she needed to write, so he gave her the inkless system that Shardlow sells,” Efran said.

Minka exhaled in fresh wonder. “I never would have imagined—what do you think, Auntie?” she demanded, looking over to her.

She smiled, “What an interesting form for a historian to take—that of a girl troll. Someone has a droll sense of humor.”

Minka pursed her lips at her auntie. “You know more than you’re telling us. Do you know him? This historian?”

“It’s a girl,” Marguerite said, half laughing.

“A young girl?” Efran asked suspiciously. Young girls were unaccountable.

“Inside, yes. Appearances don’t count,” Marguerite said, cutting her eyes to him. He almost asked to see her true form right then. But he didn’t.

Shortly afterwards, Efran put Minka on Kraken to walk them up the switchback to the fortress. She wouldn’t let him ride with her today— “I don’t want everyone staring at us again. That was embarrassing,” she said, peeved.

He grinned in disagreement. “That was fun.” So Minka kicked Kraken to trot up the switchback, which made Efran hustle, which made Minka and Kraken laugh.

Upon arriving at the fortress, the first thing Minka and Efran did was check on their historian in the library. They didn’t actually see her, as the Librarian gently dissuaded them from peeking behind the partition. “She finds that very disruptive to the thought process, which seems understandable,” the Librarian told them. “And I believe it will be beneficial to encourage her in this effort. What I have read appears to be an accurate retelling of the original events.”

“Have you got anything more to show me?” Efran asked, looking at the sheaf the Librarian held.

“I’m sure I can find something. As she completes each chapter, I will give them to the Administrator for safekeeping. Ah. Yes, it appears that she has finished the first chapter,” the Librarian said, thumbing through the pages he held.

“How long is it?” Minka asked.

“Approximately fifty thousand words, Lady Minka,” the Librarian replied.

Efran’s brows shot up. “The first chapter is fifty thousand words? And she completed it in a matter of—of—two days?”

“That appears to be the case, Lord Efran. Here is the page which she just now gave me—translated, of course.” The Librarian handed Efran a sheet.

Minka looked over Efran’s shoulder and they began to read silently:

Later that evening, the husband and wife lay quietly in their marriage bed. He was looking up at the ancient ceiling beams while she lay with her head on his shoulder.

The dominant thought of his heart as he stared at the solid support over him was, *I have been so willing to face death bravely, but . . . it takes more courage to live, when the rewards can be so great.* He also realized, *Deep down, I knew that she was of age; I knew that she was ready, but I didn’t know what I knew.*

Almost asleep—but not quite—his young wife sighed happily on his shoulder. He turned his head to kiss her again. Laying a hand on her bare abdomen, he murmured, “Your babies will be mongrel Polonti, you know.”

She considered this with half-closed eyes, then sprang up. “Oh, Efran! Could they be *aina*?”

He smiled. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

She snuggled down to look closely in his face. “You have cushy lips.”

“So you told me.”

She looked over his unevenly cut hair. “You have to grow out your hair again.”

“No,” he said, still smiling.

“I will win on this,” she promised.

He lifted his head. “Am I not lord of the fortress?”

“Yes,” she said. “But your body belongs to me.”

“Yes,” he breathed, rolling onto her again.

With that, Efran and Minka stared at each other. He said, “That was the best night of my whole life up till then. And it has only gotten better every single night since.”

But she turned to the Librarian to ask fearfully, “How much of that night—in our bedroom—is recorded here?”

“That’s all, Lady Minka,” he said placidly. He delicately took the sheet from Efran to place it at the end of the stack, tapping the pages into a neat pile.

She vented, “Well, I would hope so. I’d hate to think that entirely personal scenes would be recorded for everyone in the world to read!”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Efran murmured, smiling hazily.

Fortunately not hearing him, Minka asked the Librarian, “But, why bother writing this down when it’s all preserved in a better way in the Hall of Memories?”

The Librarian replied, “Perhaps because the Hall is accessible to only a few select persons, Lady Minka. And should anything befall the fortress in the future. . . . Well, redundancy of records is a good thing.”

Efran gently exhaled, “So is it that important?”

“Someone thinks so, Lord Efran,” the Librarian replied. Then while Minka went out back to see the children, Efran went up to the workroom to apprise his administrators of whatever they might not know yet. And Nibor, having paused to listen, returned to her chronicles.

Over the next several days, Efran carried the signet with him constantly to see if it would start burning again, to alert him that the faerie S was in the area. He rode Kraken around the Lands, even to the branch of the east Passage, to see if it would heat up again, but he never felt anything.

“S,” he murmured. The faerie S.” He rode down Main often, which seemed to be a lightning rod for attacks, but only saw Delano and Wylan finish painting over the expensive tivoli stone. And Efran had to admit that it was an improvement—that random row of conspicuous stone might have looked better on Imelda’s beauty shop.

Before the Pamua riders returned to Sasany Fields on August 15th, Efran questioned them about Alberon’s disappearance. Other than the fact that he had vanished, was there anything remarkable about it? Were his chains broken? No, just unlocked, they said. Had he stolen a horse? No, all horses were accounted for. Were there footprints anywhere? No, none. Not even his? No, not even his.

The only other unusual aspect of Alberon’s disappearance was the fact that his guards in the bath house, Bozic and Feijoo, were found the following morning sleeping so soundly that they could not be wakened by any means until the late afternoon. Even then, they were severely impaired for days afterward. Seeing that something highly toxic had been used on these capable men, Hob would not punish them.

“There it is,” Efran said to himself. “That’s faerie overkill if I’ve ever seen it, and I have.” He sat back, thinking. “So Alberon managed to escape the camp, but with most of his power gone, he needed the ring to send the dead trolls to our gates . . . which means that S must want it back.”

The following day, August 16th, Efran rode out of the wall gates just to have a look around. Because there were unknowns at hand, Kraken was saddled and bridled. First, Efran rode to the new bridge over the Passage to look at the newly constructed gates on the eastern end of the bridge. He was satisfied: they were sturdy and heavy but easily opened, and stood open now. Gerard was experimenting with greatly enlarged versions of Toby's mechanical self-propelled cart to go back and forth over the bridge, but hadn't produced a satisfactory prototype yet. He was still working on it.

Efran looked over the bridge at the dirt trail leading into the woods where the children's play hut stood. Because of one threat or another, they hadn't been out to the hut for weeks. Then it occurred to him: the play hut was technically off the Abbey Lands. Out of curiosity, he started over the bridge, and the S signet in his pocket began getting hot. "Aha." Efran turned Kraken to lope back to the wall gates, so that the signet cooled down.

Turning Kraken at the gates, he waved down the men who had begun to open them. "I'm not coming in yet; keep them closed." But he dug in his singed pocket for the signet. This he tossed to Heus. "Take it to Lady Marguerite quickly—tell her I found S in the children's play hut." Heus saluted and turned to run with the signet. Efran directed Kraken back to the bridge, taking his time.

He walked Kraken over the bridge and down the path toward the hut in the woods. As he entered the thick of the trees, dim in broad daylight, the first thing he noticed was that the gates of the fence around the hut's play area were slightly open. This should not be; the gates were always shut and locked after the children had left for the day.

Watchfully, Efran nudged Kraken to the gates, which Efran kicked fully open. Immediately, he saw a spiral of smoke issuing from the chimney in the center of the rooftop. And he smelled something like a combination of rotten eggs and excrement.

"More faerie shenanigans," he muttered. He dismounted Kraken, who shook his head in distaste. Then Efran walked softly to the door, which he pushed open. He saw a small pot simmering over a fire in the center of the round hut. Scanning the hut from the doorway, he saw no one, which meant nothing. But he quickly crossed the hut to kick the pot over, kicking dirt over the spilled contents and the fire. Whatever was cooking, it wasn't good.

The door behind him closed partway, encasing him in semi-darkness. He looked back at Solace, the faerie who had played Minka's double to entrap a EurAsian Counselor. She had done such a good job that she wound up as Surchataine of Eurus, for a little while. That is what she looked like now, but retained Minka's sardonic smile when she felt she had the upper hand.

"What've you been up to, Solace?" Efran asked.

"Playing," she said, coming up to circle in front of him. "Just having fun. What did you do with it?"—the signet, of course.

He pressed his lips together in consideration. "I lost it. Not sure where it is right now. I could've dropped it in the Passage; I don't know. Why do you need it?"

Frankly, she admitted, "I liked being Surchataine, but that's not enough. I want to be Queen. And I will be." She looked up with narrowed eyes. "Who did you give it to?"

"I don't remember," he said, watching her.

“Don’t be funny. I can make you tell me. Don’t you know that I could kill you right now?”

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Chapter 25

Grimacing, Efran said, “No, I don’t think you can kill me. This hut is the children’s. It’s Abbey Lands property.”

As she continued to circle him, Kraken nosed the door fully open. She looked quickly at it, so that he found himself blocked from entering by an invisible barrier. He kicked at it, only to be repelled. Snorting in anger, he withdrew.

“Perhaps I can’t kill you. I don’t know,” Solace said, reaching up to touch his shoulder, drawing her finger down across his chest. The fabric of his shirt singed brown where she touched it. He stiffened at the heat, unable pull away. “But I can hurt you, and I will. Tell me where my signet is.”

“You’re breaking Faerie Law,” he said shakily. It did hurt, in fact.

“I don’t care.” She drew a heart on his chest, then drew her finger down. The sweat trickled down the side of his face as he smelled his own skin burning.

Efran began, “As Lord Sov—”

“Shhh,” she murmured, muting him. Then she continued to draw patterns on his skin while he could only stand there and breathe.

Having just come to the gates, Commander Wendt watched Heus run up, panting. He saluted. “The Captain said he found S, Commander, and ordered me to take the signet ring to Lady Marguerite. This I’ve just done.”

“Then where did he go?” Wendt asked tightly.

“Back over the bridge to the children’s play hut, Commander.” Heus nodded toward the new bridge over the Passage, barely in sight of the wall gates.

“Very well. Arm and mount up. Everyone but the gatesmen,” Wendt said, turning back to the barracks. He paused to tell Gabriel, “Get me a horse.”

“Yes, Commander,” Gabriel said, and lit out for the stables.

While the men were gearing up and Wendt was issuing further instructions to Barr, the gate guards began shouting. Everyone swiveled to look at the northern road, where a mass of roaring trolls was surging toward the old stone bridge, and the wall gates.

These trolls were clearly alive and independently mobile. Their stocky, subhuman bodies wore filthy rags that might once have been saddle blankets or feed bags. Their thick, wiry hair, home to many small creatures, fanned out in their excitement, and their bulbous noses twitched in detecting their prey. Their great mouths gaped even

when not bellowing, and their tiny brains could nonetheless focus on a joint course which they pursued to the death.

“Get the drummers up here! Tar and torches for fire arrows!” shouted Wendt, and the men scattered to comply.

Immediately before reaching the old stone bridge, however, the vanguard of the trolls abruptly turned west on the coastal highway toward the new bridge spanning the Passage. And all the rest of the trolls followed.

The men dumbly watched the roaring invaders trot through the open gates to proceed over the bridge. Then Gabriel shouted, “They’re after the Captain!”

“Clubs and sawtooth knives!” Wendt shouted. “Mount up! After them!” So the men darted back to the stables.

By this time, the trolls had poured through the playground gates to the open door of the hut. Solace paused in torturing Efran; he, sweating profusely, looked over his shoulder at the approaching mass. Kraken bounded away from the door.

Like him, the trolls found themselves blocked from entering it—the leaders rebounded off the invisible barrier to knock over everyone behind them until two-thirds of them lay sprawled in the dirt. However, they saw Efran, recognized him, and saw the woman behind him.

(The following actions can only be understood along with the dialogue among the trolls. This Nibor reproduced faithfully in her account. However, the Librarian’s speed translating proved unequal to the task of rendering troll grunts, whistles, and diaphragmatic utterances to be both comprehensible and faithful to the original, which was a high trollish language comparable to Shakespearean or King James English. Therefore, the following dialogue, while accurate as to the essential meaning, falls short of the true linguistic experience. Readers are thus advised to read the following aloud with troll vocalizations and farts at the appropriate places.)

The troll leader, Number One, said, “The obstruction to the entrance of yonder habitation has been erected by the power within, which is our reward. Gaining entry is a test of our worth thereunto. Hence we must find another means of ingress.”

Troll Number Two said, “Is that not Captain Efran guarding our prize? At hand is his horse, which is a beast of wondrous strength. He, also desiring entrance, may be enticed to create an opening.”

Number Three: “Let us inquire.”

The trolls then surrounded Kraken, who reared and struck out at them. However, they bypassed him to pat the side wall of the hut. Number One enjoined him: “O noble animal, thou wishest entrance to thy master? We also have been summoned to this place. Despite the might of our arms and the strength of our numbers, we perceive that the vast amount of time it would require us to break asunder these walls, constructed by cunning Polonti criminals, is unacceptable to our purpose. However, if thou settest upon them with thy sharp hooves, that may suffice to accomplish all our ends.”

Kraken, smarter than even high trolls, understood the suggestion. He snorted, jerking his head, and they shuffled a short distance away to watch. Despite the encumbrance of the saddle, Kraken turned his back side to the wall to kick mightily. After three shuddering blows, the layers of wattle and daub crumbled inward, creating a jagged hole. This was possible because Solace’s power, not great without the signet, was mostly consumed in blocking the door and burning Efran.

With the crashing, she and he wheeled to look at the hooves appearing through the large gap in the wall. So she left off the torture and raised a hand preparatory to blocking the new entrance. But Efran, also freed, grabbed her hands and threw her to the ground, falling on her. With one hand, he turned her head to the side, covering her whole face to prevent her invoking a blocking spell.

He hissed, “As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Lands, I revoke any power you have left.” The block was withdrawn from the door, and the burns on Efran’s chest mostly effaced.

Now the trolls were shoving through the hole, which was sufficient for them but not Kraken. As they came roaring upon Efran, he rolled off Solace to land against the far wall, his shirt in tatters along the burn lines. Straightening on the wall, bracing himself to fight, he paused instead.

Where he stood, he watched the trolls cluster around Solace, lifting her in their midst. And Number One cried, “Here, as promised, is our very own Queen, who shall henceforth be known as Queen Faeces of Troop Dunghill!”

“Hail!” “Hail Queen Faeces of Troop Dunghill!” “Hail to the most beauteous Queen of all troll queens of all the Earth!” they cried in victory, rushing her out of the hut.

However, at this moment, Wendt and his men rode up to block the gates of the children’s play area. Their horses reared in panic at the trolls rushing toward them, but the men managed to hold the line. As the trolls massed before them, roaring in fury, the Abbey men all looked to their Commander, center front.

In an instant, Wendt perceived the troll formation as being that of movement and not attack. He also noted their lack of weapons, Kraken standing off, riderless, and especially the woman being held aloft in victory. He saw her being slowly transformed from a delicate faerie into the troll idea of a perfect beauty, with a stocky body, wiry hair, fleshy red nose, little black eyes, and especially breasts that sagged down to her lower ribs. Finally, Wendt saw Efran rush to the door of the hut from the inside and pause to watch.

“Back off! Fall away!” Wendt shouted, and his men pulled back on horses that readily stumbled away from the gates on either side. Then they watched the trolls surge out of the playground, back up the path and across the bridge with their prize. The defenders at the wall gates likewise watched in disbelief as the invaders ran north up the main road, carrying a bouncing troll that was wearing a bunch of sticks on its head and a soiled shroud bound with braided horse hair.

Wendt, Barr, and Earnshaw were the first off their horses to run toward Efran at the door of the hut. Noting his burned shirt, they took him by his arms, Wendt shouting for a medical cart.

“No, I’m all right,” Efran insisted, reaching for Kraken. In the excitement of the moment, he didn’t realize that he was really all right. “It’s not bad, but I need Coghill to bandage me, and a new shirt. I don’t want Minka to see this.”

He leapt up on Kraken, and the men drew aside for him to lope back to the bridge. Wendt rode beside him, and the men followed. Efran shouted across to Wendt, “I sent the signet to Marguerite. She did—something—after Solace caught me in the play hut.”

“Ah,” Wendt said, comprehending everything.

They arrived at the open wall gates, and Efran fell off Kraken to run for the barracks, glancing cautiously up Main. There was no sign of Minka. “Get me a new shirt!” he shouted on his way back to the conference room.

Wendt followed, stopping at the barracks door to ask, “Who’s the medic on duty?”

“Milo, Commander,” Verrin said, saluting.

“Get him in here,” Wendt said, not knowing whether Efran was hurt, nor how badly. Then Wendt progressed to the conference room, where Efran was sitting on the long table, stripping off the remains of his shirt. Tomer ran in with a fresh white shirt, which Efran began to put on, except that he had to unbutton it all down the front first. He had already wasted fifteen seconds trying to pull it on over his head without the crucial unbuttoning.

As he was frantically unbuttoning, he glanced up at Wendt to say, “Thank you for the support, Commander. Ah, yes, that was Solace, the—the faerie who impersonated Minka in Euris to lure down Baldassare. She told me she liked being Surchataine, and she needed her ring to rule again. She wanted to be Queen here, apparently. And so—”

He broke off when Minka rushed in with Marguerite behind her. As Efran held the new shirt protectively to his chest, Minka came over. Slowly, intently, she lowered his hands holding the shirt to look at the red lines on his chest—the heart shape, with the lines radiating out from it. It was about the severity of a mild sunburn. Since there was nothing to really cry about, she waited silently for an explanation.

“Ah, yes, that was Solace. It’s not bad; it doesn’t hurt, because your auntie sent the trolls,” he said carefully.

She glanced at Marguerite, who stood behind her, smiling. Then Minka turned back to ask, “The trolls rescued you?”

“Ah, yes, incidentally. They took Solace to be their queen. She’s now a troll queen—looks like a troll and everything. They got her up in a crown, and a robe, so to speak.” He was just talking in an attempt to forestall tears.

She came closer to put her arms around his neck, careful to not touch the burns. “I can’t wait to see this in the Hall of Memories,” she murmured. “Will we read about it as well?”

“I—” He shrugged, expressing ignorance.

Nibor, in her corner behind the partition, looked up for a moment to listen. Then she nodded and continued writing with the inkless stylus on paper.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on August 16th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

The verse in Chapter 19 is from “Wit and Science” in *Medieval Drama* by David Bevington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), 1035. I used it in *All Mirrors and All Suns: Book Eight of the Latter Annals of Lystra* (with spelling modernized for comprehension).

“[Dancing mania](#) . . . was a social phenomenon that occurred primarily in mainland Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries. It involved groups of people dancing erratically, sometimes thousands at a time. The mania affected adults and children who danced until they collapsed from exhaustion and injuries. One of the first major outbreaks was in Aachen in the Holy Roman Empire (in modern-day Germany), in 1374, and it quickly spread throughout Europe; one particularly notable outbreak occurred in Strasbourg in 1518 in Alsace also in the Holy Roman Empire (now France). . . . They hardly stopped, and some danced until they broke their ribs and subsequently died.”

Madgwick’s explanation to Efran of the passage from John 15 was paraphrased from *The Gospel of John* by F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 312.

Regarding Froggatt’s mechanical toys, automatons have a long and fascinating [history](#): “Few examples of automatons made prior to the 16th century remain, but numerous documents record their onetime existence. Among the earliest references is to a wooden model of a pigeon constructed by Archytas of Tarentum (flourished 400–350 BCE), a Greek friend of Plato. The bird was apparently suspended from the end of a pivoted bar, and the whole [apparatus](#) revolved by means of a jet of steam or compressed air. More complete information about other devices is found in the writings of Heron of Alexandria (flourished 1st century CE), who described devices actuated by water, falling weights, and steam. . . .

“References to automatons devised by western Europeans in the Middle Ages cite such distinguished names as Roger Bacon and Albertus Magnus, both of whom are credited with constructing androids—Bacon, a talking head, and Albertus, an iron man. Decorative mechanical objects for ecclesiastical use are illustrated by the Gothic architect Villard de Honnecourt in his famed sketchbook (1235).”

A few of the many demonstrations of automatons on YouTube are [here](#) and [here](#).

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Girl Troll* (Book 24)

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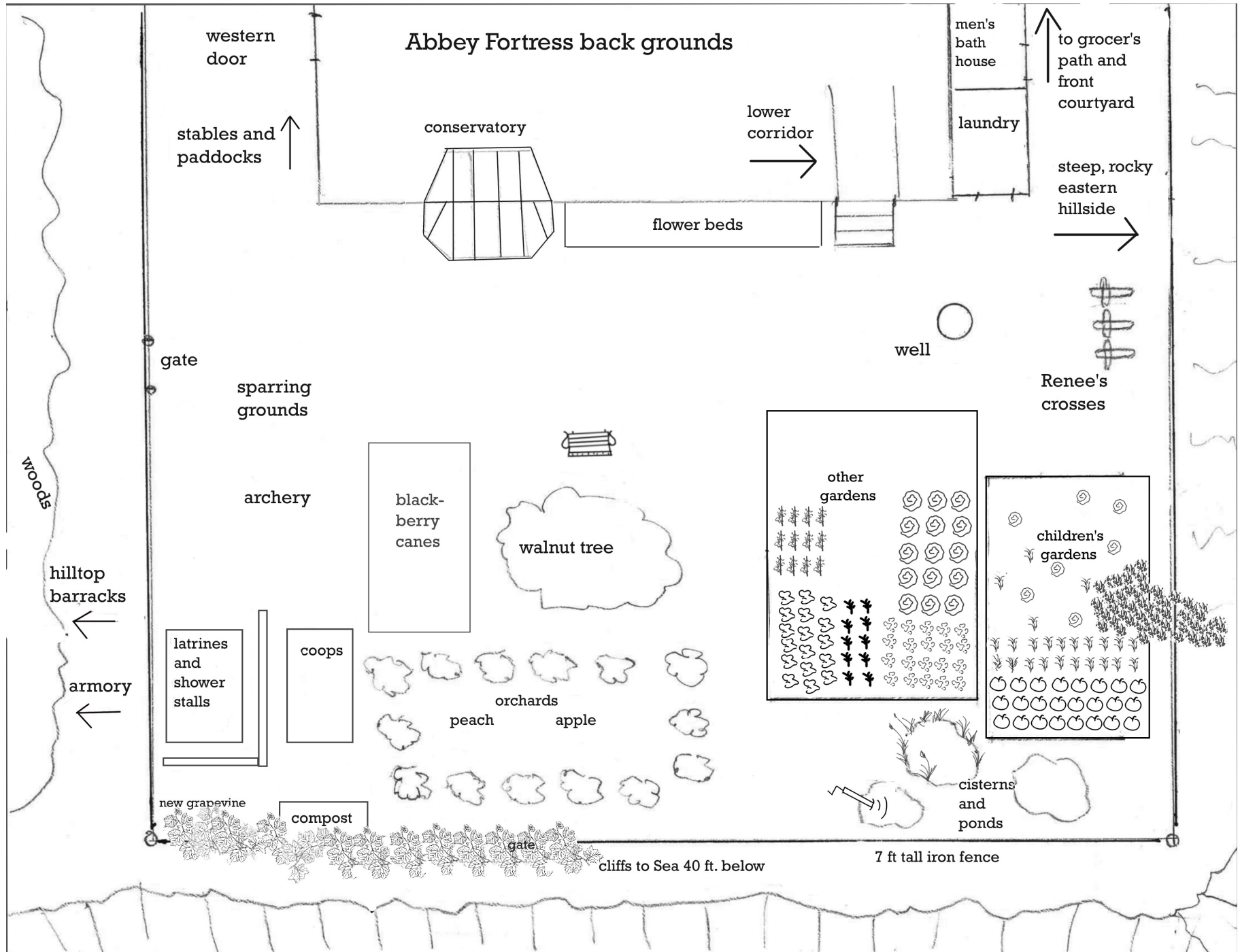
Aceto—ah SEE tow
 Adele—ah DELL
 aina—AY nah
 Alberon—AL ber on
 Almario—all MAR ee oh
 Archimedes—are kuh MEE deez
 Arenado—air en AH doh
 Arne—arn
 Atticitian—at eh SISH un
 Averne—ah VURN
 Baldassare—BALL de sar
 Besiana—BES ee an ah
 Bethune—beh THUNE
 boudoir—boo DWAAR
 Bozic—BO zick
 Bozzelli—bo ZELL ee
 Brogna—BRONE ya
 Calix—KAY lix
 Capur—KAH pir
 Conte—cahnt
 Cordelia—cor DEEL yah
 crèche—kresh
 cuisine—kwuh ZEEN
 Cyr—sear
 Dallarosa—dal ah ROW sa
 De’Ath—dyath
 Delano—deh LAN oh
 diaphragmatic—dai uh fruh MA tuhk
 diva—DEE vah
 Dominica—dah MIN ee ka (the Lord’s day)
 echelon—ESH uh lahn
 Efran—EFF run
 Elvey—ELL vee
 Estes—ESS tis
 Eurus—YOUR us
 Eurussian—your uh SEE un
 Eustace—YOUS tis
 Faeces—FEE seez
 faux pas—foh pah (a social blunder)
 Feijoo—FAY hoo
 Felice—feh LEESE
 garderobe—GAR de robe
 Gers—gares (hard g)
 Gores—GORE ez
 Goss—gahs
 Goyne—goyn (hard g)
 Graeme—GRAY em
 Graetrix—GRAY trix
 Greves—greevs
 Hartshough—HART soh

Hereward—HERR uh wuhd
 Heus—rhymes with the noun *use*
 hopui—HOPE we
 Huneke—HUN eh keh
 Imelda—eh MEL dah
 insigne—en SIN yeh
 Ionadi—ee YON ah dee
 Jehan—JAY han
 Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
 Justinian—jus TIN ee un
 kao paki—KAY oh PA kee (goat curds)
 Kele—kay lay
 Kelsey—KELL see
 Keyon—KEE yun
 Kirill—KEER ill
 Kocak—KOH sat
 Koschat—KOS chat
 Kraken—KRAY ken
kuala—koo AH lah (yams)
 Larisse—la REESE
 Leila—LYE la
 Leneghan—LEN eh gan
 Lilou—LEE loo
 Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
 Loseby—LOWS bee
 Lowry—LAHW ree
 Lues—LOO es
 Lyra—LEER ah
 Marguerite—mar ger EET
 Mathurin—mah THUR in
meano—me AH no (food)
 Melchior—MEL key or
 meritorious—meh reh TAW ree uhs
 Milo—ME low
 Minka—MINK ah
 Minogue—men OGE (hard g)
moiwahine—mo wa HEE nee (queen)
 Mumme—mum
 Nibor—NEE bore
 Nomus—NO mis
nui—NOO ee (great)
 Pamua—pah MOO ah (silent riders)
 (a) *pau*—ah POW ([for] everyone)
 Pia—PEE ah
piet—PIE et (an alcoholic drink)
 Pieta—pie ATE ah
pipia—peh PEE ah (spicy fried boar intestines)
 Pleyel—PLAY el
 Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
 Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Girl Troll* (Book 24)

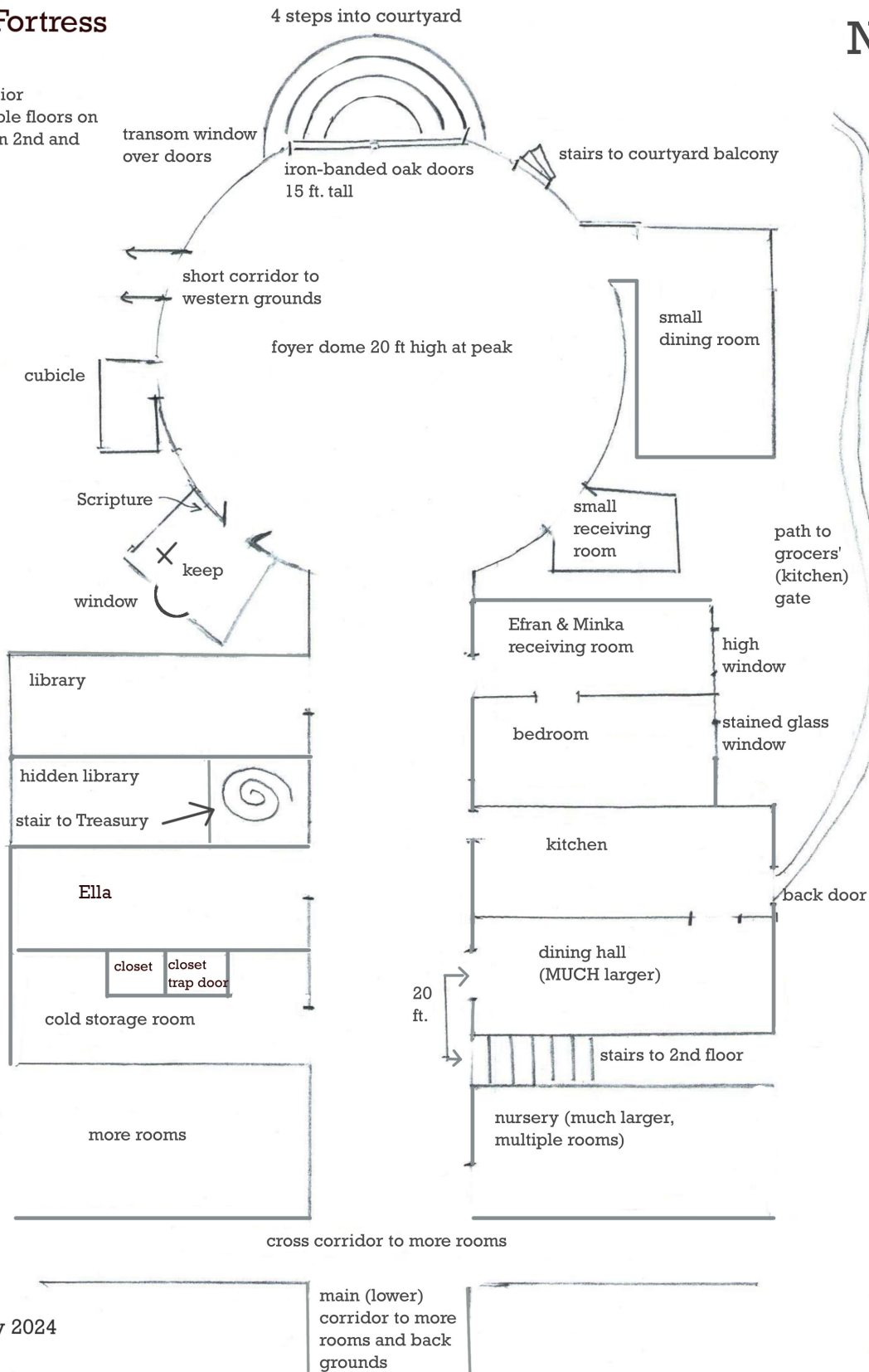
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Sasany—SASS an ee
Serrano—suh RAHN oh
soirée—SWAH ray
Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Suco—SUE coh
Sughrue—SUE grew
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Symphorien—sim FOR ee in
Telo—TEE low
Tera—TEE rah
Teschner—TESH nur
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Tica—TEE kah
Tiras—TEER us
tivoli—TIV uh lee
Tomer—TOH mur
Tortorie—TOR tor ee
Tourjee—TUR jee
trough—troff
tsunami—soo NAH me
Ure—YOUR ay
Venegas—VEN eh gus
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
Verlice—ver LEESE
Verrin—VAIR en
Vitus—VY tuhs
Vories—VORE eez
wahine—wah HE nee (woman)
weli—WEH lee (dangerous)
welina—weh LEE nah (welcome)
Whately—WOT lee
Whobery—WAH bry
Windry—WIN dree
Wirrin—WEER en
Wymond—WY mund
Wyse—rhymes with *vice*
Wystan—WIS tan
Xander—ZAN der



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



NOT TO SCALE

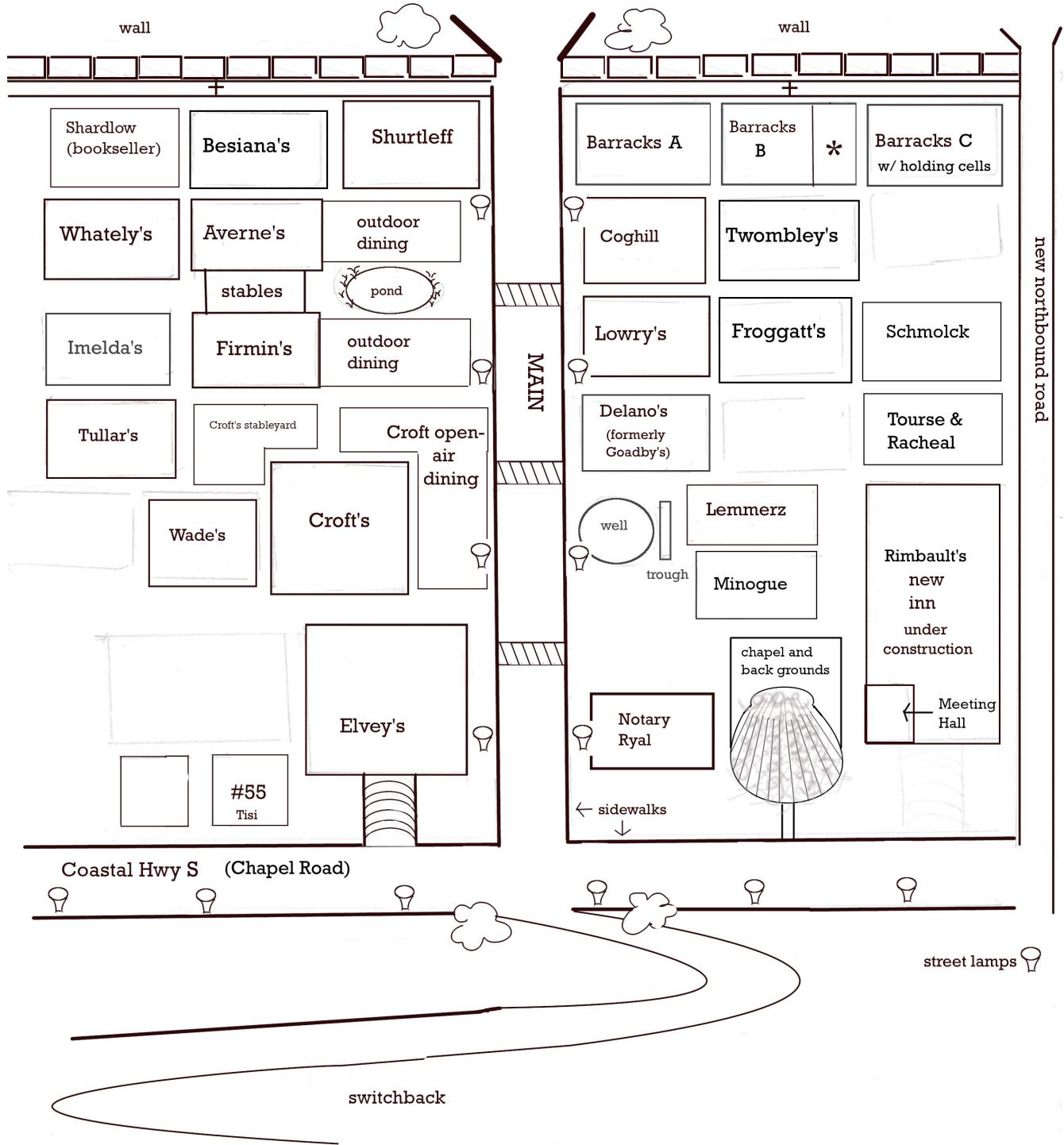
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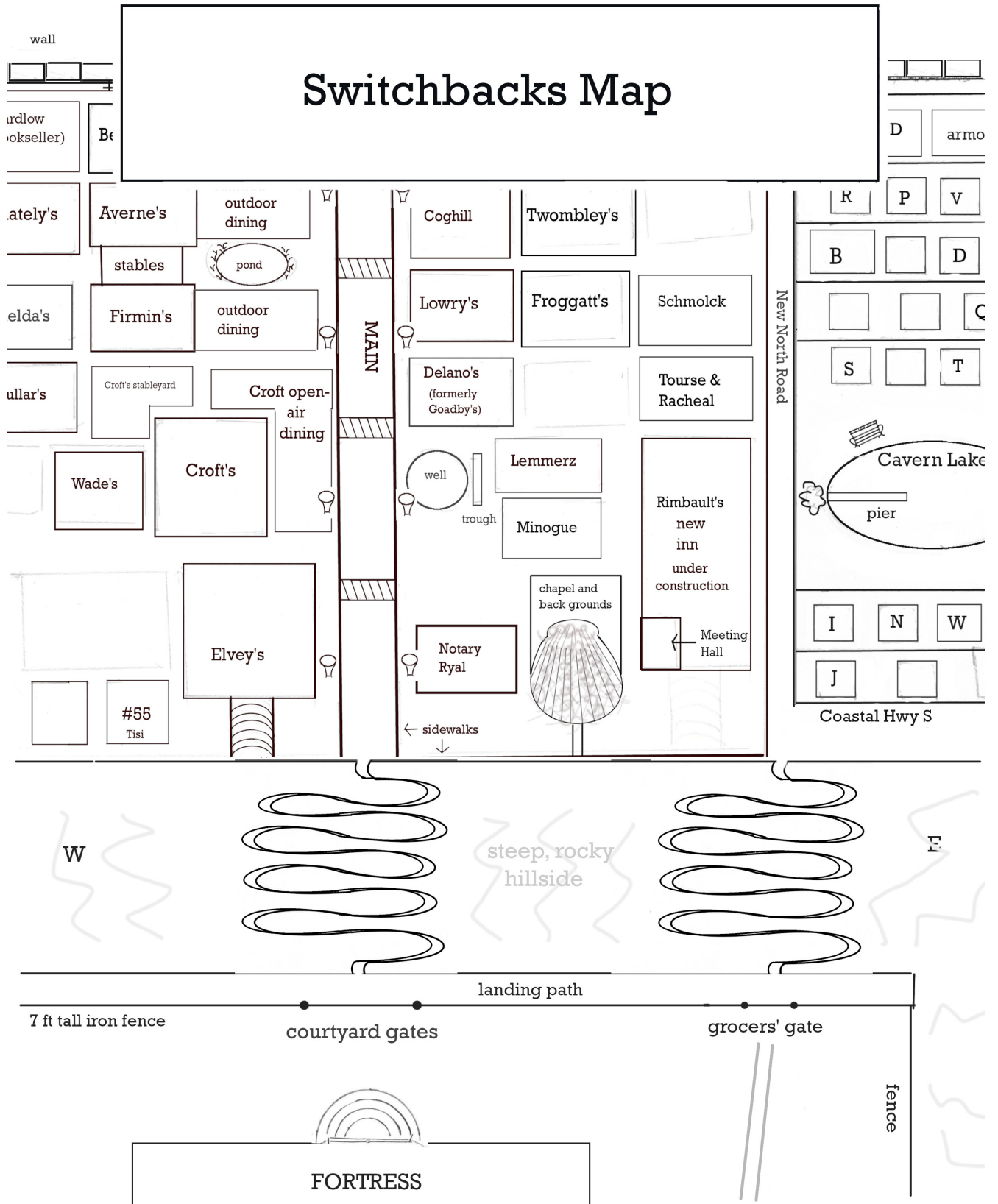
main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds

Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

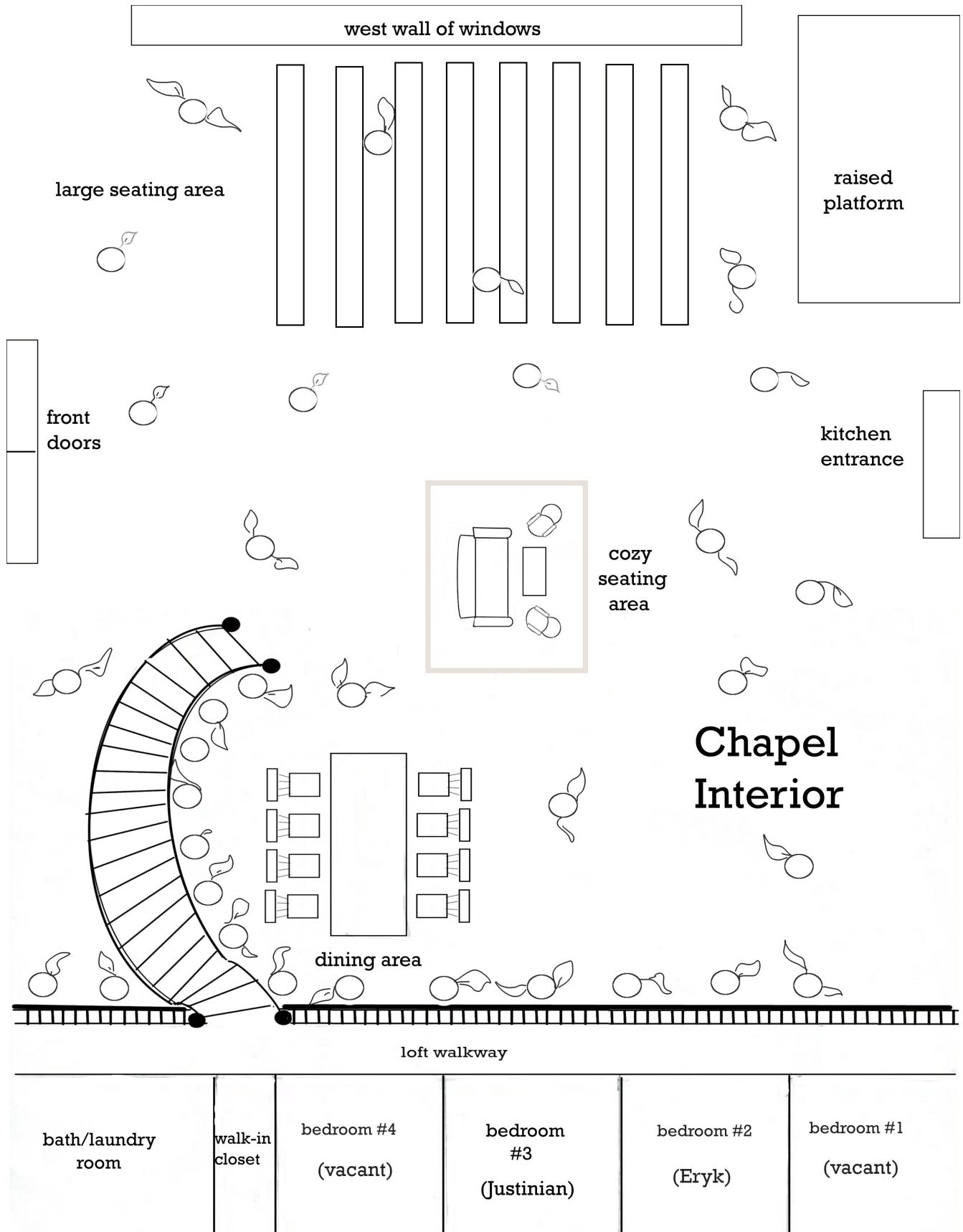
+ easements



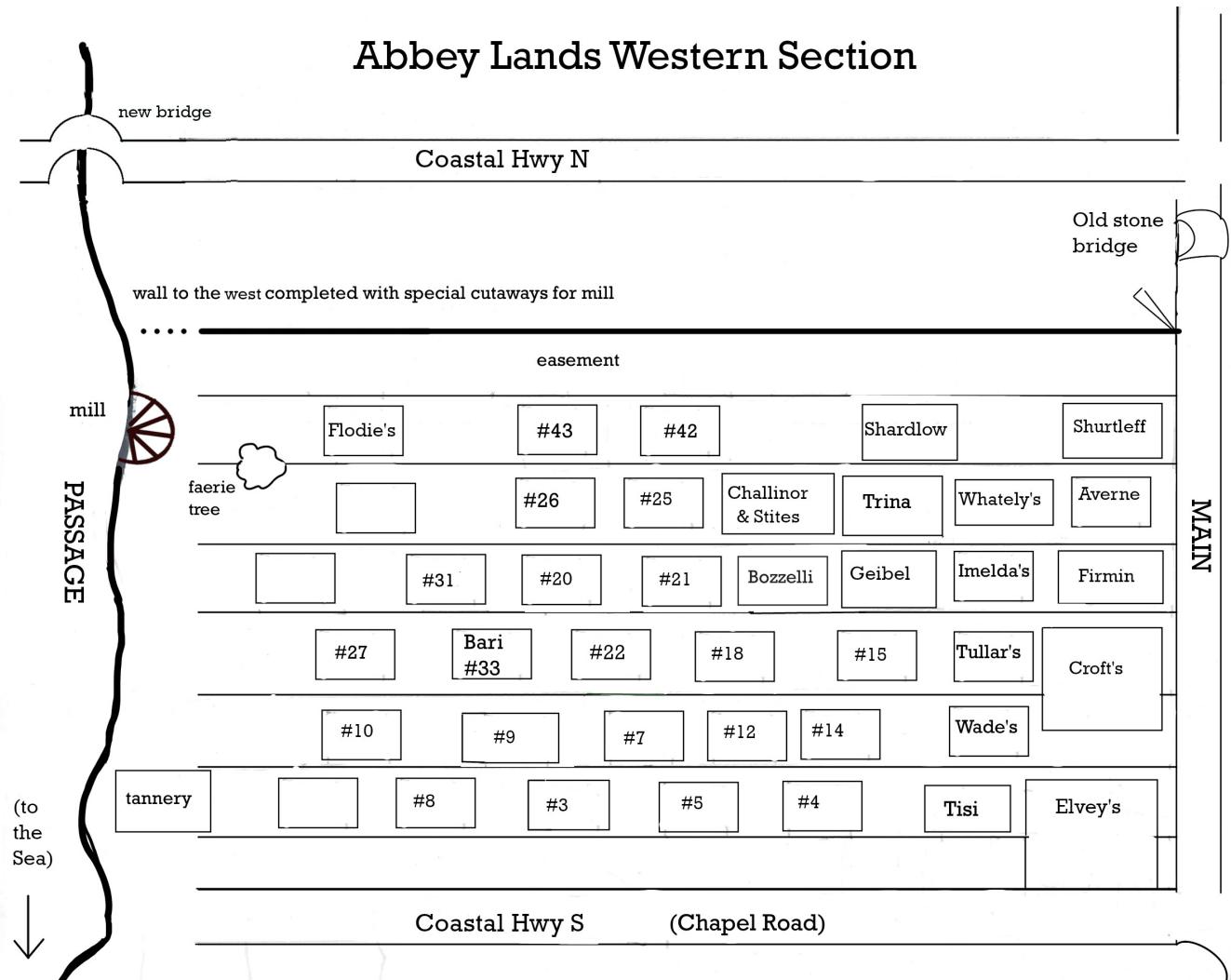


Map 5 Chapel Interior

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Abbey Lands Western Section



rocky NW hillside

switchback--4 bends on west side, 5 on east



KEY

- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
- 43 - Dallarosa & Enon



7 ft tall iron fence

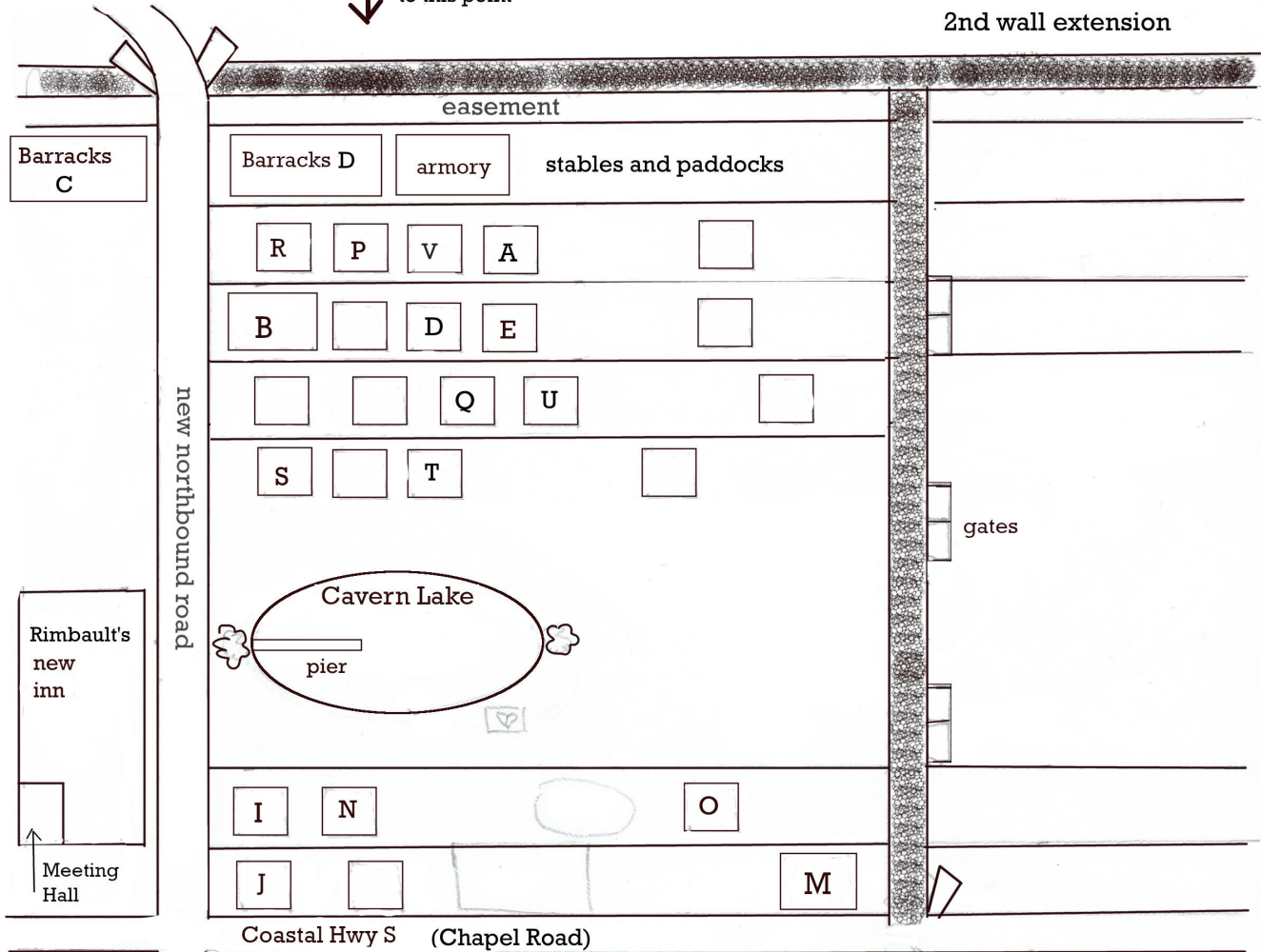
FORTRESS

woods

road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

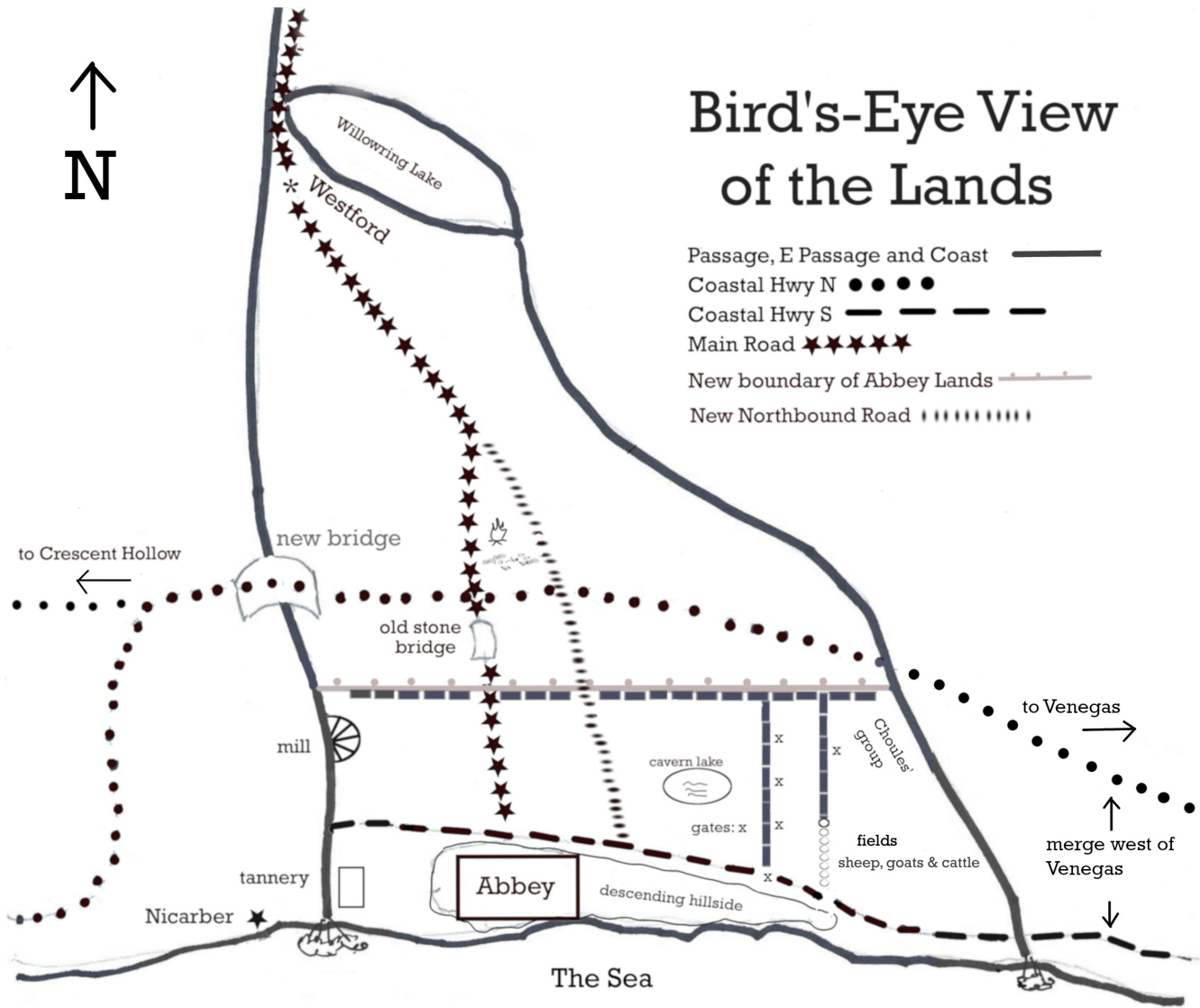
East Central Abbey Lands

1 mile from wall gates to this point

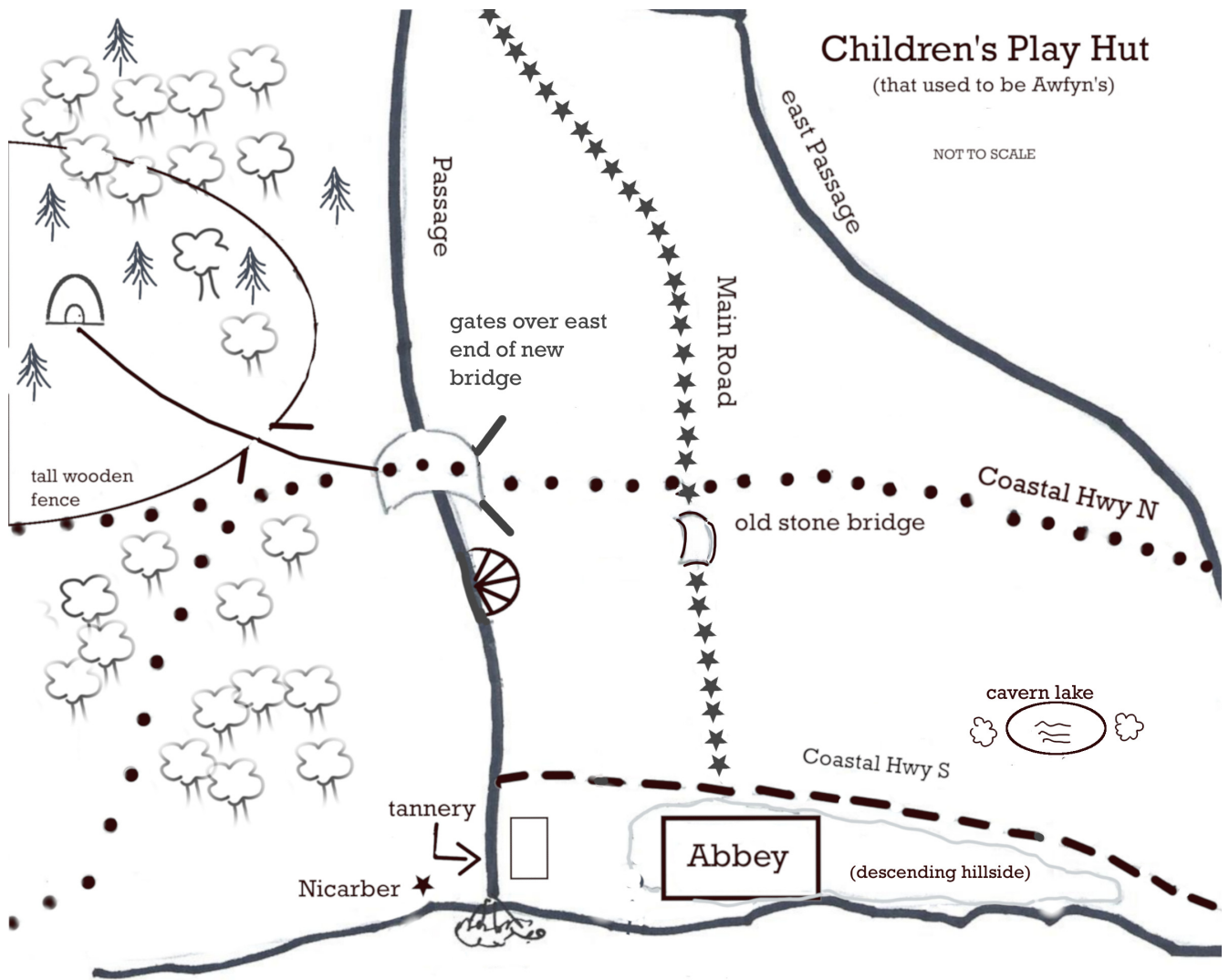


new switchback
to courtyard gates

- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring's House
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office
- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry & Eryk

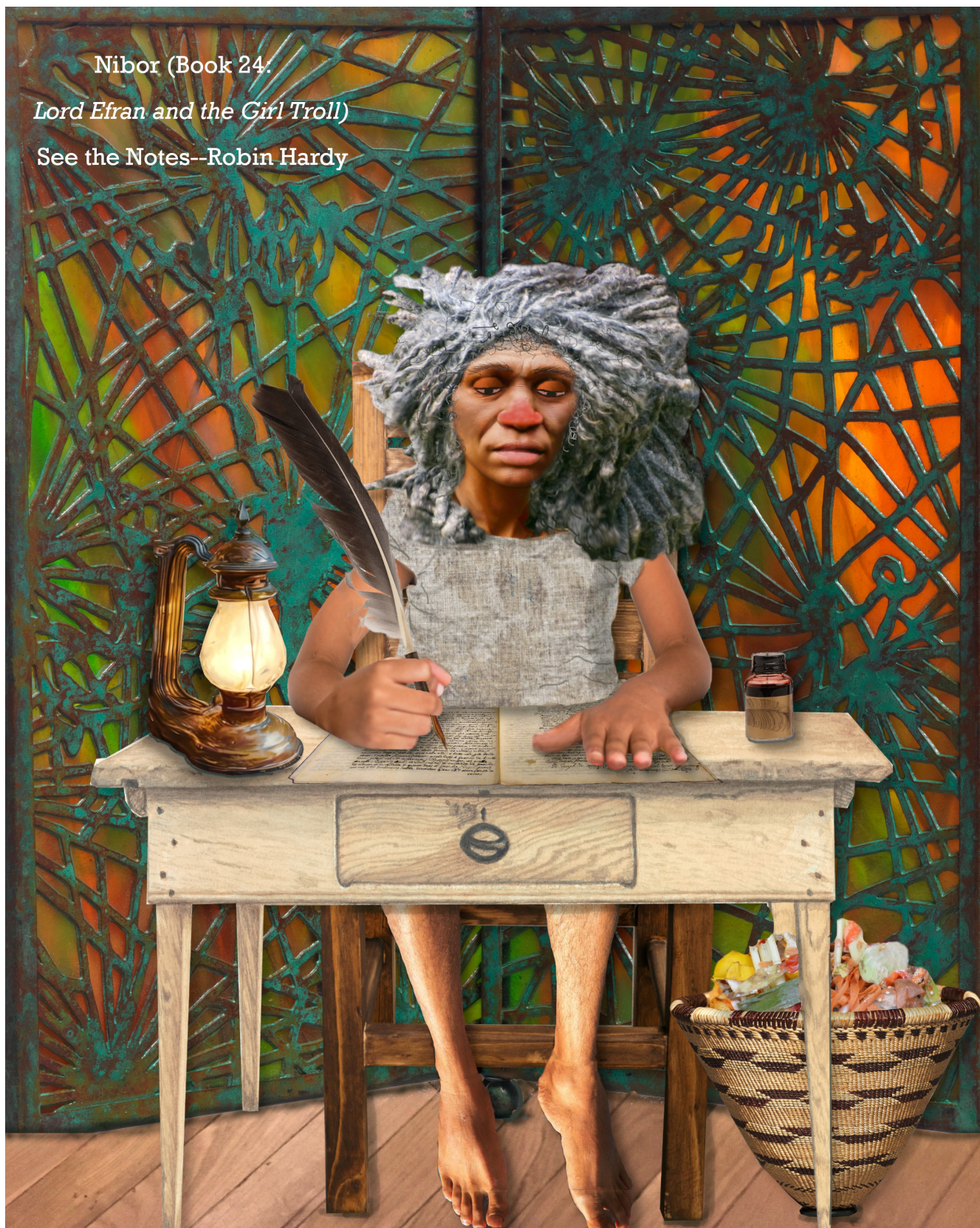


NOT TO SCALE





Nibor (Book 24:
Lord Efran and the Girl Troll)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



This was interesting. Since I had used Neanderthal images for the trolls in *More Sheep Brains* (the illustration for Book 21, *Lord Efran in the Hall of Memories*), I searched for female versions, but didn't find anything. So I resorted to Google's AI, [ImageFX](#), with the prompt, "young female Neanderthal." It returned three images, one of which is below. This female is not young, so I just gave her a facelift and stuck her in there. Then I had to get her a body. And I found [this](#) adorable little girl on rawpixel (also below).



Then I had to outfit my girl troll. Her [hair](#)¹ was the greatest find—I had never seen a Hungarian puli before, but now I'm in love with them. Nibor's "dress" was made from [this](#)², and her hairy legs came from [here](#)³.

She is sitting in front of a fabulous [partition](#) which, although not pierced-relief, is *Tiffany*. The parquet wood floor is from [here](#)⁴. Her [table](#)⁵ is actually a painting, as is her AI [lantern](#) from rawpixel. Her [chair](#)⁶ is sturdy enough to hold a troll, and her Klipartz [quill and ink bottle](#) are nice. (There's no clip art of Shardlow's inkless writing system.) I love her [PickPik](#) manuscript pages. (Google tells me that the language is Italian.)

As promised, the Abbey leadership has supplied Nibor with delicious [kitchen refuse](#) in a [museum-quality basket](#)⁷. I should receive comparable compensation for all the work I'm doing for them.

Robin Hardy
May 31, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed by Anita Ritenour on Wikimedia Commons
2. Photographed by [PantherMediaSeller](#) on DepositPhotos
3. Photographed by [Chu Chup Hinh](#) on Pexels
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5. Via the [National Gallery of Art](#) on Wikimedia Commons
6. Photographed by [Elchino portrait](#) on Pexels
7. Uploaded to Wikimedia Commons from the [Cleveland Museum of Art](#)