



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

Book 14

Lord Efran and the
Provision for a
Wronged Human

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Efran sat under a peach tree on the edge of the orchard watching several things at once. Close to hand, his son Joshua, almost a year old, was holding on to his father in order to take tentative steps on the cool grass. His beefy little legs weren't stable enough to hold him up all by themselves, so Joshua was toddling down Efran's arm from his left shoulder, with the incision mostly healed, to his hand draped over his left knee, raised.

Clutching his father's arm, Joshua paused in his progress to pat his own leg in accomplishment or encouragement to get to work. Then, bouncing just to demonstrate that he could, Joshua looked back at his father, expecting praise.

He got it. "Well done," Efran said, smiling. But then Joshua bounced a little too vigorously, falling on his well-padded bottom. He screwed up his face as if to cry, but Efran was still smiling, so Joshua emitted a high-pitched scream instead.

"What?" Efran laughed. "What was that?" Pleased with this reaction, Joshua screamed again. One or two people glanced over, because it sounded just like the maid who had taken a short tumble down the stairway from the second floor. She wasn't hurt, only embarrassed, but Joshua liked the sound for its ability to turn heads. So he raised a hand to his elder half-sister in the distance to scream louder.

Ella did glance over, as did Quennel beside her, laughing. Efran looked away, pretending that he hadn't been watching them at all. But of course he had; Quennel was his favorite candidate for a son-in-law. After months of indecision, Ella appeared to be warming to him as well. (At 24, Quennel was four years younger than Efran.)

Efran then looked over at Minka emerging from the back door of the fortress with an elegant figure in a white suit with a deep green waistcoat, a white top hat, and an ash walking stick with a prominent silver knob. (Seeing this ensemble, Sir Ditson promptly changed out his silver waistcoat for one deep green, and his ebony walking stick for ash. "Yes, definitely more consonant with the white than the dark wood," he said, to which Sir Nutbin quickly agreed.)

Smiling, Efran leaned his head back against the tree while Joshua raised a hand to scream for the entertainment of his mother and the visitor. Drawing up, Minka laughed and Justinian studied Efran ruefully: the Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands was dressed in his usual work clothes, including the boots with the elfish bite holes. "I am mildly curious as to why you are sitting in the dirt whenever I come down to confer with you," Justinian said amiably, indicating that he would not so sit. Just to emphasize the point, he said it in Efran's voice.

"How do you do that so well?" Minka cried, laughing.

"It's a gift," Justinian said, lifting his hands.

Efran grunted, leaning forward. He propped himself on his knee to lift Joshua and stand. He couldn't ever hear himself in Justinian's voice. But since he glanced at Ella and Quennel as he got up, Justinian looked over his shoulder at the pair as well.

"Ah," Justinian said. "Has Ella made her selection, then?"

"Perhaps, if I stop pushing him on her," Efran said pensively.

“Who warned you about that?” Justinian asked, glancing at the smiling blue-eyed vixen beside him.

Efran’s pride made him pause, so Minka said, “He figured it out himself when she started flirting with Loriot.”

“Loriot?” Justinian said. “The one who married Adele? I mean, most recently.”

“Yes, the one three times her age and her body mass,” Efran muttered, nodding toward the far-off training pens.

Justinian squinted at the pair next to a small white horse. “I see a girl and a small tower.”

“Exactly,” Efran grunted, turning toward the back door.

“Oh, are Tess and Loriot working with Cloud? I want to watch,” Minka said, peering at them in the distance.

Efran said in mild irony, “Yes, let’s all go stand at the fence. That will help.”

Justinian observed, “Meanwhile, Ella and her current favorite are simply standing in the middle of the grounds to declare their love.”

“He’s teaching her to shoot,” Efran insisted.

“With what?” murmured Justinian. “He’s holding her hand.”

“Bow and arrow,” Efran said, trying hard not to look over when Quennel glanced toward them.

Enlightened, Justinian said, “Oh, of course. With the bow that’s hanging on his shoulder and the quiver of arrows on the ground. And the targets. . . .”

“They’re waiting for someone to set them up,” Efran said, keeping his face turned elsewhere when both Ella and Quennel looked their way.

“All right; we’re intruding. To the small dining room,” Minka said, walking away. Efran followed with Joshua, but Justinian paused to watch Quennel put his lips at Ella’s ear, or somewhere near there. Sighing, Justinian then turned to follow the lord and lady to the fortress.

In the small dining room, Efran had a light meal brought in for the three of them, since it was close to dinner. (Justinian’s driver and bodyguard were already at Croft’s, where rooms had been reserved for him and them.) While they ate, Minka and Efran told Justinian all about Adele’s transformation into faerie, then Efran told him about her directing the last Goulven attack against them six days ago.

Justinian paused over the excellent suckling pig to listen, open-mouthed. (Until they could acquire more suckling pigs from somewhere, Lwoff had restricted their consumption to Efran and important guests only. No one, not even Efran, contravened Lwoff’s word on this.)

“Well,” Justinian murmured, “that explains why Adele has not invaded my dreams again. Has she visited you?” he asked Minka.

She shook her head. “There are advantages to being ignored.”

“Strange and stranger,” Justinian murmured, taking another bite. “I would almost like to stay to see what happens next. But the tumult in Eurus is almost as captivating.”

“You said the new Surchatain Quilicus and many of his men were killed by the Goulven hunters. Who is ruling now? Anyone?” Efran asked.

Justinian said, “Yes, of course. Someone is always waiting in the wings. This time it’s a refugee from Westford, a Lord Reinagle.”

“Reinagle!” Efran and Minka repeated at the same time.

“Yes, and he came up to Eurus with great wealth,” Justinian added.

“So that’s where Webbe’s money went,” Efran noted. “And that of others, no doubt.”

“Certainly,” Justinian said, “And he has employed the five terrorists as his own bodyguard.”

“Salotto? And Hulls, the man who can detect infections?” Efran asked.

“Yes, those are two of them. They are needed because the new Goadby’s ale is not available at any price for now,” Justinian said. This was recently discovered to kill the Goulven parasite in the body without harming the victim.

“Why?” Efran asked, his fork suddenly motionless.

“A breakdown of equipment along with the scarcity of ingredients,” Justinian said. “The new owner, Seger, is moving heaven and earth to get it up and running again, but it will take time—weeks, possibly months,” Justinian said.

“We’ll send some cases up with you to Marguerite,” Efran promised, eating again.

“You have some?” Justinian quickly looked at him.

“Yes, forty-three cases, but that is information for you alone,” Efran said warily.

“You cunning Polonti,” Justinian breathed in wonder.

Efran shook his head wryly. “It was one of my men, a Southerner, who stumbled onto the opportunity to buy them cheap—one and half royals per case.” While Justinian’s jaw hung open, Efran continued, “So if Reinagle is all out of it, he’ll fall back on the Goulven hunters to kill them.”

“And you were bitten,” Justinian noted. Minka blinked back the sudden appearance of tears.

Efran pulled back his work shirt to show him the bite marks and the healing incision. “Were it not for Lwoff, and Loriot, Wallace, and Leese, I would be one of the dead.”

“Don’t; I can’t bear it,” Minka gasped, lowering her face. He leaned over Joshua on his lap to kiss her head.

“Some people have all the luck,” Justinian groused, resuming his meal. “And the pork. Hartshough can’t get any,” he mourned. Efran’s smile was a bit smug.

Justinian returned to Croft's to mingle and listen, though he had to change out of his excruciatingly elegant white suit in order to do that. Efran promised him at least three cases of Goadby's for his return trip to Eurus tomorrow morning.

Meanwhile, everyone was watching the new inn and tavern going up on six plots near the eastern section. Lord DePew, entitled for his numerous building projects on the Lands, was determined to capitalize on the loss of the Porterhouse Inn by offering the premiere accommodations on the Southern Continent. With the Lands' sudden acquisition of livestock and farming capabilities, this aspiration was not as farcical as it would have been six months ago.

In conjunction with this, Justinian's driver friend in Eurus, Wade, brought his carriage down to the Lands desiring to start his own carriage-for-hire service. DePew offered to set him up near the new inn, but as that was not up yet, Croft made a superior counteroffer for a prime location behind his inn and tavern, which Wade accepted.

Lemmerz was somewhat crushed that DePew imported a construction supervisor named Oxenham from Crescent Hollow rather than use his services, especially after his completion of the new Goadby's (now Delano's) brewery. But when Geneve came to him victorious with the news that the Fortress would fund the construction of the chapel, Lemmerz was content.

At the fortress training pens today (December 9th), Loriot stood inside the fence to watch Tess work with the white mare. Tess used all the best techniques in her repertoire only to find that the mare had developed a new tactic of her own: biting. Close to tears for embarrassment, Tess released her to roll in the dirt with relish.

Loriot sank back, unwilling to get entangled with another headstrong young woman. But she had asked, so he reluctantly pushed off the fence to amble over to her. "Do you want me to tell you what to do?"

She clenched her jaw, watching the rebel paw in the dirt. "I've never had this much trouble with a horse before."

He half-smiled. "You've never met one just like you."

Her head snapped back to him. "What d'you mean?"

"Won't be taught," he said wryly.

She tried hard to glare at him, but started laughing. "Dam' you Polonti." He raised his brows at her; she groaned, "All right. Tell me what to do."

"Lay off training her for at least two weeks. Bring her out just to play with her; make friends with her. You can't teach her until she trusts you," he said.

She sighed, "At least you could tell me something different from what everyone else is telling me."

"Maybe everyone else is right," he said.

She lowered her face, then turned her large brown eyes up to him. "Take me to Croft's."

He shook his head. "You're too young for me."

“Oh, and Adele was so mature,” she snapped. He lowered his chin at her: *See what I mean?* She closed her eyes to breathe, “I’m sorry. I just want a chance with you.”

“You won’t like me any better than Barr,” he predicted.

She winced. “I’m trying to do better.”

He thought about that, then said, “If you say anything about anyone around us, I’ll get up and leave.”

“I’ll be good. I promise,” she said with a small, hopeful smile.

He grunted, “Put the mare up.”

She grinned at him, then eased toward the mare, who trotted away with a toss of her head. Tess lunged after her, but the mare kicked playfully, evading her.

Loriot, seeing the prospect of an hour spent watching Tess try to catch her, walked over to take the mare’s halter and lead her back to her stall. Tess followed, mildly abashed, to replenish her hay and water troughs. Loriot waited at the stable doors while she finished up, then he heard her say, “What are you doing here?”

Another voice mumbled a reply, to which she said angrily, “Do you know how much trouble you got me into?”

At that point, Loriot came into the stables to look down in the stall where Tess stood glaring. And he saw her brother Shanko, sitting up to brush hay out of his hair.

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Chapter 2

Shanko’s head jerked up at the appearance of the unsmiling Loriot, and he muttered, “Oh, no. Not you.”

“No, I’m taking you to the Captain. Get up,” Loriot instructed. Reluctantly, Shanko did. With Tess following, Loriot escorted the hay-ridden elder brother up to the second-floor workroom in the fortress.

Estes was not there, as he was checking on all the children adopted by leaseholders, over a hundred. He could have sent out surrogates, but felt duty-bound to do it himself. Adopting out children who were then abused or neglected could put the Abbey’s charter at risk of nullification—which would mean the end of everything.

But Efran and DeWitt were in the workroom. The latter only glanced up from his worksheets, but Efran’s face went slack in part dismay, part amusement. “Oh, nooooo.”

Loriot saluted. “Tess found Shanko hiding in the stables, Captain.”

“I wasn’t hiding, I was sleeping,” Shanko protested. “Trying to make my way to Euris around all those creatures with the fangs—how could I hope to get around them? I can only whistle for so long.”

“That was—when did we kick him out?” Efran asked DeWitt and then Lorient.

“Mid-October, I believe, Captain,” Lorient said.

“Two months! You’ve been running from the Goulven for two months?” Efran asked in alarm.

“Not exactly. I stayed with a friend for a while,” Shanko muttered, still picking hay out of his hair.

“Until she kicked you out,” Efran said in humorous disgust, and Shanko shrugged.

Without looking up from his worksheets, DeWitt asked in mild curiosity, “What do you mean by, you ‘can only whistle for so long’?”

“Aw, to keep ’em at bay!” Shanko said, trying to brush the itchy hay out of his clothes. “But when you stop, they start coming again.”

The room fell silent as its occupants studied him. DeWitt asked, “Do you mean you can keep the Goulven away by whistling?”

“For a little while,” Shanko said. “As long as I keep a tune going, they stop and listen.”

There was another short silence. “How did you find this out?” Efran asked.

Shanko exhaled, “Aw, I whistle when I walk, to keep myself company. And the other day, I was walking and whistling, and looked up to see this—thing stopped in the road in front of me. It was a man, except, he was grinning so that these fangs hung out of his mouth. When I stopped whistling, he gulped them back into his mouth and asked to shake my hand. I ran like the devil, then looked up to see a group of ’em coming my way. So I started whistling, ‘My Rose Knows Only Me,’ and they all stopped to listen with their blasted fangs hanging out on their chins. I could only whistle for so long, so when my mouth got too dry, I turned around to run right back here. Finally got back maybe an hour or two ago.”

Efran and DeWitt looked at each other. DeWitt said, “Then there are more coming.”

“Don’t we have Goadby’s at the wall gates already?” Efran asked.

“We should, yes,” DeWitt said.

Efran turned back to the whistler. “Shanko, you have a new job. You’re to man the gates and whistle when any Goulven start coming—how do you avoid their gaze?”

Shanko shrugged. “What, you mean, looking ’em in the eye?”

“Yes, it’s paralyzing,” Efran said.

“I hardly look anybody in the eye,” Shanko admitted.

“Take him down to the gates,” Efran told Lorient. “Tell them what he can do. If he stops them with their fangs hanging out, somebody can just pour a Goadby’s down their throats.”

“Yes, Captain,” Lorient said, turning Shanko to leave.

“I’m hungry!” Shanko protested.

Efran told Tess, “Stop by the kitchen and pick up a plate and ale for him.”

“Yes, Captain,” she said, saluting. Then she turned to exuberantly follow Lorient and Shanko.

So while Tess stopped in the kitchen, Lorient took Shanko down to the wall gates. There, he explained to Captain Barr, the wall gate guards, and several other soldiers what Shanko could do.

Asked to demonstrate, Shanko whistled the poignant love song, “My Rose Knows Only Me.”

“Huh,” snorted Arne—being one of the wall gate guards today. “That’s supposed to stop ’em? Try, ‘The Last Time I Held Her.’” Then he puckered his large lips to issue the heartbreaking notes of lost love in whistled vibrato.

“Pure garbage!” Shanko exploded. “I’m the one who faced them down whistling, and they’d ’a’ been right on me with something so slow! At least make it snappy!” And he held up a hand to whistle the fast-paced “Got No Time for Fools.”

“That’s so old; don’t you know nothing new?” another Southerner, Cudmore, broke in. And he began whistling the rowdy “Over My Head and Under My Bed.” Attracted by the competition, other soldiers ran up to exhibit their whistling expertise while Shanko devoured the chicken and lentils Tess brought him.

Barr finally stopped them. “That’s enough. As the Captain ordered, we’ll keep Shanko at the gates to demonstrate when the next Goulven come. The rest of you go back to your duties.”

They had begun to comply when someone shouted, “There! Look!” And they wheeled to see an old farmer and his wife walking toward them with the Goulven stride. Lorient, who had turned away with Tess sticking to his side, looked back.

“Don’t look in their eyes!” Barr warned. He studied the men to see who among them had that glazed, paralyzed look, and pulled two affected men away from the gates. “Whenever you’re ready, Shanko,” Barr ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Shanko said, watching their feet. “Let ’em get a little closer.”

When they were within ten feet, and the farmer said, “Shake my hand,” Shanko began whistling the crowd-pleaser, “You’re My Puddin’ Pie.” The men at the gates watched the two stop and smile, which caused their fangs to spring out to catch on their chins. This prevented their speaking or biting. Nor did they advance farther, but remained where they were to listen.

Barr said, “Arne, Cudmore—get out there and blindfold them; bring them in. Enon, go get two Goadby’s.”

While Shanko continued to whistle, Arne and Cudmore, eyes fixed on the Goulven’s shoulders, went out to wrap cloths around their eyes from behind. Then they led them through the gates to lay them out on the road, where a crowd gathered to watch.

The guards took the bottles Enon handed them to lift the victims by their shoulders and start pouring the strong ale down their throats. Meanwhile, Barr sent another man riding up to the switchback for a medic. The victims choked a little on the ale until the men learned to pour slowly.

By the time each of the victims had ingested a whole bottle, Tourle was bringing down a medical cart with two men riding beside him. The victims were loaded in, and Numan rode with them to tell Wallace what he, Gabriel, and Stites had observed about the ale's use in Crescent Hollow.

(By this time, with the growth of the Abbey Lands, Estes had secured another physician to live and work in the plots. But as Wallace had directed that all Goulven victims be brought to the fortress, and none of the Lands residents had been infected yet, the new doctor, Coghill, was spared treating them. Instead, he was occupied with deliveries, cuts, fevers, and the occasional broken bone.)

Shanko's part done for the time being, he lay down in the easement, about twenty feet from the gates, to rest until he should be needed again. Loriot turned to head back up to Croft's, Tess beside him.

When the Goulven victims were brought up to Wallace's quarters still blindfolded, Efran came in to look at them. Saluting, Numan said, "Captain, I was telling the doctor that one victim we saw in Crescent Hollow needed two Goadby's, another three, before they started having effect. But we saw the fangs start coming loose within hours. Complete disintegration of the parasite on the spine takes a couple of weeks, from what we heard. But without the fangs, they're no danger to others."

Efran nodded slowly, looking at the skinny old woman with the two red punctures in her shoulder. "A week ago, we would have drowned her or shot her."

Wallace tentatively worked her fangs. "They're already a little loose."

To Numan, Efran said, "Ask Captain Barr to send men to cut down the bait over the Passage. I don't want to drown any more if we can help it. And take a bottle of the new Goadby's to Delano; ask him if he can figure out how to replicate the formula in case we run out."

"Yes, Captain." Numan saluted and left.

After a moment's thought, Efran went to the outer door of Wallace's quarters to whistle. He instructed the young Polonti who ran up, "Get me two men up here." The boy saluted and ran back down the stairs. "Don't run down the stairs," Efran said as an afterthought while the youngster was sprinting down the first-floor corridor.

Shortly, two men arrived at Wallace's quarters, and Efran told the doctor, "I want you to keep these men on hand, and I want the victims strapped to their beds unless you need them up, one at a time. Their eyes are to remain covered. I don't want to take anything for granted; we must not risk another outbreak in the fortress."

"Oh, I agree," Wallace said, gesturing the men in.

"Have you got any Goadby's up here?" Efran asked, looking around.

"No," Wallace said, glancing up.

"Bring him a case, please," Efran said to one man, who saluted and ran off. "Don't run down the stairs," Efran added.

"Yes, Captain!" he called from halfway down the stairs.

On his way out, Efran told the doctor, "Report to me any changes."

“Of course, Efran,” Wallace said.

At that time, Lorient and Tess were sitting at a table in Croft’s. The late-afternoon dinner rush had barely begun, so tables were filling rapidly. As Minka walked into the dining area with two bodyguards, Tess looked up, and the two looked back. Minka set her tea cup on a table, turning to run out. Surprised, her bodyguards left their bottles likewise to follow. Lorient glanced back over his shoulder, but by that time the three were gone. Tess lowered her eyes in vague guilt.

As Minka and her bodyguards retrieved their horses, she said, “I apologize. We’ll just go back to the fortress.”

One of her men, a Polonti named Pleyel, offered, “We can ride around the lake, Lady. It’s safe now that the Leviathan are gone.”

She exhaled, smiling briefly at him. “All right. Thank you.” He nodded in smug satisfaction as they turned their horses on the eastbound road toward the lake.

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Chapter 3

Minka’s other bodyguard, a Southerner named Fennig, was grappling with their swift and unexpected departure from the tavern. “I hope you weren’t frightened by someone at Croft’s, Lady,” he said tentatively. He had seen her looking in the direction of the large, ugly Polonti at table.

She was disclaiming it when Pleyel snorted, “Just that razor-tongued Tess.”

Minka kept her mouth shut as Fennig eyed Pleyel. “The girl who trains horses? What’s wrong with her?”

Pleyel only grunted, knowing better than to start an argument while warding the Captain’s wife.

They walked their horses placidly out to the lake, and Minka glanced up at the gate sentries watching them. Suddenly she wondered if she unconsciously courted trouble on outings just to get Efran’s attention. He had so much weighing on him that she sometimes got very lonely.

As they began walking around the lake ringed by fishermen, she smiled. “I do miss playing with the Leviathan babies, but poor Efran had to come down and fish me out too many times.”

“Not to worry; Lwoff says she’ll be back in a hundred years,” Pleyel said easily.

She laughed, “I will have to leave a note for the new residents not to be alarmed by her nest-building.”

“Makes you wonder what else is here, doesn’t it?” Pleyel asked.

“Yes!” she said. “I wonder about that all the time. But surprises don’t show up until circumstances are right.”

“I’ve never seen that tree up close,” Fennig said, looking up to the fortress rooftop.

“Oh, you must!” Minka said, turning to him. He didn’t know that the trees around the lake had grown from seeds of that rooftop tree. Minka did, but *of course* the original tree was special—it was growing up through the fortress *on the roof* and its roots descended clear down through the caverns into the rock of the hill far below.

“Me, too,” Pleyel said.

“You haven’t seen it, either?” Minka asked, and he shook his head. “Oh, well, let’s go back and run up to see it. Efran will be pleased and surprised that I came back to the fortress under my own power.” They grinned at her, and the courtyard sentries did watch in mild disbelief as she and her bodyguard returned from the lake without incident.

Chatting happily all the way, even when they got to the upper levels of the fortress, Minka led her bodyguard up to the rooftop walkway, where they took one last flight of stairs to the bell tower at the top. Winded and exultant, she brought them out to stand before the mighty faerie tree, whose crown spanned the length and breadth of the entire fortress roof, sending branches down to curl around windows and balconies.

“Isn’t it glorious?” Minka breathed. Thousands of leaves, green on top and copper on bottom, waved to them as faeries peeked out from the branches here and there. “Oh, they’re trying to work and don’t want to entertain visitors,” she laughed. “We won’t bother you; the men just wanted to see your beautiful home.”

Mollified, several faeries came out to greet them. They kissed Minka’s cheeks or stroked her hair, imparting glints of gold to the light brown strands. They teased the men, however, by pulling their hair or sitting on their heads. Pleyel lowered his head, shaking it vigorously. “Let them be,” Minka advised, “or they’ll stay there all day.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, standing very still so that the faeries piled on his head in a pyramid of wings and bright colors.

“Oh, dear,” she said, laughing.

Fennig, meanwhile, had gone exploring around the tree. “There’s a bell tower back here!” he called.

“Yes!” Minka said, following his voice, as did Pleyel. “We hear the bells ring now and then.”

The three stood at the base of the 20-foot-tall bell tower, where the door stood open. “That’s strange,” Fennig murmured, entering to look to his left. As he did, the bells pealed a quiet, low warning.

“What is strange?” Minka asked, following him inside. Pleyel was right with her. They glanced around the interior, barren except for the steps leading up to the wooden platforms below the bells.

“A door just for show? It’s pointed, but the rounded doorway doesn’t match,” Fennig said, going out again.

Minka blinked, then stepped outside to look at the door and the doorway, Pleyel following. The door was sitting flush against the curved exterior of the slate tower to the left of the entrance. Not only did it not match the shape of the doorway next to it, but the hinges were in the wrong place. They were on the edge of the door, but not on the doorway. Therefore, it could not possibly close over the entrance. It looked to be a door that opened out from inside the bell tower. But there was no door handle, and when Minka poked her head in the entrance, looking to the left, she saw nothing but wall—as Fennig had just seen.

“And look at this. A door,” Fennig said. Minka and Pleyel turned to look at him across the small interior of the tower, which was only about ten feet in diameter.

“Another doorway,” Minka whispered. And this one was pointed.

Pleyel stepped out to look at the exterior wall of the tower to the right of the doorway, then came back in to say, “There’s no door on the outside.”

“But there’s no hinges on this side,” Fennig said. “Another decorative door?” However, there was a rusty iron handle on this door.

The three looked at each other, then Minka reached down to turn the handle and push the door open. Before them was the anteroom of a dim cavern of stone. When Minka stepped through the doorway into the anteroom, her bodyguard pushed through, one on either side of her, and the door closed behind them.

Emerging out of the anteroom into a small hall, they saw on their right a beautiful woman standing on a dais in a gorgeous red silk dress, with a golden crown on her head. Faeries rushed past them, saying, “Hail, Queene Adele!”

The woman turned her face to them, her blank white eyes fully open. “Who’s there? Someone different is there! Who is it?”

Minka gasped, trembling violently. “Hail, Queene Adele!” The faeries flowed around them to another door opposite the anteroom.

“Who’s there?” Adele shouted.

Pleyel and Fennig grabbed Minka’s arms from either side and dragged her past the shouting queen to the other door. Pleyel turned the handle to push it open, then they stumbled out onto the walkway surrounding the bell tower. They looked back as the door closed behind them. It was the pointed door with no handle on the outside of the bell tower, to the left of the entrance.

Minka fell into Pleyel, crying. “There, Lady, it’s all right. We’re out; you’re all right,” he said, desperately trying to calm her.

Fennig was shaking his head. “We have to take her to the Captain.”

“No,” she gasped, straightening. “Just—give me a minute. I’m all right.” Then she bent almost double to begin crying again, and the two men walked her gently down all the stairs to the second floor.

As they came close to the door of the workroom, she made them stop. “Give me a minute,” she said, still trembling violently. “You won’t be punished.”

“We’re not worried about that, Lady,” Fennig lied calmly, as Pleyel despondently nodded.

“All right. I’m all right,” she declared, patting Pleyel’s arm with a shaky hand. Lifting her head with her curls quivering, she walked into the workroom, her bodyguards at her side.

Efran glanced up, then lurched to a stand. “Minka! What happened?” he rasped. DeWitt looked up abruptly.

“Efran.” She tottered toward him and he gathered her up while she shook in his arms and cried. “It’s not their fault,” she gasped.

He raised flinty eyes to the men. Fennig straightened and said, “Captain, we found a door in the bell tower on the roof, and entered. It led to a chamber in which a blind woman in a red gown stood with little people hailing her as Queen Adele. This appeared to distress Lady Minka, so we took her back out.” He lifted his shoulders slightly, not knowing what else to say.

Efran’s face drained while he listened, then he smoothed her hair, whispering, “I need you to stay here with Joshua while I go look. All right?”

“Yes,” she said, straightening. “Don’t punish them, Efran. I’m the one who opened the door.”

“They won’t be punished,” he promised her. “But I need to go see.”

“Yes,” she nodded unsteadily. Then she sat on the floor to look at Joshua under the table.

Gesturing the bodyguard out, Efran walked with them down the corridor to the stairway. “That woman is Lady Minka’s sister.”

“What?” Pleyel gasped.

“Long story. But I’m sure Minka’s the one who opened the door,” Efran said dryly, swinging into the stairway.

On the rooftop, Fennig gestured to the bell tower behind the faerie tree. As they approached it, he indicated the pointed door. “That’s the door we came out of.”

Efran glanced at him, then stuck his head in the bell tower to look at the wall on his left. There was no door. He stepped out again to look at the pointed door with no handle. “I don’t remember seeing that door before,” he muttered.

The three of them entered the bell tower, where Pleyel indicated the pointed door on their right with the rusty handle. “This also is new,” Efran muttered. He turned the handle to open the door into the anteroom. They stepped in, and the door closed behind them. Efran looked back at it to see that there was no handle on this side of the door. That was the entry only.

Facing forward, he led out of the anteroom into the small cavern, where the faeries passed them. “Hail, Queene Adele.” He paused to look at Adele, who turned her blank eyes toward them.

“Others. Who are you? Can you get me out?” she breathed.

“Hail, Queene Adele,” said the passing faeries.

“Efran,” Adele whispered, and the two bodyguards looked at him in alarm.

More faeries: “Hail, Queene Adele!” Although they clearly passed out of the cavern, the men did not see them anywhere beyond these stone walls.

Efran looked at the wall on his left, in front of Adele, which was blank. Seeing the door opposite, he walked

toward it, the men close on his heels. “Efran!” she cried as he passed by her. He turned the iron handle to open the door, and the three men stepped out onto the walkway.

Letting the door close behind him, Efran looked at its placement on the bell tower. Yes, this was the door that Fennig had pointed out, with nothing but curved, empty space between the entry to Adele’s cavern and the exit. Yes, she was in the faerie realm, but on the fortress rooftop.

Exhaling, Efran gestured to the men to descend. He uttered, “You did nothing wrong; Minka will explore. At any rate, you kept her away from the lake.”

“Yes, Captain,” Pleyel said in relief before thinking. Then he looked helplessly at Fennig, raising his hands.

Efran dismissed the men before going on to the workroom. There he sat, gesturing Minka to his lap. She came over to scrunch into him, exhaling, “I’m fine, Efran. It was just such a shock. Did you see her?”

“Yes,” he said. “It was all as Fennig said.” He glanced over to DeWitt, whose expression wavered between incredulity and incomprehension.

“Why would Alberon put her there?” she murmured, alternately caressing and twisting his work shirt.

“The King of Faerie will have his fun,” he muttered.

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Chapter 4

An hour previous, when Minka and her bodyguard had just received their drinks at Croft’s, Loriot and Tess had just sat down. Seeing Tess’ eyes flick up in surprise and then drop guiltily, Loriot glanced over his shoulder at a cup of tea and two ales sitting abandoned on a table behind him. That still life was a plain picture of what had happened. Loriot turned back around to eat placidly.

Then he asked, “Who passed by?”

“What?” she asked, startled. “Who?”

“Yes. Who?” he asked.

“Oh,” she said, innocent eyes wide. “No one. No one in particular. Lots of people. Place is filling up.”

“Yes,” he said, suppressing a smile.

There was a silence as she glanced around, either looking for someone or looking to make sure that someone was not here. “I’m certainly not belittling Minka,” she said as if she were accused of doing so.

“Good,” he said.

There was another silence while he ate and she picked at her food. She couldn’t help notice how careful he was

to eat neatly with his large hands. The utensils looked like toys in his bear paws. “What was it like, under Master Crowe?” she asked.

He looked at her in mild surprise, then deliberately wiped his mouth. “A . . . delusion. It was all—not real.”

“But you learned very real skills,” she argued.

“Yes, to serve a fantasy,” he said.

She mulled that over. Then she asked, “Are you happy here?”

“I am content,” he said.

“You don’t look content. You look sad,” she said, eyebrows drawing down.

He hesitated, eyes on his half-finished plate. “I deluded myself about Adele. My gift of discernment was not as reliable as I thought.” All of his answers were slow, almost hesitant.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, staring at her lap.

“I see nothing wrong with your questions,” he said.

There was another long pause while she poked holes in her fillet. “You’re right about the mare,” she said grudgingly.

“That required no deep thought at all,” he said, almost smiling. “You’re too impatient.”

“I know,” she exhaled, slapping her hands on her lap. Then she turned her large brown eyes on him. “How long will I have to wait on you?”

“Give me a month,” he said quietly, taking another careful bite. She closed her eyes, almost groaning.

That evening, Efran held Minka quietly in bed. She had stopped trembling, but still held on to him tightly. This didn’t bother him at all. He asked, “Did she recognize you?”

“No,” she said. “I think the bodyguards confused her. But she recognized you.”

“How did you know?” he asked, turning his head.

“She’s fixated on you. She has been ever since sleeping with you—before then. From the beginning, which is why she came to you late, offering to save your life,” Minka said.

“I’ve wished a hundred times I had kicked her off the cot,” he muttered.

“I don’t. She gave you Joshua, when I haven’t been able to give you any,” she whispered.

Efran groaned, “She tried to abort him.”

“But she couldn’t, because he had to live. I am so glad we have him. But now . . . I don’t understand *why* he

would put her right there above us.” She avoided saying Alberon’s name, and Adele’s, to avoid drawing his attention to their conversation.

“He’s testing me,” Efran said.

“What?” She raised up. “Testing you?”

“Yes. He wants to see what I will do,” he said.

“Why?” she asked.

“To give him an excuse to take you—again, and for good.” He pressed his lips together, watching her.

“No,” she whispered. “Oh, no, Efran. What are you going to do?”

“Nothing.” He raised his brows emphatically. “It was probably a mistake to walk into her hall. But now that I’ve seen it, there’s no need for me to do anything else. I will leave it alone.”

The following day, December 10th, the wall gate guards were excited to send another Goulven victim up to Wallace. (The guards at the new northbound road and the east gates had seen none so far.) Shanko almost missed being the one to whistle, as he had been loitering behind the barracks when the victim was spotted, and another man was preparing his lips for the task.

But Shanko made it to the gates barely in time to begin whistling out the comedy tune, “Heaphy and Livesey Are Heavy but Happy.” The fangs popped out right away, and the man willingly chugged the Goadby’s before being carted up to the fortress.

Wallace summoned Efran to see him, and also the old man and woman who had been brought up to him yesterday. “Look here,” Wallace said, leaning over the woman. He gently pulled on one fang, which came completely loose. The other was barely hanging on.

“Apparently, direct contact with the Goadby’s when it’s swallowed weakens the attachment of the fangs to the parasite body immediately,” Wallace told him, as he and Efran peered into her mouth. “Her teeth are not badly damaged, which is a surprise, considering her age. We gave her and her husband both another Goadby’s, and she’s had a little mash this morning as well.”

Turning to her husband in the next bed, Wallace said, “He’s had a harder time coming around; apparently he was bitten first. But still—” He gently took hold of the fangs, both of which were loose.

Wallace went over to a third bed. “This man now, who came this morning, being younger and stronger, is apparently fighting the parasite. Look.” Wallace took hold of the fangs, which almost came completely out. “He also has had a second Goadby’s.”

The man cracked his eyelids, trying to speak. Wallace patted his shoulder. “Rest now. You’ll be able to talk to us when the fangs drop out.”

The victim raised a hand to take hold of one fang and pull hard, wrenching both out of his mouth. Wallace took them from his fingers so that he and Efran could study the partly torn, partly dissolved connective tissue, and the egg tubes that had connected to the parasitic body.

“Save my wife Portia,” the man whispered. “She’s the only one I have left.”

“We will, if we can find her,” Efran said, patting his shoulder. The man moaned, lying back.

As Wallace put the fangs on a side table, Efran said, “Please write up all that you see and do with the Goulven, and include the information from Ryal’s book on Barthelemon. I want a record specifically on everything we know about them.”

“Oh, yes. Good idea,” Wallace said, then called in Leese to ask her to start on his notes.

Meanwhile, Justinian was impatient to be off, but Efran wouldn’t let him leave until he had approved his bodyguard detail. So Efran took a horse down to Croft’s, where Justinian was standing beside his readied carriage. “Goodbye, Efran,” he said with finality.

“How many in your bodyguard?” Efran said, looking over Marguerite’s men on their horses.

“Four, Efran,” Justinian said.

But Efran turned to whistle loudly. A sentry ran up, whom Efran told, “Get me four volunteers to accompany Justinian’s carriage to Eurus—all whistlers who can carry a tune. And pack Goadby’s with them.”

“Captain!” The man saluted, setting off at a run, as there were no stairs to navigate.

Efran turned back to the men who were mounted and waiting. “You all have Goadby’s in your bags?”

“Yes, Captain,” came the reply in various voices.

“Good. You’re sure to meet Goulven. Subdue them with a whistled tune, pour Goadby’s down their throats, and leave another in their hands. That’s all I know to do since you can’t take them with you. If anyone comes up with a better plan on the road, do it,” Efran said.

They assented as Efran glanced around distractedly. Returning to Justinian, he asked, “Have you got the cases?”

“Yes, Efran, but two is all I’ve got room for,” Justinian said.

“All right, then. You may leave when the rest of your bodyguard arrive. God speed,” Efran said, patting his shoulder.

Justinian smiled. “Thank you, Efran.” Remounting, Efran returned to the fortress.

At this time, Ryal was sternly informing Challinor and Stites, “There is a thirty-day waiting period for remarriage after divorce.”

“But my ex-husband tried to use me to bring suit against Lord Efran, exposing me to great opprobrium,” Challinor pleaded.

Despite his admiration of her vocabulary and sympathy with her plight, Ryal was shaking his head. Stites then said, “The waiting period is waived for military. Shouldn’t it be waived for me to marry her?”

Ryal blinked, then turned to Giardi, who handed him the book of marriages, smiling.

A little later, Delano sent his son Wystan up to the fortress with a message for the Captain. Efran met him in the foyer, where he said, “Captain, Pa asked me to tell you that the new Goadby’s is easy to replicate—it’s made with gruit instead of hops. Pa’s got the ingredients; been experimenting with brewing it because some of the men like it better than the old. Pa likes it better himself; says it’s got a kick to it.”

“Ahh,” Efran said in illumination. “How long would it take to brew up a batch?”

“Three, four weeks,” Wystan said. “Process is already started. Pa predicts it’ll overtake the hops formula in popularity.”

“I see. Thank you, Wystan.” Efran sent him off with a clap on his shoulder. Then Efran turned away, muttering, “Poor Goadby, too feckless to hang on with the new.”

From there, he went up to the second-floor workroom. “Estes! You’re back.”

“Yes, Efran. Eudoxie helped me finish the interviews with the children who were adopted out,” Estes said distractedly, standing over the table to look through papers.

“Good,” Efran said. “How did—” He paused to look around. “I thought I had left Minka up here.”

“Efran,” she said.

He looked around, then under the table to see her on the floor with Joshua. Scrunching himself up, Efran crawled under the table to sit with them. Joshua screamed in laughter; Minka chortled. Bending almost double, Efran said, “This isn’t very comfortable. Would you consider sitting on my lap like you usually do?”

“Yes. Thank you for coming down to us, anyway,” she said, leaning over to kiss him.

He studied her. “We can stay here if we lie down.”

DeWitt barked, “Efran, Pieta is coming up.”

“She won’t see anything down here,” Efran said. Minka, breathing out in laughter, crawled out from under the table, so Efran followed. Joshua started to follow, then scooted back as Efran reached for him.

Crawling out alone, Efran hoisted himself to his chair and leaned over to pull Minka onto his lap. “There,” he exhaled in accomplishment. She put her head on his shoulder and he stroked her hair. When the sunlight hit it just right, it reflected the glints of gold.

Efran looked over her head to Estes. “How did the interviews go?”

“Very well,” Estes said. “Of the one hundred ten children adopted out, we took back only four. Fortunately, there was no abuse involved; they were just bad fits.”

Efran nodded. “How many do we have in the fortress now?”

“Thirteen,” Estes said. “Not burdensome by any means. Eight of those are three years old and younger.”

“Good,” Efran said, nodding slightly. Then his brow wrinkled as he asked, “How did you and Eudoxie get through one hundred ten children in two days?”

“Oh, we worked separately, and the majority of those were siblings that were interviewed together, away from the adoptive parents. We don’t permit siblings to be separated except in extreme circumstances,” Estes said. “And, it was easy to tell right away whether there were problems or not.”

“Ah. Very good,” Efran said. After several minutes of quiet, during which time he just held Minka, he mentioned, “The wall gate guards brought up another Goulven. He pulled out his own fangs to ask us to find his wife Portia. Said she was all he had left.”

Minka absorbed this for a moment, then sat up. “Do you know his name?”

Efran shook his head. “You think you might know him?”

“I’d like to come look at him,” she said, getting up.

So he stood to scoop Joshua out from under the table and nod to the door.

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Chapter 5

Carrying Joshua, Efran walked with Minka down the corridor to Wallace’s quarters. Here, he told Leese, “Minka wants to see the man brought in this morning.”

“Oh. Yes,” Leese said, rising from the table at which she had been writing. “I’m trying to read Wallace’s handwriting for the Goulven book you requested,” she said.

“Ah. Good luck,” Efran said. She laughed lightly, leading them into a side room where the man was sleeping without restraints.

Holding Joshua, Efran watched from the doorway as Minka leaned over to look in his face. She studied him doubtfully a moment, then said, “Plunkett?”

He opened his eyes to focus on her blearily. “You . . . you’re the girl. . . . Adele.”

“You just rest. Wallace will fix you up right well,” she said, patting his shoulder.

She walked swiftly away as he lifted up slightly to call after her. Leese urged him back down, and he groaned, “Please, come back. I’ve lost them all—Portia, and Clute, and Hassie.”

Settling him back into bed, Leese paused. “Hassie? A little girl with light blonde hair?”

“Yes!” he gasped. “Do you know her?”

“Well, I don’t know. There is a Hassie here, but I don’t know if she’s yours,” Leese said guardedly.

“Bring her here. Bring her to me, and I’ll tell you,” he said, agitated.

“We’ll see. You just get better,” Leese instructed. He exhaled, laying his head back.

Meanwhile, Efran followed Minka down the corridor. “Do you know him?”

“Yes,” Minka said. “That’s Clute’s father, and—”

“Clute,” Efran said. “The man who followed you down here. The one that Martyn killed.” Joshua put his head down on Efran’s shoulder, yawning.

“Yes. But the new patient is also Hassie’s father,” she said. “Has she been adopted out?”

“Hassie? No, I don’t think so. Let’s check with Estes again,” Efran said.

They returned to the workroom, where Pieta and DeWitt were conferring. Estes had sat by this time. At Efran’s entrance, DeWitt said, “I keep forgetting to warn you, Efran—the men are digging test wells out in the far eastern section. They should be barricaded, but keep watch when you ride out there.”

“Yes, thank you, DeWitt,” Efran acknowledged, then asked, “Estes, has Hassie been adopted yet?”

Estes looked up. “No, Efran. She seems to like it here. Lots of other children to play with. Why?”

“Minka says our newest Goulven victim is her father,” Efran said, removing Joshua’s fingers from his lips so he could speak clearly.

“Ohhh,” Estes said.

DeWitt asked, “Does that mean he’s entitled to take her when he recuperates?”

“We must ask Hassie,” Minka insisted.

Estes nodded. “If she doesn’t want to go with him, she doesn’t have to.”

“Also, Portia is his wife, and I suppose Hassie’s mother. If she’s also Goulven. . . .” Minka shrugged.

“He recognized you,” Efran noted.

“Yes. I gave them the name ‘Adele,’” Minka admitted.

“What kind of a father did he seem to be?” Efran asked.

“My opinion means nothing. We must ask Hassie,” she reiterated.

“Yes, we’ll do that,” Efran said, turning.

They stopped by the nursery for him to pick up another sling for Joshua, who settled down in it to go to sleep on Efran’s chest. Then they went out to the back grounds to look around the children’s favorite haunts.

After a few minutes' fruitless search, Efran said, "They might be—" And then a group of children ran out the back door, evidently just freed from class. Efran nodded, so he and she began walking over with Joshua soundly asleep.

"Efran!" Toby shouted, running over. "You and Minka have to come see our new garden in front of the hut!" He paused to pat the sleeping baby on Efran's chest.

Efran said, "Joshua and I will come now, Toby. Minka and Hassie will follow in a moment."

"Oh," Toby said, glancing back at Hassie, who looked at Minka. "All right; you girls hurry." Toby, Alcmund, Noah, Ivy, Cleo, Erastus, and the new residents Beischel, Chorro, and Jera clustered around Efran as they all walked around the west side of the fortress toward the gates.

Hassie looked inquiringly at Minka, who said, "Here, let's sit." She walked the child to the bench under the great old walnut tree. Minka sat, and Hassie scooted up to her, swinging her legs.

"You seem to have made a lot of friends, Hassie. Do you like it here?" Minka asked.

Hassie nodded, eyes wide. "I like all of it. I like the other children—especially Toby—and the food, except not the crayfish. I can't bear to eat them. And the soldiers are so nice, that give us rides on their shoulders. But I don't like numbers. I can't make them work right."

"Well, do the best you can, and don't worry about it," Minka said. "Hassie, Plunkett came to us very sick. He is in the doctor's quarters, getting better. He should be well soon. He wants to see you. Do you want to see him?"

Hassie swung her legs, thinking. "Clute is dead?"

"Yes, Hassie. You will never see him again."

"What about Portia?" Hassie asked.

"We don't know where she is. She may be sick, as well," Minka said.

"Do I have to go live with Plunkett?" Hassie asked.

"Only if you want to. But we don't have to decide that yet," Minka said.

"Do I have to see him right now?" Hassie asked.

"No, of course not," Minka said.

Hassie got off the bench. "Then come down and see our garden. I planted the poppies, and they're already coming up."

Minka stood to walk with her. "Already? Then you must have the green touch."

"That's what Toby says," Hassie said smugly.

Swinging hands, Minka and Hassie went around the west side of the fortress to the courtyard. Below, they could

see Efran and his entourage, including several soldiers, walking up Main toward the wall gates. Although the hut was outside the gates and across the Passage, Efran considered it safe enough for the children to play in now, with a bodyguard. He knew how important it was to them.

Minka smiled at the courtyard gate guards: “We’re following Efran and the other children.”

“Yes, Lady Minka.” The gate guard, another new Polonti, smiled broadly at her while the other guard opened the gates. But since the Captain, the children, and their guards were so far ahead, Fellowes peeled off to escort Minka and Hassie.

They began walking down the switchback, but that was not fast enough for Hassie, who started trotting. Having had much experience running and falling on the switchback, Minka continued to walk. Therefore, she was able to stop and help Hassie up when she fell. Then Minka held her hand to restrain her. “We’ll get there soon enough.”

“I know,” Hassie said grudgingly, wiping gravel from her knees. (DeWitt was still trying to work out a schedule for paving the switchback.) Fellowes was preoccupied watching riders and carts to make sure they didn’t crowd his charges.

As they approached the wall gates, Minka heard Efran’s whistle of alarm. Although she was unable to see him over the eight-foot stone walls, he and the children were paused on the near side of the bridge over the Passage. The whistle was repeated by the wall guards, and Shanko ran up to the gates.

Minka and Hassie drew up behind him to see a woman walking toward them. Minka gasped and Hassie said, “That’s Portia.”

“Come back from the gates, Hassie,” Minka said, trying to turn her around.

“Portia!” Hassie called, resisting Minka’s efforts.

Shanko began whistling a tune so that Portia stopped, her fangs dropping over her chin. Hassie screamed at the sight, and did then accept refuge in Minka’s riding skirts. When the men opened the gates to bring Portia in and feed her a Goadby’s, Hassie ran out toward Efran and the other children. Minka followed as Hassie crossed the old stone bridge at a run and then turned left on the paved road to the new bridge over the Passage, where Efran and the other children had paused. Fellowes covered his charges from behind.

Hassie threw herself on Efran’s legs while the children crowded around her. When Minka and Fellowes drew up, winded, Efran asked uneasily, “Did she see it?” Joshua woke up slightly, then put his head back down on his father.

“Yes,” Minka exhaled. “But more: that’s Portia.”

“Oh no,” Efran breathed.

Hassie cried, “Is that how they’re sick? Is that going to happen to me?”

“No!” Minka cried, kneeling to embrace her.

Toby said authoritatively, “That only happens to grown-ups, and we’ve found a way to get them back to normal.”

“Really?” Hassie said, withdrawing from Minka to look at him.

“Yes,” Toby said, sounding just like Efran.

Hassie accepted this without question. Taking Minka’s hand again, she instructed, “Now you must come see my poppies sprouting.” Fellowes took up his position beside her.

“Of course,” Minka said, standing. She looked up to Efran, who raised his brows. Then he peered at her in sudden displeasure. “What?” she asked in alarm. He shook his head as the children were stampeding them over the bridge toward the hut. But he glanced back at her with a mild scowl.

“What?” Minka asked again, pained.

“Here,” Hassie said, pointing. “These are my poppies. Those are pumpkins, and those are . . . what?”

“Barley shoots,” Erastus said. The mildness of the climate at the Lands, being so close to the Sea, enabled almost anything to sprout in early December.

“That’s wonderful!” Minka said, tears in her eyes.

Efran was muttering, “She’s mine. Leave her alone.” She looked at him in bewilderment.

As the children ran to their enclosed playground attended by bodyguards who could whistle tunes, Efran glanced at Minka’s gold-tinted hair again. “He’s trying to make you into faerie.”

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Chapter 6

“What?” Minka said, uncomprehending.

“She’s mine, Alberon! Leave her alone!” Efran shouted. Joshua fully woke, then.

There was the echo of a light laugh on the breeze, and the gold highlights in Minka’s hair faded slightly. Not the least bit comforted, Efran put an arm tightly around her as they watched the children play. Joshua wanted to get down and play with them, which Efran disallowed for now.

Hassie declined to see Plunkett today, and refused to commit to seeing him or Portia at any time in the future.

Two days later, on December 12th, the bodyguard Efran had sent with Justinian returned in the late afternoon to report. Efran had them put in the small dining room with dinner, then collected Minka to hear them. And since Ryal had come up to return some books borrowed from the fortress library, Efran dragged him into the small dining room, as well. Joshua he turned loose on the floor to crawl around under the table, patting the men’s feet.

The men—Stephanos, Arne, Tourse and Hawk—started out by devouring the beef rolls, crayfish and rapini.

Glancing at the Delano's ale, Arne (being one of the old guard who had served under Efran at Westford, and therefore entitled) asked, "May we imbibe the new Goadby's, Captain?"

"Yes, if you want," Efran said, eyeing them. "Who all wants the Goulven remover?"

All four of them raised a hand or a finger. When Efran looked mildly surprised at the uniformity, Hawk explained, "It bites."

"It's addicting," Stephanos agreed.

Efran looked expectantly at Tourse, who admitted, "It's rather satisfying to swallow something that fights back, Captain."

Laughing mildly, Efran turned inquiringly to Minka, who screwed up her face. "Eww. Give me the Delano's."

"Ryal?" Efran asked, smiling.

The elderly notary shook his head. "I'm with Minka; I don't need any inducements to stagger."

The men laughed, shoving their bottles toward him and her. Efran instructed the sentry, Elowen, "Bring four of the new Goadby's." He saluted as Efran turned back around to tell them, "Delano is replicating the formula; should have a batch ready within a month."

"Really?" Arne asked in anticipation, and the men looked gratified.

Seeing that they were silent while eating, Efran leaned back. "Don't rush; I have all day to hear your report."

Tourse lightly choked, then said, "We met a handful of Goulven coming and going, Captain. Euris was relatively clear but alarmingly quiet. The amazing Lady Marguerite carries on without difficulty—said that her men simply shove the Goulven down; once they fall, they have trouble getting back up. And her men have perfected their own counter-Goulven stare."

This Tourse demonstrated with a piercing gaze at Efran, one eyebrow flattened and the other arched. Minka laughed richly. Tourse resumed, "Hartshough also discovered that a shot of spirit vinegar kills the parasite and quickly disintegrates the fang attachment."

"Spirit vinegar," Efran breathed in illumination.

"Have to lay them out on the floor to administer that, however; it makes them flop around something fierce. She showed us her collection of Goulven victims in her basement. Once treated, it takes only a few days for them to recuperate enough to go home," Tourse continued. "And, once bitten, they seem to be immune to further attacks—other Goulven simply steer clear of them."

Efran exhaled, looking at Minka. "Why do we bother worrying about Marguerite at all?"

Smiling, she replied, "Because we love her."

Efran muttered, "She's better suited to rule Euris than anyone on the Continent." He looked back at Mohr in the

doorway to say, "Plead kindly with Madea to give up all of her spirit vinegar to Wallace and order three times more from wherever she gets it. Tell her what we just learned about it."

Mohr saluted and darted away, almost running into Elowen returning with new Goadby's for the bodyguard. As Efran handed out those bottles, he asked, "So what is Reinagle doing?"

Tourse made a point to resume eating, flicking his fork toward Hawk. With a light laugh, Hawk wiped his mouth and said ironically, "Oh, he's off to a roaring start, Cap'n. He's surrounded himself with the Goulven hunters who kill everyone they say is infected, but, seeing as most people know that the parasite can be treated, they don't want their friends and neighbors killed. So there's a solid block of resistance on that front. One of the men has mysteriously disappeared; the other Goulven hunters claim he was murdered, but no one is saying anything and they can't prove anything, so—" Hawk shrugged, taking a swig of the fighting Goadby's.

After swallowing, he added, "Then he's trying to browbeat the nobles, but those who've survived real despots just flatter him to his face and bribe his administrators behind his back. Oh, he married Bowring's daughter Trina. She looked really unhappy."

Efran looked perturbed. "I wonder if we need to get her out of Eurus."

"Oh, be careful," Ryal warned.

"Why?" Efran asked, attentive.

"The wife of a Surchatain is special property anywhere on the Continent; taking her is a capital offense, even if she desires it. Doing anything to help the wife run away is a declaration of war, which you do not need right now," Ryal said sternly.

"Ow," Efran winced. "Are there no circumstances in which I could help her?"

"Yes, there is a finely drawn exemption which is up to her—or someone close to her—to put in play: should she show up on your Lands without your knowledge in need of assistance, you are permitted to give her refuge," Ryal said. "That allows truly abused wives to escape."

"I see. That's why I have you here, Ryal," Efran muttered.

Stephanos added, "Good thing we didn't listen to her, then. She asked if we could bring her back with us. We discussed it, then decided that without your authorization, we couldn't risk it."

"Watch for her to show up here unannounced, then," Tourse noted.

Efran asked them, "Is Bowring in Eurus?"

Tourse made a negatory gesture and Hawk raised his shoulders in ignorance: "If he is, he's laying low."

"I see," Efran murmured, lifting his eyes in thought. He glanced at Minka, but she shook her head, indicating that she had no opinion about it, or no questions for them.

Mohr trotted up to the door to salute. "Captain, the kitchen mistress says they make their own vinegar, so will step up production if it's needed. She sent up about a gallon to the doctor."

“Ah. Good, thank you,” Efran said. Mohr withdrew.

After a few minutes of silence while the bodyguard finished eating and drinking, Efran said, “All right, then, well done. If you’ve nothing more—”

“Arghh!” Tourse said suddenly, prompting a screech of laughter from Joshua under the table. Tourse reached into his jacket pocket to extend a sealed letter to Efran. “Lord Justinian had a few thoughts,” he explained.

“Which of course we would have remembered to give you, Captain,” Hawk said, eyeing Tourse.

“Thank you,” Efran said dryly. “You’re dismissed. And thank you for joining us, Ryal.”

“You’re welcome,” he nodded, rising. “Minka,” he added, and she smiled at him. The scouts stood, saluting, and left as well.

Efran bent to check on Joshua under the table, just making sure that he was not eating anything unauthorized. Then he stood to move down a chair to sit next to Minka. He broke the seal on Justinian’s letter and opened it for her to read silently with him:

“To my *deliziosa* cookie:

“Not to say that your Gargoyle overdoes anything, but 8 bodyguards each on their own separate horse for a jaunt from the Lands to Eurus is not something I will voluntarily repeat in future. Although your men were courteous to the extreme, they did displace Lady M’s men from the front and sides of my carriage to the rear, ensuring that they were singularly unprepared for any oncoming surprises. Fortunately, there were none, and if there were, I didn’t know about them, and the driver refuses to say.

“I believe your men observed that our divine Lady M has the Goulven well in hand (as she has everyone else) and the band of ruffians that Surchatain R has retained is not enhancing his standing in the hearts of the people. Whatever capacity their detector had for discerning Goulven victims seems to have been enlarged to include detractors of Surchatain R, and all are killed without any attempt at treatment. The citizens have previously been cowed into submitting to such tyranny by powerful men with broad chests and thick beards who roared in deep voices, but—

“R is a spindly, whiny, feeble-looking sort of dictator with thinning gray hair and a bald spot. Therefore, he probably won’t be abiding with us to ring in the new year.

“One final point: Your Gargoyle may be acquainted with R’s wife, the Lady Trina. While no one can quite figure out why an astute young woman would throw in her lot with a doddering, soon-to-be-displaced petty despot, some observers detect signs of a hidden agenda. Caution is warranted.

“Strange how I never noticed the gold in your hair, or the intense depth of your blue eyes. I find myself wishing that the bride stealer had never got his prize.

“Yours always,

“Justinian”

After a moment of silence, she murmured, “You know he says that to afflict you. He never wanted to marry me, and he still doesn’t.”

“Except that he’s not the only one noticing,” Efran said, eyes downcast as he folded the letter. “You’re being dangled as shiny bait in a river full of fish.”

“If so, I’m bait that bites back,” she murmured. He looked up quickly, and she raised a smiling brow at him. He leaned over to take her in his arms while Joshua grabbed his pants leg to hoist himself up and pat his father’s knee.

That evening, three days after Minka’s bodyguards had accompanied her into the faerie cavern prison of her sister, Pleyel found that he couldn’t resist telling his closest friends in Barracks #2 about it. They derided him thoroughly for his storytelling until he insisted, “Go look for yourselves! Anyone can walk in!”

“You take us up, then,” one friend challenged.

“No,” Pleyel shuddered. “It was—enchanted. The kind of place you don’t want to be stuck in for long.”

“Oh, good excuse,” they laughed. He kept insisting it was real, while adamantly refusing to lead a tour group. So the talk devolved, as it usually did, into a discussion of the prettiest maids in the fortress and who had gotten the furthest with whom.

By then, the bunkmate who had been listening rolled over on his cot to close his eyes even before Numan came through ordering lights out, so that lanterns and candles across the hall were extinguished and the men left their arguments for later. But this man, Seagrave, had a few hours to spare tomorrow, so decided he’d go check out the story of the lady on the dais.

The next day, December 13th, after having been treated with spirit vinegar, Plunkett was up and about while his wife Portia was sitting up. He was quietly overjoyed that she had followed him down here, but she was wary and mistrustful. “These people killed Clute,” she murmured, darting her eyes at the doctor’s wife as she went to someone in the outer room.

“We have to put that behind us,” Plunkett told her. “We’ve got to find a new life anyway, with no one in Westford to buy peat anymore.”

Portia wailed, “But without Clute, or even Hassie—”

“Hassie’s here,” Plunkett said.

“She is? I knew it! Have you seen her?” she asked.

“No, but we will, when you’re all well,” he said.

“Then we’ll take her and leave this place, and be a family again,” she said, lying back and closing her eyes.

“Yes,” he said, stroking her gray-brown hair.

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Chapter 7

That afternoon, following his shift on guard duty at the back fortress door, Seagrave decided it was a good time to check out the lady stuck on the rooftop. He'd attract no attention in his uniform, and it was still hours away from sunset. So he trotted easily up all the sets of various stairs to the highest point of the fortress, that of the bell tower platform.

Emerging from the stairwell onto the rooftop, he paused at the faerie tree. Huge, magnificent, it stood watch over the fortress like a sleepless sentinel. He regarded the bi-colored leaves flitting, and noted that their movements could not be a result of the wind alone. Yes, the tingle of faerie magic was pronounced up here.

He went around the spreading trunk, taking note of everything he saw. He noted the points of light deep in the leaves where the sun did not penetrate, and the sound of flowing water when none was possible. He understood Pleyel's reluctance to come up here uninvited a second time: there was a capricious power here that might do harm to an unwary, unwelcome visitor.

On impulse, Seagrave bowed to the tree. "Forgive my uninvited visit. I merely came to see something that we're apparently allowed to see. If I trespass, please bid me to leave—gently, if you would," he added, then detected an answering twitter in the depth of the tree.

As there seemed to be no objection, he went watchfully past the tree to the bell tower. Here, he stopped to study everything: the pointed door on the left with hinges and no handle, the round-topped entryway, and the uninterrupted slate siding to the right.

Stepping into the dim tower, he regarded the wooden steps leading up to the bell platforms above. He looked to the left to see a blank wall, and looked to the right to see a pointed door with a rusty iron handle but no hinges. He walked around the small interior of the tower to the back of the steps, seeing nothing different from what he had seen entering.

Standing before the pointed door, he reached down to turn the handle and push the door open. A small, dim anteroom lay before him, beyond which was the main hall, also small. Around him flowed faeries half his size who paused in the hall to bow to someone on the right and say, "Hail, Queene Adele," before flowing out.

Seagrave let go of the door to watch it close silently behind him. The faeries did not need it for entry; they simply appeared on this side of the door to flow through the hall to the other side. There, approximately fifteen feet away, he saw the second pointed door. It also had a rusty iron handle but no hinges. Nor did the faeries need to open this door to exit after their requisite greeting, "Hail, Queene Adele." They simply flowed through it.

Looking aside, he regarded the small torches that burned in holders on either side of the anteroom, without giving light or heat. Raising a hand to touch one flame, Seagrave felt nothing. It was an illusion.

Pensively, he walked into the main hall, looking at the stone all around—it appeared to be covered with a thin, irregular layer of ice which enclosed a black ring. With her eyes closed, a beautiful woman on a dais lifted her head. "Another stranger. Have you come to stare, to mock, to laugh at me in my prison?"

He regarded her without answering, finding her just as Pleyel had described. For the moment, Seagrave was

more interested in her prison. Experimentally, he reached out to feel the stone across from her—and his hand went right through it. He reached in farther, finding no impediment. So he slowly leaned his head into the stone to look around. There was nothing but blackness beyond. He carefully withdrew his head, and turned back to her.

“Who are you? Why have you come?” she whispered. He took a step closer; sensing that, she held out her hand. “How I yearn to feel the touch of a man again. Touch my hand. Please.”

Eyeing her, he reached out to barely touch the wide skirt of her dress instead—and his fingers went right through it, as they had the stone. “Don’t just stand there. Take my hand! Let me feel you!” she pleaded—apparently unaware that he had put his hand through her dress.

He extended his hand farther into the illusion of her dress, and heard the bells sound a warning note. So he removed his hand and backed away. “Talk to me. What is your name?” she whispered.

Slowly, cautiously, he went to the exit. While she cried, “Wait! Don’t leave me in loneliness!” he turned the rusty handle and pushed open the door to step out on the bell tower walkway. Letting the door close on its own, he looked back at its smooth movement on rusty hinges.

He turned to watch the sunset in progress, then began to walk back around the tree. Pausing, he bowed again to its branches. “Thank you for your kind permission to explore. And thank you especially for the warning. I am grateful.”

“You are welcome,” Kele whispered back to him, although he didn’t see her.

Then he went down all the stairs to the second floor. Finding the workroom empty, he went on down to the dining hall. There, he saw the Captain seated at the table in back with his wife. Approaching the bench on which he sat, Seagrave saluted. “Seagrave reporting, Captain.”

Efran glanced back at him in disinterest, but Minka looked. Seagrave continued, “I went exploring on the rooftop, Captain, and thought you should hear what I found.”

Efran turned full around at that. Seagrave looked down at him and said, “It’s a trap.”

“Sit down and tell me about it,” Efran said, looking down the crowded bench. Quennel, on Efran’s left, scooted down to his left, crowding Ella nicely. She moved down as well, while Minka moved down to her right, taking Hassie onto her lap. Toby, next to Minka, was holding Joshua on his lap, feeding him bites of pie off his own plate.

When there was barely sufficient room on Efran’s left, he motioned, “Sit.” Seagrave did, and Efran raised his face toward Dobell. While he was on his way over to their table, Efran asked Seagrave, “Do you want Delano’s or the new Goadby’s?”

“The new Goadby’s, if it’s available. Thank you, sir,” Seagrave said.

He reached up to receive a plate of beef and rapini from Dobell’s hand, who said, “The new Goadby’s is on its way.”

“I’ll drink whatever’s available,” Seagrave said.

“Very good,” Dobell said noncommittally.

As Dobell went to fetch Seagrave's drink, Efran asked, "Where are you from?"

"I was in the Gold when Lightfoot announced the loyalty oath, Captain. Took off, then; came here when I heard that you were here. That was about eight months ago," Seagrave said.

"The Gold. Captain Spohr?" Efran asked.

"No, sir, Captain Messiter," Seagrave said with a slight frown.

"Messiter. Of course, what was I thinking?" Efran muttered, and Seagrave got the impression of being tested. "Tell me what you found," Efran said.

"Yes, sir." Seagrave briefly put down his fork. "I heard my bunkmates talking about the lady in the bell tower, so thought I'd go have a look. As soon as I got up to the rooftop and saw the tree with all the faeries, it—got my wind up. They can be treacherous." Efran glanced at him in comprehension, chewing.

Seagrave continued, "So I asked permission of the faeries to look in the bell tower. When they didn't object, I went in to look around." While Ella, Quennel, Efran, and Minka listened, Seagrave described his exploration in the cavern, discovering that the torch fires, the stone, and even the woman's dress were illusion.

"But she herself was definitely there, in some respect, and she was playing on me hard to touch her—reaching out to me, pleading for a man's touch. In hindsight, it was very dangerous touching her dress, even though it was illusion, for something bad would have happened had I made contact with her physically. In fact, when I put my hand through the illusion of her skirts, I heard the bell strike a warning. It's possible that touching her would have freed her from the cavern and put me there in her place," Seagrave said.

"Yes," Minka agreed, telling Efran, "When I looked like a spider, you had to touch my hand to break the spell. And since she was pleading with him to touch her hand, what he says is likely."

Nodding, Efran stood, stepped over the bench, and walked to the front of the hall. "May I have your attention for just a moment?" The hall quieted, and he said, "I've just been made aware of a dangerous weakness in the roof. For the time being, the bell tower level is off limits to anyone. Let me repeat that no one is allowed on the rooftop at this time. Spread the word, please. Thank you."

Efran returned to the table to pensively sit and take a drink (of the new Goadby's). "That was foolhardy. Well done, Seagrave," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Seagrave laughed dryly. He picked up his fork again.

Efran sat still over his plate, studying the far wall. "Torches," he mused. "Do you remember seeing torches in the anteroom?" he asked Minka.

She thought hard for a minute. "No," she finally said. "They were unnecessary; the whole space was lit, but dimly."

"For my visit as well," Efran murmured. "Nor did she ask me to touch her. She asked if I could get her out before she recognized me. Then we left pretty quickly. But she begged Seagrave to touch her hand."

He glanced at Minka's nodding, then asked Seagrave, "Did you see her eyes?"

Seagrave swallowed, then said, “No, sir. She had her eyes closed the whole time.”

Efran inhaled, looking back to Minka. She studied him, then said, “Someone told her how to get out.”

“Yes,” Efran whispered. “But then why the torches?”

There was a short silence, then Seagrave said, “I could venture a guess.” Efran looked at him inquiringly, and Seagrave said, “Torches burning with no smoke, no heat, no additional light to what was already there. It was too obviously fake.”

“Someone was giving you a clue,” Minka whispered, remembering Kele’s “clue” of the eggshell in the box. “And the bells’ warning! You know—we heard the bells too, when we entered the anteroom. I had forgotten about that.”

Efran looked off in thought, then shook his head slightly. “I don’t remember hearing them. Maybe it wasn’t necessary; I had no intention of touching her or speaking to her.”

While they sat thinking through this, Quennel stood and helped Ella out from the bench. She said, “Father, may we walk around the back grounds?”

Still looking off, Efran replied vaguely, “Stay in the light. Quennel, take along someone who doesn’t like you.”

“Yes, Captain,” Quennel groaned, while Ella expelled a half-laugh.

Efran was still wrestling with the bell tower. Hassie jumped off Minka’s lap to join other children rising from their tables. Minka took a sleepy Joshua off Toby’s lap, freeing him to go supervise the children. She said, “I’ll take him to the nursery and be right back.”

Efran turned to take the baby so that she could get up from the bench. “Can you carry him?” he asked, as she stood behind him.

“Yes,” she said, offended, but then had to hoist Joshua higher up on her shoulder to carry him out. Efran watched dubiously from his seat.

After she left, he turned back around to toy sightlessly with his fork. “You seem to know something of faerie,” Efran remarked to Seagrave.

“From one or two accidental trespasses,” Seagrave said. “Fortunately, I never met one that was malicious nor very powerful.”

“Did any of them answer you when you spoke to them?” Efran asked.

“On the roof?” Seagrave asked, and Efran nodded. “Possibly,” Seagrave said hesitantly. “When I came out and thanked them for the warning, someone might have replied. But I hardly know whether I heard it or imagined it.”

“You heard it; someone helped you,” Efran murmured. “But *why* . . . ?”

When Minka returned to her seat, Efran asked, “Can you talk to Kele? Ask her what she knows about this?”

Minka glanced up to the rafters. “Kele? Will you . . . ? She says tomorrow,” Minka said, stifling a yawn.

“Yes,” Efran said, standing and helping her rise again.

Seagrave shot up off the bench. Efran asked him, “Whose unit are you in?”

“Rigdon, sir. He’s been moved up here,” Seagrave replied.

“Good. Let the back door sentry know where you’ll be on duty tomorrow,” Efran said.

“That’s me, Captain,” Seagrave laughed.

“Good. I may want to talk to you again,” Efran said, patting his shoulder. “Dismissed.”

“Thank you, Captain. Lady Minka.” Seagrave bowed to her and she smiled sleepily at him.

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Chapter 8

As Efran and Minka started out of the dining hall, Lorient approached with a salute. “Apologies, Captain, Lady Minka. I’d like a word with you, sir.”

Efran nodded, whispering to Minka, “Go on to bed; I’ll be there directly.”

“All right. Good night, Lorient,” she murmured, and he bowed to her.

Efran watched her leave the dining hall, then turned back to Lorient, who said, “Captain, I’ve been watching the men handle the newest Goulven with the—whistling, and the spirit vinegar, and now just pushing them down and staring back. I . . . don’t understand this. None of that would have been possible with the one that bit you. She was far too powerful, mentally; her stare completely drained me. Had you not speared her, I would have been bitten.”

Efran raised his face to contemplate this new mystery. “Yes,” he murmured. “She had power that the others don’t have. All I can think is that something—profound happened when Delano’s wife Madgwick ordered the ‘nasty thing’ out. Apparently, that power left not only Adele, but—this realm. Only the physical parasite remains.”

“That would explain it,” Lorient allowed. Then he said, “Tell me about the problem on the roof, Captain.”

Efran almost growled, “Yes, it involves Adele. But I forbid you to go up there, Lorient.”

“I understand, Captain. But please tell me what you have found out,” Lorient said.

Glancing around, Efran took him from the dining hall, which the kitchen workers were trying to clean, out into the corridor. Then he told him all about the bell tower doorway that led to Adele’s cavern, her desire to touch her visitors, and why. Efran ended, “I forbid you offering yourself, Lorient.”

“I understand, Captain,” Lorient repeated.

“Good. Good night,” Efran said, eyeing him. Lorient saluted, turning away.

Efran returned to his quarters to find Minka curled up in bed, sound asleep, as she should be. Exhaling in relief, he undressed to his breeches to lie down beside her and insert her into his side. Still asleep, she curled her arm over his chest, sighing. And he took a deep breath in contentment.

Lorient walked down the switchback and down Main to Barracks #1 below, where he slept. As he lay on the too-small cot, he contemplated his last night on earth. In the morning, he would do something he had never done before: defy a superior officer’s command. Adele did not love him; never had, but when a Polonti man took a wife, he swore to protect her life with his own. Captain Efran knew this; he had demonstrated it with his own wife frequently, most recently by entering the battle arena to protect her with his own body.

Lorient had offered himself earlier to replace Adele in her eternal confinement, but was rejected. And now he believed he knew why: his offer was insincere; he had not really wished it. Now, he knew that it was inevitable. He must perform the duty of a Polonti husband to his wife. Whether Adele had not really been transformed into faerie or whether King Alberon could transform her back to human, Lorient didn’t know. Ultimately, it didn’t matter; he would be likewise transformed, or not.

So he lay his head back on the skimpy pillow to sleep as a human for the last time.

When Lorient awoke before daybreak on December 14th, he dressed and went to Captain Barr’s office in the front of the barracks. The Captain and his scribe Numan, having just entered, looked up at Lorient’s appearance. He saluted and said, “Captain, I have one remaining duty at the fortress before I start the day.”

Barr nodded. “Make it quick; I need you.”

“Yes, Captain,” Lorient said with a heavy heart. Then he turned to walk up Main to the switchback. The courtyard gate guards—Polonti—opened them with a salute, to which he nodded. Unnoticed, he went up all the stairways to the bell tower entry.

At that time, Minka found Kele to ask her pointedly about the bell tower, and why Adele’s prison had to be there. Kele’s answer was guarded and reluctant; she was obviously afraid of being overheard—and possibly punished—by Alberon. So she said, “We are decidedly unhappy with the new occupant; she stinks the place up so. The bell faeries can hardly ring at all, and—we’re powerless to prevent something awful happening to the man who stumbles into her trap. We’ve grown fond of your men; they are silly but courteous creatures.”

“Yes, we’re fond of them, too. Thank you, Kele; I’ll tell Efran,” Minka said, and Kele added a tiny splash of blonde to her hair as she turned away. No need to irritate the Captain with more gold.

Lorient paused at the bell tower entry to collect himself, searching his heart. Yes, as far as he knew, this was a willing act. So he entered the doorway and took hold of the rusty iron handle to open the door into Adele’s prison.

There were no torches; the cavern was very dim. As he entered the small hall, Adele's head shot up. "Who is it?" she asked eagerly. "Efran?"

"No, Adele," he said, disappointed that she was still seeking the Captain after having himself as her husband. "It's Lorient."

"Lorient," she said in satisfaction, smiling like a leopard over a gazelle. "Have you come to free me, darling?"

"Yes, Adele," he said.

Baring her teeth in the pretense of a loving smile, she reached out her hand. "Then take my hand, dear Lorient."

He paused to control the pounding of his heart. He did not relish the thought of spending eternity in this illusion of rock, but neither would he allow any other human to deliver him from it. Soldiers must be prepared to die, so that is how he viewed his duty today.

He reached out his right hand to hers. As their fingers touched, there was a brilliant, blinding flash and crackle. Lorient fell back against the opposite wall (which felt quite solid) clutching his hand, the fingertips of which had been severely burned. He barely restrained a cry of pained surprise. Far below, Minka awoke with a start at the fierce pulsing of pain above her. She threw the bedcovers aside to begin to dress, Efran having already left.

Adele cried, "What happened? What are you doing? Lorient! Stop that! Take my hand!" She stretched out quivering fingers as far as she could reach.

Gripping his right wrist, Lorient staggered out the opposite door, which had opened on its own. Exiting faeries chastised him, "Silly mortal."

"Why?" he cried.

More faeries flowed out with the rebuke, "Lorient is rejected as replacement for Queene Adele."

"Ohh." He leaned on the slate bell tower in comprehension: It was not a matter of his heart at all. His Captain had disallowed it, and for whatever reason, that dictate took precedence over anything he owed Adele. With his whole hand and forearm throbbing, he began staggering down the multiple stairways.

Minka encountered him as he was coming down to the second floor. She regarded him clutching his hand, then she pulled him down to hug his neck fiercely. Because he showed no change of expression, she assumed that her hug no longer healed. So she barged into the doctor's quarters dragging the towering Polonti by two of his fingers (on his left hand). Wallace came out sleepily from his bedroom. "What?—"

Minka showed him Lorient's fingers, and Wallace sucked in a breath. "Good Lord, man, what'd you grab onto? Bring him in here; set him down. Here, give him a Goadby's—that's got to hurt like the devil."

Opening the bottle, she put it in his left hand, and he took a drink while Wallace spread his fingers. "Leese? The burn ointment."

Still in her nightrobe, Leese came in with the ointment to peer in distress at his fingertips. Lorient drank while Wallace applied the ointment and wrapped his fingers in clean cotton. Wallace then tied a sling under his elbow and around his neck. "Keep that hand elevated," he instructed.

Loriot began to move away, but Wallace and Leese grabbed him to lay him on a nearby bed. “You’re not doing anything today,” Wallace ordained.

“I have duty,” Loriot uttered.

“It will have to wait,” Wallace said without pity. Minka patted Loriot’s shoulder, then went out into the corridor.

Plunkett and Portia were watching from behind the door of the next room. “That’s her! Adele! The man with her murdered Clute!” she hissed. Portia was not practiced in distinguishing one Polonti from another.

“Well, never mind that now. Hassie is here; we’ll get her and leave,” Plunkett said.

“Good,” Portia said. “But we can’t slip away until the doctor and his wife go out.”

“Then we wait,” he said, sitting in a visitor’s chair. “Lie back down for now, Portia.” Exhaling, she did so.

When Minka entered the corridor from Wallace’s quarters, Efran was at the door of the workroom, looking around. Spotting her, he walked over as she paused with a guilty look on behalf of Loriot.

Taking her hands to look her over, Efran said, “Well, you’re not hurt. Who is?”

“Loriot,” she murmured.

“Did he go up to the roof?” he demanded.

“You’d better ask him,” she demurred.

Leading her by the hand, he entered the doctor’s quarters, then paused to glance around. Seeing Loriot laid out in a side room, Efran dragged her in there. As he regarded the bandaged, elevated hand, Efran asked flatly, “What did you do?”

Loriot blinked up at him. “I disobeyed you, Captain.”

“And got punished for it,” Efran said irately. “Did you go up to the bell tower?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“And tried to touch her hand?” Efran asked, now distressed.

“Yes. She expected it to free her. But when we touched—” He raised his bandaged hand as evidence of the outcome.

“So she is still there?” Efran asked.

“Yes. She didn’t know what had happened, only that she was still bound,” Loriot said.

Efran mused, “That is useful to know—someone has led her to believe that she can be freed by a touch. But . . . not yours.”

“No, Captain. Because you had forbidden it, as I am your underling,” Loriot said.

Efran raised his face with a smile of illumination. Eyes upward, he said, “As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I forbid anyone in this fortress to touch Adele.”

There was something—a huff, a grunt, or maybe a short laugh—that indicated receipt of the message by the relevant party. Satisfied, Efran patted Loriot’s shoulder. “I will send down word to Barr that you’ve been injured and require time off.”

But Loriot sat up, insisting, “I have duty, Captain.”

“For *today* you will rest,” Efran uttered.

Minka pushed the great Polonti’s shoulders back down to the bed. He sank under her little hands. “I’ll get you a nurse,” she purred. Both men glanced at her as she swished out.

When she was gone, Loriot sat up again. He unwound the bandages from his fingers, then he, Efran and Wallace looked at the badly scarred fingertips. But the skin was no longer raw and oozing. “Can you move them?” Wallace asked.

Loriot manipulated his fingers. “Not as well as I used to, but they don’t hurt anymore.”

“Minka hugged you,” Efran said almost as an accusation.

“Yes, Captain,” he admitted. “And I have duty,” he added, standing.

“Dismissed,” Efran said in mild disgust. Wallace shook his head and Leese stared at Loriot’s fingers as he saluted the Captain. Then he left.

Meanwhile, Minka was trotting downstairs to the fortress grounds. She went around to the horse training pens. Ella was not here yet, being in Law class (where Minka should be) but Tess was here, glumly watching Cloud skitter away in a huff whenever Tess tried to get too close to her.

Tess glanced over as Minka stood at the railing to beckon. Hesitantly, Tess walked over to ask a little brusquely, “Yes?”

“Loriot has been hurt. He’s in Wallace’s quarters,” Minka said.

Tess stared at her for a moment, then dropped the training rope to climb over the fence rails and run into the fortress. Minka followed at a walk.

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Chapter 9

Efran was coming out of the doctor's suite when Tess ran up. He got out of her way before she could shove him aside from Wallace's door. Glancing around, she saw Wallace and Leese conferring over their soon-to-be-released Goulven patients, but no Lorient. As Minka came up behind Efran, Tess swung in fury toward her—but reconsidered the words on her tongue as she regarded the Captain's attentive expression.

So Tess inhaled a calming breath to say, "Lorient doesn't appear to be here."

"His fingers were badly burned, but he insisted on leaving because he has duty," Efran said, blank-faced.

"I see. Then I'll return to work as well," she said, quickly moving off.

After watching her leave, Minka cried softly, "How could Wallace let him go?"

"You hugged him, didn't you?" Efran said, closing his arms around her.

"Did it work?" she asked, eyes wide in hope.

"Yes. Though his fingers are deformed to the point that he'll never have normal use of them again. Did you convince Tess he needed nursing?" he asked leadingly.

"That was her own doing. Where is Joshua?" she demanded.

"Uh oh," he said, heading back to the workroom, and she followed.

In Wallace's quarters, the doctor was finishing his final examination of Plunkett and Portia. "Well, between the Goadby's and the spirit vinegar, you look to be completely healed. So, you're free to go. Er—do you have a home to go back to?"

"Yes, sir, we do," Plunkett said, buttoning his shirt.

"Wonderful! Let me have a man show you out," Wallace said, turning to the door.

Portia quickly looked to Plunkett, who said, "Oh, don't bother, sir, we know the way out."

"Are you sure?" Wallace asked, pausing.

"Oh, yes," Plunkett said. At that time, one of the soldiers brought in a buddy who had a nasty gash on his arm. With that interruption, Plunkett and Portia went quietly downstairs to the back door.

Seagrave, on duty at the door, saw them go out. He pegged them at once as rural folks who lived around Westford, having been dependent on the city to buy their produce. After another minute of watching them look around in a manner he did not like, he recognized them as recent Goulven victims. Healed or not, they had no business back here.

So Seagrave approached them smiling: "Hello! I see you've gotten turned around. The front entrance is this way." In a friendly manner, he took both their arms to lead them back to the door, despite their protests.

As he was bringing them up the corridor, the children were released from their lessons for the day, and began streaming out of their classroom toward the back door. So it was inevitable that Plunkett and Portia should see Hassie, and she them.

“Hassie! Oh, we found you! I can’t believe it! Come here!” Portia cried. Plunkett was smiling down at Hassie as best he could, being unfamiliar with the practice.

Hassie looked to be evaluating them when Toby stepped in front of her defensively. “Do you know them?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Yes,” she said tentatively.

Portia started toward her. “Get out of the way, boy. Let her come to us.”

Seagrave stopped her with a hand on her arm. “One moment, Madam,” he said, watching Hassie and Toby.

Toby was asking her, “Do you want to go with them?”

“No,” she said, with a little shiver.

“She’s not coming with you,” Toby pronounced with authority.

“Well, then, let’s go,” Seagrave said.

But Portia began screaming, “They’ve got my child! They won’t let me have my child!”

A few sentries approached to monitor the dispute, but Portia kept screaming until Efran, Estes and Minka came off the stairs. While Efran handed off Joshua to the nursery worker, Toby brought Hassie right over to them, and she clung to Estes (since he had been her favorite from the beginning—besides Justinian). Meanwhile, Efran told Portia, “Be quiet.”

She shut her mouth, then opened it again to cry, “I remember you! You rode up on a horse and had my son’s body dragged out! You won’t keep my daughter from me!”

“Be quiet,” he said again, lowering his chin at her, and she stood glaring at him. He said, “We’re sending for the Notary Ryal to make a determination as to what should be done with Hassie.”

“She should go with her parents!” Portia cried.

“Ordinarily, yes,” Efran said. “But since she does not want to, we have to call in Ryal to determine what is best for her. Come to the small dining room.”

Portia and Plunkett were escorted up the corridor following Estes, Hassie, Minka, and Toby (whom Hassie wanted with her as well). While waiting, they were all brought dinner, as Ryal’s interviews could very well last through the imminent dinner hour. Plunkett and Portia sat uneasily at one end of the long oval table while Hassie sat on Estes’ lap, surrounded by her friends. Given her choice of vegetables and allowed two desserts with dinner today, she thought that interviewing was a fine thing they should do more often.

When Ryal and Soames arrived (the latter to take notes), the notary decided to interview the parents first. So Hassie’s party was transferred to the second-floor workroom, where DeWitt waited with Efran, who had

reclaimed Joshua. Ryal's interview of the parents did not take long; they affirmed that they were Hassie's parents, which she admitted, and they wanted their child back. After Ryal had dismissed them, he privately interviewed Minka about her brief stay with them (which took place about six months ago).

Meanwhile, Joshua was thrilled to have big kids under his table exploring the faerie tree roots until Ryal summoned them down to interview. Then he cried because they all left. While Hassie was taken to the small dining room for her interview with Ryal, the rest of the children went to the dining hall.

Portia cried, too, being disallowed from sitting in on Hassie's interview with Ryal. The parents were sent to the dining hall to wait. Since they were here, they had a second dinner.

In the small dining room, Ryal asked Hassie first about her family life, and her older brother Clute. Why did she sleep in her clothes? Why did Minka have to pull the dresser in front of the door? Finally, why did Hassie agree to leave with her in the middle of the night? Was she glad or sad that she had left? Was she glad or sad to see her parents?

Ryal had a gentle, patient manner, so that she talked freely about everything except Clute. The only thing Ryal got out of her about him was that Minka had to assure her over and over that he would never follow her again.

It did not take Ryal long to determine that Hassie's family life had been lonely and possibly abusive, and that she was happy and thriving at the fortress. So after conferring with Efran and Estes, Ryal called everyone back to the small dining room to hear his decision.

A sentry closed the door when they were all seated, with Hassie on Estes' lap again. Then the sentry had to open the door again for Efran, after he had taken Joshua back to the nursery.

Efran stood against the wall to listen as Ryal explained: "Portia and Plunkett, my first responsibility is to see to the welfare of the child. In ascertaining that, I look first to the child herself to tell me what she thinks. Then I evaluate your perspective, and in this case, Lady Minka's experience with you. All that together tells me that Hassie should stay here. However, you should be permitted visits with her for as long as she desires."

"That's not good enough, sir," Portia said, trembling. "These people murdered my son, and have taken my daughter from my bosom. I demand satisfaction."

"Dear lady," Ryal began reluctantly, "Your tolerance of your son's behavior was a major factor in my decision. He was a menace to your daughter and the Lady Minka, and I consider it a good thing that the Lady got her away, and got away with her."

"How dare you?" Portia said. "Having never been a mother, and never seen your son's dead body thrown out like trash, how dare you sit in judgment on a grieving mother?" Plunkett sat looking tired and depressed.

Trembling, Hassie said, "Can I go sit with Toby now?"

"Yes," Efran said, opening the door beside him. "Estes, you want to bring her?"

"Yes," Estes said, rising to place Hassie on her feet and take her hand.

They began rounding the table when Portia leapt to her feet. "Stop! This must not stand!"

Hassie ran out of the room; Estes followed at a walk, and Efran closed the door behind them. He stood in front

of it as Portia screamed, “Stop! Stop! Bring her back! I said—!” And she opened her mouth wide for the fangs to pop out.

There followed several minutes of frantic movement and overturned chairs. Efran finally caught Portia’s arms and held them behind her back. She thrashed this way and that, trying to bite him. Everyone else in the room settled down to watch her. “Go get Wallace,” Efran instructed Seagrave, who quickly left.

Ryal, Soames, Minka, DeWitt, and two other sentries watched as Portia twisted ineffectively in Efran’s grip. Plunkett remained seated throughout, looking on sadly. DeWitt finally observed, “This is not Goulven behavior. She’s not going for the shoulder to lay eggs; she’s angry.”

She opened her mouth to swallow back the fangs, then said in a muddy voice, “Wouldn’t you be angry if they took your child away from you?”

Wallace and Leese both appeared at the door, then, looking on in concern. “What—?” Wallace began.

“Show him your fangs,” Efran told Portia, still holding her arms.

Wallace went over to take her lower face in one hand and squeeze, causing the fangs to pop out again. “This is most disturbing,” he said, then looked at Plunkett. “Check him.”

Seagrave advanced on Plunkett, still seated, but he opened his mouth of his own accord. After peering therein, Seagrave raised up to shake his head.

Wallace stepped back. “Take them up to my quarters; strap them both down. I will have to examine them further.”

Two of the men at the door took Portia from Efran; two more took Plunkett with less force to escort him out and up the stairs. Wallace paused to say, “This looks to be the result of a remnant of the parasite remaining on the spine. We’ll continue treatment with the spirit vinegar, but I am alarmed at what appears to be a mutation.”

Efran evaluated that, then said, “I want to come up and look at her spine with you.”

“Come, then,” Wallace said. Minka looked at Efran, then came around the table to accompany them.

In Wallace’s quarters, the doctor shut himself, Efran, Minka and Leese in the examining room in which Portia and Plunkett had been restrained. Wallace released Portia so that Leese could have her drink a whole bottle of the new Goadby’s. By the time she had unwillingly choked that down, she was less inclined to resist when Leese drew her dress down to her hips and turned her face down on the bed.

Wallace and Efran then leaned over to look at her back. “There,” Wallace said immediately, pointing to a small lump at the base of her neck. “Somehow it’s regenerated, probably from a tiny fragment that survived treatment.”

Efran stood back to strip off his shirt, telling Wallace, “Now have a look at me.” Minka began trembling.

Chapter 10

Wallace had Efran lie face down on a long table, then Minka and Leese came over to look at his back along with the doctor. Leese parted his hair so that Wallace could start his examination at the base of the skull and progress downward from there. As Efran's spine sat in a valley of muscle, it was obvious that there was no parasitic growth anywhere along it.

"I see nothing, Efran," Wallace said. "But then, the parasite never attached itself to your spine."

"That we know of," Efran said, sitting up to pull his work shirt back on. He glanced at Minka's large, frightened eyes. "I'm all right," he smiled, making a belated effort toward reassurance. "I do want you to look at Ellor, Eustace, and Doane, however. Just—to be completely sure."

"Yes, I'll have them up right away. Then I think we can call it a day," Wallace said wearily. "Adele is beyond my care."

"Yes. Thank you, doctor." With a glance back at Leese redressing Portia to strap her back down, Efran took Minka's hand to leave.

When they arrived downstairs, Seagrave reported that Ryal and Soames had left, promising to send Estes a copy of the notary's certified decision on Hassie for his files. Then Efran and Minka looked in the dining hall to see the children being rounded up for bedtime care. Hassie, with six or eight friends around her, appeared untroubled from the afternoon's drama.

"I'm glad she didn't see her mother sprouting fangs," Minka whispered. "Regardless how Hassie felt about her, that would be a terrible shock."

Efran agreed with a snort, then they looked in the nursery to see that Joshua was asleep in his crib on the floor. Minka and Efran greeted the night caregivers before walking back to their quarters. As they approached the door, another sentry ran up to tell them that Doane and Ellor had been cleared by the doctor. Since Eustace was in one of the barracks below, Wallace would look at him tomorrow. Efran nodded.

In the bedroom, he shucked off his work clothes and his boots with the eelish bite holes. He lay in bed in his breeches, waiting impatiently for Minka to undress. As she curled up on him, he checked her ribs for bruises. "How long has it been since you cracked your ribs?"

"Um," she considered sleepily, "that was mid-October. Two months ago. I miss the Leviathan babies."

Efran groaned, "Can I get you another pet? Something that won't grow so big, with not so many sharp teeth and not so wet?"

She grinned, caressing his chest. "You, then?"

"Yes," he said, kissing her.

"Efran," she murmured.

"What," he breathed, disinclined to talk right now.

“Adele’s no longer in the bell tower,” she said. “I’m almost sure of it.”

“I’ll look tomorrow,” he said, rolling over onto her.

She entwined her arms around his neck, whispering, “I’ll go with you.”

As soon as it was fully light the next morning, December 15th, Efran left an indignant baby in the nursery to collect Minka and climb the many stairs to the fortress roof. There, the faeries greeted them happily, kissing Minka’s cheeks and pulling Efran’s hair. “Tell them to stop sprinkling gold in your hair,” he said, aggrieved.

“They’re just decorating me, Efran; it doesn’t make me faerie,” she protested, whereupon whole strands of her hair were covered in gold.

“Minka!” he complained.

“Dear faeries, while I appreciate being beautified, please have regard for my poor husband’s feelings,” she said. Thus the gold was muted a little. Efran was not satisfied, but knew the futility of complaining further.

They went around the tree to the bell tower, and immediately saw the change: “The pointed door is gone,” Efran said. There were only slate tiles from the bottom of the tower to the platform above which the bells rested.

He and she entered the tower to look immediately to their right, where the entry door to Adele’s chamber had been. That also was gone, the wooden wall being unbroken. “So she’s been moved,” Efran observed.

“Yes, after you forbade anyone in the fortress from touching her, why should she remain here?” Minka asked.

He glanced at her, then said to the air, “As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I forbid anyone in the Lands to touch Adele anywhere on this property.”

They studied each other, then she said, “Watch her show up on the other end of the stone bridge.”

“Don’t give him ideas,” Efran winced.

Over the next few days, the Fortress experienced a respite from plagues and faerie trickery. It took only a few Goadby’s treatments to completely clear Portia. As Plunkett had not experienced a relapse, Wallace declared them both clean and promptly evicted them from the Lands. Hassie forgot they had ever been here.

Eustace was also cleared, Wallace having found no suspicious lumps anywhere on his shoulders or back. Although no more Goulven appeared at the gates, no one believed the plague to be over. Most interesting, scouts reported some rebuilding going on in Westford. After the Goulven had struck, virtually emptying the city of adults, Efran and his men swept through about three weeks ago, rescuing children and animals. That evening, the city had been burnt to the ground, obviously to cover pillaging by unknown parties.

So, five days before Christmas, Efran and a scouting party of ten archers rode up to Westford to watch the ground being cleared in the area of the former Porterhouse Inn, and a new foundation being laid. To not alarm the construction crew, Efran dismounted to introduce himself and talk with the on-site supervisor, a Eurasian named Bortniansky.

Efran learned that the construction was being financed by a coalition of Eurasian nobles in defiance of Surchatain Reinagle's peevish directions to let Westford lie in its ashes. So no one told him what they were doing. While construction could hardly progress through the winter (which was much harsher in Westford than in the Lands, due to the Sea), the nobles wanted to get as much done as possible by the spring, for they'd heard of interesting sights in the Abbey Lands to the south, and wished to accommodate tourists.

When word reached the financier DePew, who was building a vast new luxury inn and tavern on six adjacent plots on the corner of the coastal highway south and the new northbound road, he redoubled his efforts to get it done. The Lands' own construction supervisor Lemmerz was content with building the chapel just west of it—a project clinched by his assistant Geneve when she simply asked Efran to fund it. He said yes.

The rapid approach of the Abbey Fortress' second Christmas almost paralyzed Minka, because they had five times the staff as there had been last year, and she could see no way to purchase gifts for all of them or decorate the fortress adequately. Without knowing Minka's state of mind, DeWitt simply handed the responsibility of Christmas at the Fortress to his assistant Pieta, along with a generous budget. She then enlisted her sister-in-law Bethune to help, and Minka soon saw a huge fir tree erected in the foyer, decorated with ornaments made by the fortress children, and surrounded with presents.

Minka then gave permission for the faeries to decorate outside the fortress (not trusting them inside), and immediately there appeared faerie lights all over the fortress exterior and in every faerie tree on the Lands. The faeries went overboard, of course, decorating the fence around the fortress grounds with faerie lights that spelled out messages they wished to convey (which Efran had to periodically censor).

Then the stables, the pig enclosures, and the cows were adorned with faerie lights, as were sleepy or inattentive gate guards. Efran gave up attempting to restrain the madness, especially as droves of tourists appeared from Eurus, Crescent Hollow, and Venegas, as well as small surrounding towns and villages. Since the new inn was not yet completed and Croft's continually packed, Lands' residents who had nice big houses made a tidy sum renting out rooms.

With Christmas looming, Earnshaw (Captain Melchior's scribe who was learning *aike* shooting) shifted his Scripture readings in the keep to focus on Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah. Thus, soldiers filled up the keep to listen when he read:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; . . .

“For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
And the government will be upon his shoulder,
And his name will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace;
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end.”

And when the small keep was full, listeners gathered outside the door to hear the words of power and hope. Minka stopped by frequently as well, and the men always made room for her right at the door. (Incidentally, Earnshaw had requested that the keep not be decorated for Christmas, which request was honored.)

With the bell tower having been cleared of its unwelcome guest, the bells began pealing very old Christmas hymns, but only for those who wanted to or needed to hear them. Upon hearing a long-forgotten melody rung, listeners stopped with tears in their eyes, thinking, *It has been too long since I've seen the old boy; I will go to him today, or, I remember her Christmas feasts of boiled rice and plain pudding, and her joy in seeing me again; I wish to God I'd had one more year in that dowdy little house of hers.*

When Minka saw Efran working up a state of anxiety about what to get her for Christmas, she stopped him and said, "May I tell you what I want for Christmas?"

"Yes," he said quickly.

"I want to ride, you and me and Joshua, out to the east Passage just to look at all the land God has given us," she said.

He looked both pleased and anxious. "We have to take a few soldiers, in case something happens. When you leave the fortress, *something always happens.*"

"I will choose the men," she stipulated.

"Don't you always?" he returned.

"Often. Now, what do you want from me for Christmas?" she asked.

He stopped with a suddenly guarded look. "Well? What?" she demanded.

"Frankly, and, really?" he asked awkwardly.

"Yes, of course. What?" she asked, wondering.

"I—" He glanced around to make sure no one was within earshot while she watched in bafflement. Then he drew very close to whisper, "I want you to sleep all one day so that I can have you all night long."

She eyed him. "Will you stop complaining about the gold highlights in my hair?"

He grimaced. "As long as it doesn't turn *solid gold.*"

"All right," she said. "You name the day, and the night."

"Tomorrow," he said instantly.

"What if you fall asleep?" she asked.

"Oh, I doubt it," he breathed.

So the following day and night, Minka gave him his present, which he enjoyed all night long, as he had intimated. However, the day following, he was dead on his feet until he stretched out under the table in the workroom with Joshua for a couple of hours. Fortunately, nothing happened that day, as Minka didn't leave the fortress.

Chapter 11

On the day before Christmas, Efran set aside the whole afternoon to give Minka her present. Accordingly, that morning he had notified Tourse, Martyn, Seagrave, Fennig, Pleyel and Telo that they would be required for bodyguard duty for himself and the Lady Minka following the midday meal. Minka had been outraged to discover that Captains were disallowed for this task because of their work load, therefore her longtime favorites Barr and Rigdon could not accompany them. So she just added to her standard list of four. Efran approved them all.

Poor Telo, when he was notified, assumed that it was a mistake. A fourteen-year-old new Polonti recruit would *never* be assigned guard duty for the Captain and his wife. So, rather than be humiliated at the gates when the mistake was exposed, Telo went to his Captain, Melchior, to explain the error himself.

Melchior listened in smiling sympathy, then said, “The Lady Minka chose the bodyguard, Telo.”

Telo gaped. “*Moiwahine* Minka chose me,” he breathed. “She hugged me,” he said, opening his shirt to expose the horrible purple scar. “And I was healed.”

“Yes, Telo, everyone knows by now,” Melchior said patiently.

“Then it’s not a mistake,” Telo said, testing.

“No. I’m sure she chose you,” Melchior said, with a ream of work waiting.

Telo suddenly deflated. “What if I do something wrong?”

Melchior looked down at the bodyguard list again. “Good men here—Tourse, Seagrave, especially. Watch them; do what they do.”

“Yes,” Telo exulted. “Thank you, Captain!” He saluted in joy.

“You’re dismissed,” Melchior sighed in mild envy, regarding the paperwork in front of him.

So when the bodyguard was summoned to assemble in the courtyard, all in Abbey red, Telo waited with restrained excitement for someone, anyone, to question the fact of his inclusion in the party. He was almost disappointed when no one did.

Then Lady Minka swept out in her pants, and the Captain followed with their baby lying in a sling across Efran’s midsection. Forgetting himself, Telo went over to say, “Hello, Joshua. I am Telo.” Efran restrained a smile, but Joshua looked over and stuck out a hand to wave to him.

Minka said, “I think he remembers you. Telo was badly wounded defending Venegas,” she told Efran, who knew this. Then she cried, “Martyn! The only way I get to see you any more is to summon you for guard duty. Oh, Fennig and Pleyel. Didn’t we have fun discovering my sister in the bell tower?”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Pleyel said, trying to smile but looking ill.

She laughed at him, then looked at the large horse brought her. “Where is Rose?”—her favorite mare, a small one.

Efran shifted Joshua over his shoulder so he could grasp her waist and hoist her up to the saddle. “For the distance we’re riding, Lady, I didn’t want you to be at a disadvantage on a short horse,” he said.

She took the reins. “In case we have to run? You’re such a pessimist.”

“No reason for that at all,” he said, holding Joshua in his sling with one hand while he gripped the pommel to throw a leg over his saddle. Joshua settled down for the ride.

“Now,” Minka said authoritatively as they walked down the switchback, “I’ve told everyone what Fennig and Pleyel and I discovered—and how I completely fell apart—but I want everyone to hear from Seagrave what he found in the bell tower.”

Seagrave began, “Thank you—”

But Minka, looking back, interrupted, “Tourse, I told you to wear your demon mask next time you warded me!”

“Pardon, Lady,” he said, withdrawing a crumpled bit of painted rubber from his pocket. “Shouldn’t I wait to put it on till it’s needed?”

“Oh, you’re right. Very good. Forgive me, Seagrave. Please proceed,” she said.

“Thank you, Lady,” he said. Then as they walked the main eastbound road (which led directly to the Coastal Highway South), Seagrave told them about approaching the faeries in their tree before looking in the bell tower. “I’ve had one or two experiences with faerie; in their domain one treads lightly. So I asked permission to explore. After that, I felt that I was given warnings—the torch that emitted no light, heat or smoke; the illusion of stone with blackness beyond, and the illusion of her dress. When I put my fingers through it, the bell pealed a warning. So I knew not to touch, especially as she was working hard on me to touch her hand.”

Efran nodded, glancing down at Joshua asleep in the sling. Although Efran had already heard this account, he gleaned new information from the retelling. “You were smart. Lorient was not. Since he had been married to her, he felt obligated to replace her on the dais. When he tried to touch her hand, he got the shock of his life—literally, I mean, like lightning. Wallace fixed him up as best he could, but he’ll have to use his left hand from here on out.”

“Moiwahine should just hug him,” Telo said quietly, and Minka turned her eyes to wink at him. The affirmation quietly thrilled him. Efran didn’t mention that she did hug him because he did not want any pressure on her to do it again.

By this time they deviated north to look over the animal pens, which were the far most eastern structures on the Lands. (Even those, however, proved to be less critical than originally thought, for the men were successfully hunting in the woods the Abbey owned west of the Passage. Deer, wild pigs, squirrels, rabbits, and frogs were all abundant to the point of overpopulation, and all were brought to the fortress and mess kitchens. But Minka cried to see the partridges, quails or doves killed, so of the birds, the men were restricted to shooting only ravens or crows. Besides, the great black Gers that practically ran loose on the hilltop were such prolific breeders that they thrived no matter how many wound up in the kitchen.)

Beyond the animal pens were large swaths of meadowland that had been plowed for planting. “Isn’t that

wonderful?” Minka murmured, looking over the evidence of self-sufficiency. “What are they going to plant, Efran?”

“Last I heard, this area is entirely wheat,” he said, stretching a hand to the north. “Over here will be sorghum and oats. That third area may be rye; I can’t remember.”

“What’s that ahead?” Fennig asked. They all turned to look where he was looking. From this distance, it appeared to be a tent.

“Whatever it is, it shouldn’t be there; all this land clear to the east branch of the Passage is ours,” Efran said, turning his horse to Minka. He lifted the sling over his head to give her the sleeping baby. Then he said, “Tourse, you and Telo wait here with the lady, please. The rest of us will ride over to find out it’s nothing and come right back.”

“Captain.” Tourse saluted; Telo did likewise.

Efran turned his horse, so Martyn, Seagrave, Fennig and Pleyel loped with him toward the object in the distance.

As they drew closer, they saw that it was indeed a center-pole tent, with four smaller poles at each corner to form a square of approximately twenty by twenty feet. It was striped in brilliant gold and blue, with pennants cracking in the breeze. The closed entrance stood facing them, golden tassels hanging from the flaps, ready to be pulled to open the tent.

“Captain,” Seagrave said warily, “I’m feeling faerie magic.”

“No doubt,” Efran said. “Martyn, you and Fennig ride around it no closer than we are now; see what you find.”

“Captain,” Martyn said. He and Fennig trotted their horses around the tent, then shortly reappeared on the other side. “Nothing unusual, Captain. There are no other entrances,” Martyn said.

“An invitation?” Efran murmured. Inwardly, he looked up to the light in the window of the keep for illumination. “I don’t think I will walk into it. The floor is open for suggestions,” Efran said, looking back to them.

By this time, at Minka’s instigation, she and her bodyguard had ridden up to study the tent with the rest of them. Efran glanced at her, unsurprised. Tourse said, “Captain, there are enough of us to pull up the corner poles and tent stakes and open the flaps from either side. With just the center pole standing, that will give us a clear view of who or what’s inside.”

“I like that idea,” Efran said. “All right, Telo, Martyn—you take the stakes at the front flaps and pull them back as the anchors come up. Tourse, Seagrave—you to the left here; Pleyel and Fennig to the right. Start at the front. Go.”

The men dismounted to position themselves around the tent. At a glance from Efran, Minka backed her horse away, holding Joshua in front of her in the saddle. Telo and Martyn pulled up the front stakes, then held the tassels as Tourse and Pleyel pulled up the front corner poles.

While Seagrave and Fennig worked on the center side stakes, Efran dismounted to walk over and position himself in front of the opening flaps. As they began to ripple loosely, he caught glimpses of black slate.

The men doubled up to pull up the back corner poles, then Telo and Martyn pulled the flaps apart and the men

gathered the loose canvas behind the center pole. In front of the pole was another structure: a replica of the fortress bell tower. And that's all the tent contained.

After wrapping tent rope around the loose canvas to secure it to the center pole, the men came to stand beside Efran in front of the opening to the bell tower. "That's not amusing, Alberon," Efran muttered.

"It's smaller than the original," Tourse noted.

"So it would fit in the tent," Efran observed.

"No side doors," Fennig said. "Just this black curtain over the entrance, which wasn't on the original, either." He grasped it with both hands to yank it down, and the men looked into the tower with quick indrawn breaths. There were no stairs, no platform, and no other doorways. But—

In the middle of the tower, slightly above them, a woman with a sack over her head hung suspended from a crossbeam by a rope wrapped around her middle, pinning her arms. She was dressed in a gorgeous red gown embroidered with gold and silver threads.

As Efran started to step inside the tower to look closer, Seagrave grabbed his arm. "Captain!"

Efran tottered on the edge of a hole in the ground before Seagrave and Martyn pulled him back from either side. "She's dangling over a pit," Seagrave said, shocked. It was roughly circular, about four feet in diameter, the edge closest to them being less than a foot from the doorway.

"Annnnd the rope above her is fraying," Tourse observed.

They all looked up to see that this was so. Light from cracks in the roof shingles filtered down through motes to illumine her and the rope, but not the bottom of the pit underneath her.

"I have rope if we need it," Pleyel said.

"Is she alive? Is she real?" Telo asked. Evidently hearing, the woman twisted, trying to speak.

Tourse shouted at her, "Be still; your rope is fraying." She stopped struggling.

Someone voiced the question that was on all their minds: "Is it Adele?"

Efran turned to see Minka right behind him, holding Joshua in his sling. Efran asked, "Is it your sister?"

Staring at the figure, she said, "I don't know."

He lowered his face to rub it in aggravation, then moved her and Joshua firmly away from the entryway. Looking toward Pleyel, he said, "Get me your rope."

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Chapter 12

Pleyel darted to his horse, placidly grazing, to unlatch the coil of rope from his saddle and run it back to the Captain. He knotted one end, then unwound enough to toss the knotted end up toward the crossbeam from which the woman hung, her head about 10 feet off the ground. He had to toss the rope three times before the knot cleared the beam without hitting the roof. Then he fed the rope out to lower the knotted end down over the pit. "Hold on to me," he said.

Tourse and Seagrave gripped his belt from either side while he leaned forward far enough to reach the dangling knot. This he handed to Seagrave, telling him, "Anchor this for me; I'm going to climb." Seagrave quickly tied a couple more knots in it before handing a knotted length to Tourse behind him. Fennig made himself anchor for the three of them to hold the rope securely while Efran placed a foot on the other end that dangled to the ground next to the hole.

Jumping up to grasp the rope, he brought his knees up to catch the rope between his feet and stand, his left foot on his right, with the rope held tightly between them. He only had to do this twice before he was even with the dangling woman.

Wrapping his right arm around the rope, he reached over with his left to pull her to his rope and hold her against him with his right arm. Then he drew his knife with his left hand, stretching up to cut the remainder of the fraying rope. He had to hack for a minute, and she squirmed uncomfortably. "Don't move; I don't want to drop you," he breathed. Thereafter, she held very still.

The remaining yarns finally snapped and Efran dropped the knife to catch her in both arms against his rope. The sudden concentration of weight on one point of the ceiling beam caused it to crack, dropping them several inches. The three at the end of the rope tightened their grip.

Looking down, he said, "I'm about to loosen the rope between my feet, so I may drop a little faster than I want."

"Wait, Captain." Martyn tied a couple of quick knots in the end of the rope beneath Efran and the woman. Handing one off to Pleyel behind him, he said, "We've got you, Captain." Telo took his place as anchor for that end of the rope.

Looking below, Efran slid down the rope so suddenly that the woman issued a muffled scream. But Martyn, Pleyel and Telo pulled them past the pit as Tourse, Seagrave and Fennig released their end by inches. Then they were able to cooperatively lower Efran and the woman to the ground just outside the tower doorway.

While Efran untangled himself from the rope, the men laid the woman down outside the tent to untie the cords binding her. Minka came up with Joshua to watch. When they had all those off, they could work the grain sack off her head. And they discovered that—

It was not Adele. It was Reinagle's wife and Bowring's daughter Trina.

She was gagged, disheveled, blinking in the light. Martyn removed her gag, then Telo and Pleyel sat her up and rubbed her arms to restore her circulation. Efran, shaking out his arms, looked back at Minka to exhale, "Happy Christmas." She crinkled her eyes at him.

Trina leaned over, taking deep breaths of fresh air. The men helped her stand, and Telo walked her around a bit.

As they began walking over to the horses grazing in the meadowgrass, Efran paused to study the partly collapsed tent and the bell tower. “What of all that is illusion? Show me,” he demanded.

The bell tower vanished, leaving behind the broken framing of timber over the pit. Tourse’s head shot up. “Men riding to the northwest!” There were four of them about a mile away—too far to pursue.

They all watched the riders gallop into the distance. Pleyel was beginning a question when Seagrave said, “Then they must have been cloaked by an illusion.”

Fennig and Martyn went over to look down into the pit. Fennig said, “Well, the pit is real, but the netting over the top was cloaked.”

“Netting?” The men came over to look at the fishnet secured with metal pins all around the opening of the pit. Martyn leaned over to retrieve Efran’s knife which the netting had caught when he dropped it.

Telo said, “Someone made sure she would not drown if she fell.”

“Drown? Yes, there’s water in the bottom,” Martyn said, glancing back at Efran.

“It looks like a well,” Fennig observed.

Efran’s face opened in comprehension. “The men have been digging test wells out here.” He peered up at the broken framing. On one timber was painted, “#4.” Efran said, “And that wood was the barricade around it. Well, since whoever set this up dismantled the barricade, we’ll just leave the netting. And the tent.”

Raising the end of the rope that Efran had cut off the crossbeam, Seagrave said, “The fraying was also illusion. You cut through a solid rope, Captain.” He held up the even cut for their inspection.

“Why? To make it seem more urgent?” Martyn muttered.

“Yes, to make us act quickly, it would seem,” Efran said, studying the rope end.

The men looked at each other. Tourse said, “So someone enlisted faeries to create an illusion of the tower, then hid it with a real tent. Why on earth . . . ?” Pleyel picked up his rope to remove the knots and begin coiling it.

Telo blurted, “From a distance, the tower would look like something we built—a watchtower. The tent was strange. Made you come look.”

“But the tower was needed to camouflage the framing,” Seagrave murmured. “And . . . make you think it was Adele?” he posed to Efran.

“Why? Who would do this to her?” Martyn breathed.

They all looked at the woman. “Trina, what happened?” Efran asked quietly, tossing down the rope.

Leaning on Telo, she pushed back her mussed auburn hair. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “I was yanked out of bed last night and blindfolded, taken in a carriage for a long ride. I fell asleep to be wakened, stripped and dressed in this.” She gestured at the replica of Adele’s dress.

“Then I was covered with the sack, bound, and hung. There were—men around me until shortly before you

came. . . . I thought I was being set up to die at the hands of whoever was coming. I heard snatches of talk about—someone coming.”

Efran lifted his face to shout, “Alberon! You allowed faerie magic on my Lands to almost kill her!”

“Peace, friend; she would not have died. This is for good,” Alberon’s voice wafted back to him.

“You’re conspiring with an enemy ruler against me,” Efran accused him.

“No, no, that is against Faerie Law. Am I not a lawful resident of your Lands? It is for the good of the lady,” Alberon insisted in a stronger voice.

Efran scowled, but Trina said unsteadily, “If that’s the case, it—did get me away. I didn’t know how to get away, but . . . here I am.”

Efran took Joshua from Minka to drape him across his back. Then he gestured, “Mount up. Tourse, help Trina up behind Telo.”

“Yes, Captain,” Tourse said. Telo scrambled up onto his horse, looking back as Trina put her foot into the stirrup and Tourse lifted her up behind the saddle. The wide skirt of the dress gave her plenty of room to ride. Efran took Minka’s waist to hoist her into the saddle of her tall horse.

After Efran had mounted, he reached back to make sure the upper edge of the sling was behind Joshua’s head so that he could look over his father’s shoulder while he rode at a walk. Since Joshua was teething, he also chewed on the shoulder. Efran periodically winced.

Mounting his own horse, Tourse whipped out the demon mask to put it on. “We’re ready for the next chapter, Lady Minka.”

The men looked over, smiling wryly or shaking their heads. But Trina cried, “Where did you get that? That mask!”

“At the Crescent Hollow Faire, Lady,” Tourse said, removing it again. “Why?”

“One of the men who took me wore a mask just like it!” she gasped.

Tourse looked quickly to Minka, who said, “Folliott.”

“What? Who?” Efran demanded.

Glancing at Trina, Minka said, “Reinagle’s son Folliott bought a demon mask at the same time we did.”

Tourse asked Trina, “Was someone wearing an old lady mask as well?”

“Yes,” she said faintly.

“He bought that one, too,” Tourse observed.

“I thought he was my friend,” she said brokenly.

There was brief silence, then Efran said, "Back to the fortress."

They talked little on the walk back, as they were all thinking. Efran thought, *So someone knew I was coming. But the illusion of the bell tower was for the same reason as the dress: to make me think it was Adele. Was this just to see whether I would leave her to die? But if Adele is truly faerie, falling bound into a well would not kill her. No, this was about Trina.* Meanwhile, Minka was pondering the masks.

When they arrived back in the courtyard to dismount, Efran said, "Gentlemen." The bodyguards paused at attention. "Whenever my wife sets out from the fortress, *something always happens*. Today you were all invaluable; you will receive commendations, with my thanks."

"Captain." "Thank you, sir." They saluted, smiling, but Telo was swaying on his feet. To be selected at all was an honor; to be commended for it was unreal. He had to stop to think where his barracks was, so Pleyel grasped his shoulder to take him down with him.

Efran took Trina to the small dining room, sending sentries scurrying to the kitchen and the workroom to alert DeWitt and Estes of their find. Then he asked Minka, "Can you find her—"

"Some lady things? Yes," she said. Before turning out, Minka took the sleeping baby and his sling from Efran's hands to deliver him to the nursery. She already planned to stock the vacant third-floor room with clothing and necessities from the catch-all room on that floor.

While Minka was doing that, Trina received an early dinner of baked perch, chard, and lemon custard (made with lemons from the fortress conservatory). Given her choice of the new Goadby's or Delano's, she chose the lager—the mildest of all.

Efran let her eat in peace until DeWitt and Estes came down to interview her. They were astonished to hear from Efran how she had been found, and sat to contemplate that while she collected herself to talk.

"May we get some background, Lady Trina?" DeWitt asked.

"Yes, certainly," she said. Both he and Estes noted that she seemed to avoid looking at Efran.

DeWitt began by asking, "Is Reinagle still ruling Eurus?"

"Yes, as far as I know," she said. "His son Follriott is his senior advisor, but, they don't agree on much. Few people agree with him on anything; he's thin-skinned and—" She shrugged, at a loss for words.

"Are you married to him?" DeWitt asked.

"Until I can get out of it," she said dully.

"Why did you marry him?" DeWitt asked.

"He said he had my father. But I haven't seen him for weeks; I don't even know if he's still alive," she said, eyes down.

"I'm sorry to hear that," DeWitt said sincerely. "What of the Goulven? Are they still a danger?"

"Not as much as Reinagle's bodyguard. When they first came to Eurus, they were clearly hunting Goulven and

that's all. But now they kill anyone. I would be very surprised if they last much longer—too many important people have seen friends murdered; they will find a way to stop them for good.” She paused to take a drink of the lager.

The four of them were silent a moment, then Efran said, “Tell me about Folliott.”

She glanced at him cautiously. “Reinagle's son and his thorn in the flesh.”

“How does he know faerie?” Efran asked.

She studied him. “You think he set up this—ordeal?”

“It wasn't Reinagle,” Efran observed. “Yet it was someone who had access to your chambers, money, confederates, the masks, and faerie help. But the faeries are prohibited from doing anything on my Lands against my wishes. Murder, or attempted murder, is against my wishes. Endangering someone's life is against my wishes. But a rescue is not.”

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Chapter 13

DeWitt and Trina spoke in objection at the same time, and his voice prevailed: “If this was a rescue, why in heaven's name could he not put her in a carriage and send it to our gates?”

Efran smiled slightly. “Ryal explained that for me to accept the runaway wife of a Surchatain is a declaration of war. Unless I want war with Eurus, I'd have to turn her away.”

“But all that ridiculous subterfuge with the bell tower and the dress—” DeWitt began.

“All to plausibly make me think that I was rescuing my wife's sister,” Efran said. “Yet once Trina is on our lands and in need of assistance, I am allowed to give her refuge. Only someone familiar with the laws of rulership would know about a loophole like this. *I* didn't know about it until Ryal told me.”

Estes protested, “But—way out there in the eastern section! She could have been hanging there for days.”

“Apparently, they got it set up barely in time. The faeries knew that Minka and I were heading out there today,” Efran said. “And when I demanded that the illusions be exposed, we saw men riding away.”

They were silent at this reasoning. Turning his eyes to Trina, Efran said, “Folliott engineered it to get you to safety. That is the only reason the faeries would consent to help him.”

Trina put her head on her hands to cry for the first time. “Folliott—cares—”

“Yes, he went to a great deal of trouble for you,” Efran said.

At that time, Minka entered to place the key to the third-floor room before Trina. “Your room is all ready and stocked; the maid waiting just outside here will take you up whenever you're ready. I'm very sorry that we don't

have clothes on hand befitting your station—just casual wear. But if you're here for more than a few days, I'd be delighted to take you to Elvey's and get you better things."

Trina stared at her in open-mouthed shock. "Why would you do that?" She remembered, although Minka apparently did not, Trina's belittling her supposedly half-wit mother.

Mildly confused, Minka sat across from her smiling husband. "Why—I love Elvey's clothes, but the best things are impractical for me to wear." Trina lowered her head to laugh and cry.

Efran asked Minka, "Would you like to hear what we figured out about today's theatre?"

She asked, "Besides the fact that Folliott did it because he's in love with her?"

Efran slumped back in his chair at her leap of understanding while DeWitt and Estes laughed. Trina blushed, exhaling.

Still, Efran rallied to ask his wife, "Then why did *I* have to go get her?"

Minka blinked. "Well, who else but the lord of the Fortress? The faeries couldn't have made it more obvious if they had spelled out 'Help, Efran' in lights."

That prompted more laughter, and even Trina smiled. Looking at her, Efran exhaled, "You cannot know how relieved I was to see that it was you and not Adele."

Then DeWitt asked, "What happens now, though, Efran?"

Efran grimaced. "The next obvious move is for Folliott to depose his father. I hope he does it legally."

"Will you support him in this?" Trina asked.

"If I can do it without endangering my own people," he said cautiously.

With Trina drooping in exhaustion, Efran had her escorted up to her room accompanied by the maid and two sentries. Estes and DeWitt returned to the workroom to finish up the day's work, but Efran called over a sentry to tell him, "Go ask Captains Rigdon and Melchior to find me four volunteers to ride up to Eurus tomorrow morning"—Christmas Day.

"Captain." The man sprinted away, then Efran and Minka turned into the dining hall to enjoy a Christmas Eve dinner with Ella, Quennel, and most of the Abbey children. The majority of Ella's suitors, having seen Quennel with a clear advantage, ceded the field. He was quietly triumphant and patient, because if and when a marriage took place was entirely up to her.

While they were eating, Efran received a message from Melchior that he and Rigdon had managed to whittle the field to six volunteer riders for tomorrow, and if it please the Captain to allow six instead of four, that would prevent ill will and possible injury among restless soldiers. Efran gave leave for six to ride.

After an excellent dinner of venison, pork pies, various garden offerings, and fruit compotes, they emerged from the dining hall to see the foyer crowded with people standing around. They were all waiting for Earnshaw to bring out the lectern and the Holy Canon for the Christmas Eve reading, as there was not enough room in the keep for half of those wanting to hear.

Efran paused with his arm around Minka's shoulders to listen to Earnshaw read: "In that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, so that they were terrified. The angel said to them, 'Don't be afraid, for I bring the good news of a great joy which is for everyone; for to you is born today in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'"

As he listened, Efran looked at the faeries in the foyer tree peeking out, and he felt sorry for them, that they could not know redemption. But then he heard Therese's voice from years ago: "*All creation waits with eager longing for the sons of God to be revealed, for the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.*" [Rom 8:22] Although faeries lived so long as to consider themselves immortal, they could, and did, die.

As Minka and Efran were climbing into bed that evening, she yawned hugely and he asked, "When can I have another Christmas present?"

That caught her mid-yawn, and she looked at him in disbelief. "After what all you did today, aren't you too tired?"

"Not for that," he said pensively.

"Well, I have to rest up a few weeks," she murmured, snuggling into him.

"Have you got a calendar?" he asked, looking toward the outer room.

"Shut up!" she cried, laughing, and raised up to kiss him. So he rolled over onto her.

The following day, Christmas, the kitchen simply put out a day-long buffet of various dishes and desserts, nearby tables being stocked with new Goadby's and Delano's. Minka got to walk around the gardens with Commander Wendt, whom she hardly ever saw anymore because of the demand for his presence at the lower barracks.

The six volunteer scouts to Eurus—Tiras, Coxe, Finn, Graeme, Shane, and Chee (ex-Crowe, elected by the others to be in command on this trip)—set out early that morning with instructions to scout Eurus before arriving at Lady Marguerite's Featherstone, from which they would not escape until they were required to return to the Lands on the third day.

That day, Plunkett sat in his chair by a fireplace with a cold grate. He sat, and blinked, and occasionally drew a breath while Portia paced the small gathering room. "We must get her back. Then we will be a family again," she said tightly.

He barely shook his head. "She's happy there. I think we should leave her be."

"That will *never do*. I will *never* accept that," Portia said. He sighed as she continued to pace.

A few minutes later, she said, "I know what to do." He slowly blinked. "I will get myself bitten again. There are still some of those Gouffin or whatever about—old Gilpert is one; we saw him coming back, you know; he's just too old in the legs to catch anyone. We'll go find him and get him to bite us, then we'll go back to that white palace so they'll treat us again. Then we can nab her."

Plunkett was shaking his head. "I'm not going to do that."

"Of course you are," she said firmly. "We need to get Hassie back so we can be a family again around the dinner table."

"It won't be the same without Clute," Plunkett said.

"Well, we'll catch another one like that Adele. Only we'll fix the windows so they don't open," she said.

"No one to buy peat," he observed, and sighed.

"We'll see to that," she said crisply. "Come now, let's be off to find Gilpert."

"No," he said, settling down in the chair that needed a new cushion.

"Yes, Plunkett, get up!" she ordered.

"No," he said.

"Get up, Plunkett! Now! Get you up! I mean it!" she cried, and the fangs popped out again.

He turned heavy eyes up at her, then raised himself with difficulty. He went to the kitchen for a large carving knife, and with it took care of the problem. With her stretched out on the floor at his feet, he eased down in his chair again, sighing.

Trina woke late that morning. The bed was nice, with soft blankets, pillows, and a good, clean mattress. She looked up at the apples and wheat biscuits on the little table beside her head, then looked at the morning light coming through the window of the outer room.

She rose to go to that window, standing beside it to see the light filling the sky from a high, early winter sun. Then below there were many little rooftops in neat rows, punctuated by strips of green fields, large trees with multicolored leaves, and larger rooftops of businesses or stables. She looked at the construction in the area to her right, and a shimmering lake with those large trees at each end.

Straight down the middle of this panorama was the road leading north. Along it, she saw shop owners opening up for Christmas Day necessities, and the lights that still blinked in the trees at the bottom of the switchback. The sudden rearranging of those lights startled her, especially when they settled into a pattern that read, "Good Morning Trina."

She gasped out a laugh, then stood back from the window to listen to the bells above chime a melody. Although she didn't remember ever hearing it before, the tune caused something of a heartache so that she turned away in pain. And they stopped ringing.

In her undergarments, she went back to the bedroom to open the wardrobe and take out one of the dresses. They all looked much the same, like servants' dresses, but Minka had warned her they were similar to what she usually wore. As Trina began dressing, she suddenly stopped to remember that Minka had been wearing pants yesterday. Was that right? Yes, she was sure: Minka had been wearing ladies' pants. After a moment, Trina decided to ask for pants as well.

Once dressed, she began folding up the costume gown she had been dressed in yesterday. A glimmer of gold in it caught her eye, and she spread the bodice to see a gold square of silk sewn onto the lining. Pulling on the end of a thread removed the stitches so that she could lift one edge and withdraw a bit of parchment. On it was written, "Wait, I will come for you." There was no signature, but she recognized the hand as Folliott's. Efran was right.

Tears threatened again, but she put the parchment in the pocket of the dress she was wearing, then she finished folding the gown to put it in the bottom of the wardrobe. She certainly didn't want it.

She ate the apple and the biscuits before hesitantly opening the door into the anteroom. There, a Polonti guard looked at her in mild interest. "Good morning, Lady Trina. Do you care to go downstairs?"

"Yes," she said, and he offered his arm to escort her.

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Chapter 14

The guard took Trina down a flight of stairs and a short way down a corridor before stopping at a door to announce, "Lady Trina."

She hesitantly entered a large room with a tree growing up into the ceiling from the middle of a table. She gaped at the tree (as everyone did when seeing it for the first time) and DeWitt said, "Good morning, Trina. I hope you slept well?"

"Yes, very well, thank you," she said, snapping her attention to him. The Steward Estes, next to him, smiled and nodded to her before returning to a large, flat book in front of him.

She began, "I was wondering if Efran—"

"Yes, no problem," he said. She glanced around without seeing him, but his hand suddenly came out from under the table to brace himself on it, and he half rose. "I just have to make sure that Joshua isn't putting anything—unauthorized in his mouth. Here."

He put something in front of DeWitt, who glanced at it, recoiling. Efran assured him, "Don't worry; it's dead."

"Throw it out the window!" DeWitt said, aggrieved. Estes glanced over, smiling.

"Oh. All right." Efran took it gingerly to carry it to the eastern window, the glass panes of which he opened to empty his hand. Then he glanced down, peered harder, and called, "Sorry! But you might better not work right underneath this window. That's right. You never know."

Closing the window again, he said, "Hello, Trina. I hope you slept well."

"What *was* that?" she cried.

He began, "Oh, well, just a small—"

“Good morning, Trina.” Minka entered with a mug in hand. “Would you like some hot mint tea? My morning isn’t complete unless I can brew a cup for someone besides myself.”

Taking the mug, Trina said, “You’re wearing pants again today.”

“Yes,” Minka said, a little self-consciously. “I find that they’re so much easier to—”

“I’d like some pants to wear,” Trina blurted.

The men laughed quietly at Minka’s look of joy. “Would you? Oh, drink up and we’ll go right to Elvey’s!”

Trina began sipping her tea. “This is good,” she said in surprise.

As Minka was having another fit of joy, Efran winced slightly, shaking his head at Trina. “Don’t—overdo it.”

“Oh, speaking of which—” Trina handed him the bit of parchment in her pocket. “I found this hidden in the dress.”

Efran turned it right side up to read out loud, ““Wait, I will come for you.”” He looked up at her. “Do you know who it’s from?”

“Yes,” she admitted, and her face confirmed his theory.

“Folliott. Well, that’s convenient, as long as he doesn’t bring an army with him.” Efran handed the scrap back to her. “Don’t leave it on the floor,” he cautioned her, then checked under the table again.

Minka immediately requested horses and a bodyguard to accompany them to Elvey’s. Trina had a ham roll and Delano’s while they waited. Without actually listening, she nodded occasionally at Minka’s happy chatter, then they went down to the courtyard to find Minka’s favorite mare Rose and another gentle mare saddled and waiting, along with the Polonti Coish and Jehan.

The bodyguards bowed to them, then Coish assisted Trina up to the saddle while Jehan knowledgeably stood by to let Minka mount by herself. As they ambled leisurely down the switchback, Minka looked down at the sprawling Elvey’s complex. “Of course they’re open,” she replied to an unasked question. “I believe Elvey’s would stay open during an invasion, in case the invading soldiers had wives or girlfriends that needed new clothes.”

Her bodyguards smiled, as she had accurately hit on the behavior of Abbey men, but Trina was looking around at the paved roads, the whitewashed buildings, the glassed-in windows which protected tastefully arranged displays. “Why—this is almost civilized,” she murmured.

“Isn’t it?” Minka said in fresh wonder. “I can hardly take it in. It seems like it all sprang up out of the ground.” She turned to Jehan on her right to demand, “How long have you been here at the Lands?”

“Only about three months, Lady Minka. But we have seen all the building in that short time. It is grand,” he admitted.

Coish added, unbidden, “And the new inn going up has made Croft’s add another outdoor dining porch.”

“Really?” Minka asked in amazement, craning her neck to look. “Oh, you’re right! And it’s raised! How clever!” They departed the switchback under gentle pats from the faerie trees, which startled Trina. Then they turned in at their destination.

“This is Elvey’s?” Trina murmured, looking at the expansive entryway where doormen took horses and carriages to wait in an adjoining stableyard, and fashionably dressed women exited to be escorted to a shaded pavilion where they waited for their transportation to be brought around.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Minka asked, noting the improvements since she was last here.

“Yes,” Trina admitted. “I certainly didn’t expect to see anything like it here.”

“Firmin’s has a new tea patio that the ladies prefer to Croft’s tavern,” Jehan said.

Minka quickly turned to him. “I did not know that!” Jehan raised his brows authoritatively and Coish nodded confirmation.

While the bodyguard waited outside, she and Trina entered the reception area where a beautifully dressed and coiffed woman looked up. “Hello, Lady Minka! Happy Christmas! What can we do for you today?”

“Hello, Ianna. Happy Christmas to you, as well. I hope you don’t have to work long today,” Minka said.

“Oh, but I love it so,” Ianna protested. “Who is your guest?”

“Oh, excuse me,” Minka apologized for her oversight. “This is Lady Trina of Eurus. Trina, Ianna is the most wonderful dresser you’ll ever find. Bill the Fortress for what she needs today, Ianna.”

“Certainly,” she said, standing.

“Frankly, I’m adoring the pants,” Trina said.

“Oh, we were at the forefront of that trend—it’s sweeping the Southern Continent,” Ianna purred.

As they began toward the back rooms, another woman rushed up. “Why, I thought I heard your voice! Trina! What are you doing here?”

“Challinor!” Trina cried, and they embraced.

Both started talking at once, but Trina was compelled to listen as Challinor laughed, “Oh, I came down with Whelpton to bring suit against Efran for Provision for a Wronged Husband!”

Given the number of people around them, Minka almost died on the spot; Trina cried, “Another one! Did you prevail?”

Still laughing, Challinor said, “No, although he offered us five hundred royals because it wasn’t him I slept with at all; it was his Steward Estes!”

“Shut up, shut up,” Minka said under her breath.

“Are you serious? When?” Trina gasped.

“Oh, that was eight years ago,” Challinor said dismissively. “I just recently divorced Whelpton and married the most delicious man you ever saw. He is a beast in bed.”

While Minka quietly melted into a corner, Trina laughed, then asked, “How were you able to divorce Whelpton down here?”

“At the notary’s. Quick and easy,” Challinor said. “And I was able to marry my hunk right away, because he’s a soldier that can divorce and remarry without any waiting period at all.”

“So I can divorce Reinagle down here?” Trina asked.

“I don’t see why not. When you’re through here, I’ll take you to his shop,” Challinor replied.

“Wonderful!” Trina cried.

Challinor jerked her primped head toward another room. “Come on back.”

While Challinor, Trina, and Ianna swept out to the fitting rooms, Minka stood quietly in mortification. Another dresser came in to sit at the entry table and receive customers. So Minka left.

When she came out the doors, Jehan and Coish sprang up. They looked behind her, then studied her questioningly. So she said, “Trina met an old friend. She’s in good hands, so we’ll . . . go back, I suppose.”

“Let us take you to Firmin’s, Lady Minka,” Coish urged. He was the slightly older of the two, so Jehan looked on expectantly.

She slowly raised her eyes to smile. “All right. Leave her horse in case she needs it.”

Coish said, “Yes, Lady. I’ll wait with you here while Jehan brings our horses around.” He nodded, and Jehan ran back to the stableyard.

Shortly, Minka was chatting again to engaged listeners who felt free to respond with their own comments. When they stopped at Firmin’s, they found it also busy with Christmas Day tourists, but Firmin himself recognized her, and seated her and her bodyguard in a desirable outdoor area.

They came to an obstacle in ordering. Minka ordered tea, so the men did, too. She looked at them in astonishment, changing their order to the new Goadby’s which they hastily declined. After some negotiations, which the elderly waitress Ionadi guided them through, they agreed to Delano’s lager, milder than either ale. So all was well.

Minka talked happily; her bodyguard listened attentively, but they never forgot that they were on duty, and noticed when three large men in Eurasian dress were seated nearby. Any one of them was bigger than either of the two young Polonti. While Minka talked about faerie shenanigans, Jehan and Coish were aware of the silence of the Eurasiens, who were careful not to look at her.

Minka talked for so long that she felt it necessary to order ham biscuits for her bodyguard. They protested, but ate them quickly when they arrived, as Minka did not care for ham. The Eurasiens ate very slowly, cleaning their plates. Watching the waitress depart, Minka murmured, “That Ionadi is a jewel. I need to leave her a good tip.” She dug in her pocket to find that all she had left was a royal. So that’s what she left for Ionadi.

Finally, Minka stood with a happy sigh. The three Eurusians stood at the same time. As Minka turned to leave, Jehan and Coish inexplicably rammed the three with elbows and fists so that they fell over their table and the one next to it. Then the Polonti closed in around her as she exited with only a glance at the clumsy Eurusians behind her.

While Minka and her bodyguard were ascending the switchback, Challinor and Trina were crossing Main at a smart yellow crosswalk to enter the notary's shop. (The clothing and accessories she had bought, as well as the Fortress horse, were then being taken up the switchback by an employee of Elvey's.)

Leaning on the counter, Challinor breathed as to an old friend, "Ryal!"

"Yes, Challinor," he said. Giardi came up beside him, then intuitively turned for the divorce ledger.

"This is Lady Trina. She wants to divorce Reinagle," Challinor explained, fluffing her hair.

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Chapter 15

"Lady Trina wants to divorce the Reinagle who is Surchatain of Eurus?" Ryal asked mildly.

"That's the one," Challinor grinned, and Trina smiled.

Ryal nodded slowly. "We will fill out the forms, but it won't be finalized until we are able to deliver a copy of the petition to him. Also, Lord Efran must be notified."

"That's fine. Get it started and she'll stop back by. Bill the Fortress," Challinor said, puckering at him. When they turned away, Ryal and Giardi studied each other, then she pulled out the necessary forms.

As the women were exiting, a tall, handsome soldier stood aside to let them pass. Trina glanced up, then gasped, "Neale."

"Hello, Lady Trina," he said, bowing. "I heard of your interesting escape. Welcome to the Abbey Lands."

"Neale," she repeated in a whisper. Challinor made herself disappear. Eyeing the insigne on his uniform, Trina said, "You were—promoted?"

"Yes, I am Captain of the Second Regiment," he said. They both stepped away from the door as someone else desired to enter the notary shop.

"Congratulations," she said.

"Thank you, Lady," he acknowledged. He waited uncertainly, as she seemed to have something on her mind.

"I am divorcing Reinagle," she spilled out.

He paused, then said, "I'm sorry."

"I hope not," she blurted, then laughed.

He smiled with her, and said, "Even if it's a good thing, it may be—complicated."

"Yes," she said, again with a small laugh.

Although she clearly wanted to talk, it was awkward doing so in front of the notary's. So he said, "May I walk you up?"—gesturing to the switchback.

"Yes, thank you." She turned in relief, and he walked beside her through the faerie trees at the bottom of the switchback. He glanced up at the faeries blowing kisses down to them.

They walked in silence for a while, then Neale asked, "How is your father, Lady Trina?"

"I don't know," she said in distress. "Reinagle claimed to be holding him somewhere, and promised I'd see him after we were married. But he won't tell me where he is."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Neale said.

She blurted, "Efran thinks that his son Folliott devised the scheme to get me down here. But I don't ever want to go back to Eurus. I love it here."

"You should tell Captain Efran this," he said.

"I'm afraid to. I don't have any friends here," she said. Why she discounted Challinor is unknown.

"Oh. Well, if that's all, I'll vouch for you," Neale offered.

"I would deeply appreciate it," she whispered, turning her eyes to him. He nodded a little stiffly.

The courtyard gates were opened to them before they even got there. When they entered the foyer, a door sentry, identity unknown, approached with a mountainous armload of packages. "Lady Trina, your purchases from Elvey's have arrived. Shall I carry them up to your room?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, which seemed to be all she could say.

"Good to see you, Lady Trina," Neale said, bowing, and she nodded. Then she went down the corridor to climb stairs in front of the sentry staggering up blindly behind his burdens.

Coming down the fortress steps into the courtyard, Neale saw Captain Efran approaching the gates from the western hillside. So Neale waited, and when the Captain entered with Joshua asleep on his back, Neale met him to relate the conversation he'd just had with Lady Trina.

While Neale was reporting this, Minka entered the second-floor workroom, announcing, "I want a—" She looked around. "Where is Efran?"

Estes looked up to say, "Hello, Minka. I believe he took Joshua to climb down the hillside. What is it you want?" DeWitt, engaged with a column of numbers, couldn't risk the interruption.

She flounced down into Efran's chair. "I want a commendation for Jehan and Coish. They spent an hour listening to me at Firmin's."

Estes smiled. "Most men would consider that reward enough all by itself."

She looked at him from under her brows. "You are too sweet. By the way, if strangers on the street smile at you, you'll know they were at Elvey's today when Challinor told everyone that Efran offered Whelpton five hundred royals for your having slept with her eight years ago."

"What?" Estes said.

"What?" DeWitt repeated, abandoning his column of numbers. "Challinor? She's still here?"

"We gave her a house," Estes said darkly.

"She married one of the men whom she described as a beast in bed," Minka added.

"Who?" Estes demanded.

"I have no idea. She didn't shout *his* name from the housetops," Minka said peevishly.

A sentry entered to walk over with a piece of paper. "From Elvey's, Administrator DeWitt."

"Thank you. You're dismissed," DeWitt said as the man saluted and left. He briefly perused the paper, then his jaw dropped. "Trina spent thirty-eight [royals and] ten [silver pieces] at Elvey's."

"What?" gasped Estes. Turning his gaze to Minka, he asked, "What all did she buy?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "I left after Challinor proclaimed you her lover of eight years ago."

At that time, Efran walked in, dusty and sweaty from his hillside climb. Before coming up, he had detoured to the nursery to drop off Joshua. Minka said: "I want commendations for Jehan and Coish."

Estes said: "Challinor is talking about Whelpton's suit and your offered payout."

DeWitt said: "Trina spent thirty-eight royals at Elvey's." And the three of them spoke at the same time.

Efran was looking at them when Ellor, on guard duty at the doors today, entered the doorway and saluted. "Captain, three men are at the courtyard gates claiming to have a message from Reinagle."

Efran eyed him. "'Claiming'?"

Ellor said, "They're not in uniform. They have nothing in writing. Gate guards wouldn't let them through; just conveyed their message."

Minka asked, "Are they large men in Eurussian leisure wear?"

The men looked at her. Ellor replied, "They're pretty big; I'm not up on fashions, Lady Minka."

“Why?” Efran asked her.

She said, “They were sitting near us at Firmin’s. When I got up to leave, they got up; Jehan and Coish sent them down to the floor. I want commendations for them.”

Efran turned back to Ellor. “Summon Jehan and Coish to the courtyard. I’ll come talk to the gentlemen.”

Minka stood. “I want to see if that’s them.”

Efran looked back at her, deliberating. “You may come as far as the foyer door.” She accepted that.

When she joined him in the doorway of the workroom, he kissed her forehead. “How is your calendar looking?” he asked. She collapsed onto his chest, laughing.

Satisfied with that response, he took her down to the foyer and cracked the door for her to peer out. She inched out enough to see, then said, “Yes, that’s them.”

“All right. Wait here,” he instructed. He paused to ask, “Where is Trina?”

She looked to Ellor, who replied, “Up in her quarters with many parcels from Elvey’s, Captain.”

“Ah,” he said, stepping out. Ellor prevented the door from closing so that he and Minka could watch.

Before speaking to the men waiting at the gates, Efran stopped to wait for Jehan and Coish to come around. Shortly, they trotted up to him to salute. Coish said, “Jehan and Coish reporting as summoned, Captain.”

He nodded to the men waiting. “Is that them?”

Their heads pivoted to look, and one of the men muttered something to the others. Coish said, “Yes, Captain. They were watching the lady at Firmin’s, and rose when she did. We cleared a path for her.”

“Minka wants you commended, so I suppose I’ll have to do that,” he grunted, and they grinned. “Coish, go get six from the barracks who are bored and looking for something to do.”

“Captain!” Coish saluted, then turned to run to the hilltop barracks.

While Jehan watched from the courtyard and Minka and Ellor from the doorway, Efran went over to the men waiting, their horses behind them. One of the guards started to open the gates, but the other, the older one, stopped him.

Efran drew up to the closed gates to say, “I am Captain Efran. Who are you and what do you want?”

One, the evident leader, said, “We are messengers from Surchatain Reinagle of Eurus, Captain Efran. He demands to know if his wife Lady Trina is here.”

Efran studied them. “Show me the message.”

The leader glanced down. “He instructed it be delivered verbally, Captain.”

“Then why were you following my wife?” Efran asked.

The leader exhaled. "That was an accident, Captain."

"It was certainly a mistake. If you are really from Reinagle, tell him to outfit his messengers plainly and not to use the same men as both messengers and spies. Beyond that, I owe you nothing. I'm going to have some plainly uniformed men escort you off the Lands; you will lead your horses. Don't come back."

"Yes, Captain," he said through gritted teeth. He was obviously a longtime soldier who knew the rules far better than his Surchatain did.

Coish trotted into the courtyard followed by ten men in uniform, who drew up in lines on foot to salute Efran. "Reporting as summoned, Captain," said Connor in front, repressing a smile.

"Thank you, gentlemen. The men currently outside the gates are going to lead their horses off Abbey property. They need you to make sure they walk a straight line past the stone bridge." He turned to direct the gate guards, "You may open the gates now."

They did, and the Eurusians turned to lead their horses down the switchback and up Main, followed by a parade of Abbey soldiers who were marching to a sharp cadence. Thus Reinagle's messengers had to step lively to prevent their heels being trodden on or their horses spooked. Once past the wall gates, they mounted and began riding away.

At this moment, there was a sudden flash of light that appeared in the eastern sky and began traversing the firmament toward the westering sun, which turned the entire tail of the comet a blood red as it spread across the sky. Everyone in the Lands, including the three Eurusians, stopped to stare at the phenomenon. The bloody sky persisted until the comet soared out of sight, then its tail gradually faded away.

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Chapter 16

After dismissing Connor's men with compliments on their style, Efran took Minka by the hand to return to the second-floor workroom. Sitting in his chair and pulling her to his lap, Efran said, "First things first. DeWitt, Minka wants Jehan and Coish commended, so we have to do that."

"Commendations coming up, Efran. I want us to stop adopting stray women who divorce their husbands," DeWitt grumbled.

"Trina spent how much at Elvey's?" Efran asked.

"Thirty-eight and change," DeWitt enunciated grimly.

"What does Elvey even sell that can cost that much?" Efran marveled.

"She's getting really high-class," Minka said. "There's room on the Lands for less pretentious clothing shops. I miss the old Elvey's. I don't fit there anymore," she murmured. DeWitt was nodding.

Efran snuggled her. "I'm so glad."

"But you're always telling me to spend more," she observed.

"It's not the money. Those are the women who cheat on their husbands," he said.

DeWitt raised his face from the numbers again. "Tera agrees with you, Minka. She's too intimidated to walk into Elvey's anymore. She was telling me that she found a secondhand shop that she really likes, though."

Minka sat up on Efran's lap. "Where?"

"I don't remember. I'll have to ask her," DeWitt said.

"Yes, please do," Minka said, settling back on Efran.

That evening, when Trina showed up at dinner looking like the proverbial Queen of Sheba, Minka went up to the head tables to ask Tera where this clothing store was. Tera told her, and Minka made a date with her to go shopping there tomorrow. Estes' wife Kelsey, overhearing, also wanted to go, so they included her.

Looking down the tables, Minka saw Wyeth and Cyr, so she stopped by their table to ask Wyeth to ask Cyr (who was deaf) if she would please go with them to shop at this newfound place tomorrow. She eagerly agreed, and Wyeth promised to tell Tourjee that Minka had commanded the morning off for her.

Minka then triumphantly returned to Efran and Joshua to tell him of their planned excursion. He authorized a good wagon (with a suspension system) and bodyguard to accompany them. And he allotted her an outrageous twenty royals to spend as she wished.

So, on the day after Christmas, while the fir tree in the foyer was hauled out and chopped into firewood, Minka, Tera, and Cyr gathered excitedly in the courtyard to wait for their wagon and bodyguard. Besides the suspension system, this wagon had cushioned seats with storage underneath. In fact, it had all the amenities of a carriage without the roof or the styling.

Efran had requested four bodyguards for this trip, so Connor, Koschat, Martyn and Mathurin rode out to Minka's delighted greeting. With Arne driving the two-horse wagon, they all set off down the switchback.

As Estes and Kelsey lived in a house in the western section, Minka directed Arne to their street to pick her up. But she was walking to the corner to meet them, so Arne just pulled the wagon over to the side to wait for her.

While they were waiting, Minka looked across Main at the houses and ongoing construction. Movement in front of a new house caught her eye—while she couldn't see the house number, she knew which house it was. Despite being overshadowed by Elvey's, it was visible from the courtyard. At this time, she watched Captain Neale emerge from the front door and turn back to kiss someone on the doorstep. He then walked off with a look of contentment.

When Kelsey reached the wagon, everyone greeted her. Arne got down from the driver's seat to lower the step for her, and Kelsey explained that her sister was watching baby Malan, in exchange for which Kelsey had promised her a trip to this shop later.

On the way, Minka checked Cyr's little velvet bag for spending money. Minka didn't worry about Tera or Kelsey

in that regard, knowing that their husbands were well paid. And although Wyeth made good money for a soldier, he was still paid a soldier's wages. Therefore, Minka shamelessly opened Cyr's bag to drop four or five royals into it. Cyr looked pained, opening her mouth, but Minka put her fingers to her closed lips (signifying "be quiet") and Cyr laughed.

As the wagon rambled down Main, Tera leaned forward to direct Arne to the shop. He turned west down the last street next to the wall, then drove the wagon almost all the way to the end of the street. The women grew quiet and the bodyguard alert as Tera pointed out the lonely little shop tucked in a corner plot less than fifty feet from the boiling Passage. Its faded sign read, "Flodie's Oddities and Articles of Worth." The shop looked as though it had stood here for decades, which of course was impossible.

Arne turned frowning to Tera. "DeWitt lets you come down here by yourself?"

"No, I take Bullara to carry what I buy," Tera tossed off, and everyone relaxed. Bullara was the Fortress handyman everyone called when there was heavy lifting to be done.

Arne lowered the step for the ladies and they all filed into the shop. All four bodyguards accompanied the women in; Arne was left out in the wagon by himself. But since he had rediscovered his love of whistling during the Goulven crisis, they could hear him emitting the heartrending "The Last Time I Held Her." Meanwhile, he kept watch, as was ingrained in all the men.

Tera greeted an elderly woman at the counter, "Hello, Flodie. I've brought some friends."

"Oh, that's lovely. Let me know if I can help you," she said, nodding at them.

"Thank you," Minka said, studying her. There was something familiar about her gentle smile, but Minka couldn't determine what triggered the sense of recognition. Flodie came out from behind the counter to walk around and make suggestions.

"Here, dear," she said, patting Cyr's arm, who looked over questioningly. Flodie led her to stacks of bloomers with large drawstring waists and racks of dresses with bodices that opened easily. "You need these." It was all maternity wear.

Minka looked quickly at Cyr. She and Wyeth had been married about two months. Minka began, "Are you—?"

Blushing, Cyr lifted her hands, palms up, to raise one hand while lowering the other as if juggling: *Maybe*. Minka hugged her in joy, and Flodie helped her find the best things there. Minka went over to the children's area to see if she could find any baby-safe toys. There were a few rattles and such, which she picked up, then she looked up to a high shelf at a doll that made her start. It looked just like the doll from the barge that she had given Geneve—who had then thrown it out of her third-floor window, breaking its head.

Minka pulled this doll down from the shelf to look under its cap and see that its head was unbroken. Other than that, it looked just the same. So Minka put it in her basket for herself.

Tera was looking at tables of random glassware and accessories which she mostly passed over, until coming to a pair of spectacles. These she picked up to put in her basket, though she had no use for them and DeWitt had never complained about his eyesight. They were rather expensive, so she started to put them back, but couldn't seem to get them out of the basket. In exasperation, she let them be and went on to look at the ladies' shoes.

Kelsey was having fun just browsing, looking at this or that, until she came across a chest with the sign, "Ladies

Clothing.” Opening it, she discovered many old, beautiful things—fashions from probably forty years ago that were in pristine condition. She held up piece after piece, enthralled with their simple style and quality. “Tera, Minka, Cyr—come look at these!” she demanded.

They came over to look. Minka breathed, “Oh, these are the kind of things Elvey used to make. But most of them I’d ruin in the garden or the coops.” She did take a shawl woven with roses and a long skirt of copper brown. Cyr glanced in the trunk, but had found many other clothes that she thought she would need soon.

Tera found several lovely, simple dresses. “They’re all in perfect condition—no moth holes, tears or stains. Who would give up such beautiful things?”

“Someone who couldn’t wear them anymore?” Minka suggested. As the last piece was lifted from the bottom of the chest to go into someone’s basket, they saw a card that read, “Donated by Lady Marguerite of Eurus.” Minka murmured, “Of course. Dear Auntie.” Kelsey nodded.

Following, the women separated again to explore other areas, each under the eye of a bodyguard, although no one else was in the shop at the time. On an isolated shelf of random articles, Minka found an old, well-washed hooded cloak of green, brown and blue stripes which she tried on. It was definitely not elegant or fashionable, but it was clean and roomy, and made her feel warm just putting it on. So she put it in her basket.

In the same area, she was delighted to find a few small handwritten books, battered from use. The first one, bound in bark with pages of inexpertly made paper, was filled with short quotations in a childish hand. Minka immediately put that in her basket, loving it without knowing why.

The next little book was very old, but had been professionally bound in good leather. Opening it, she found it filled with unevenly written paragraphs in different inks, obviously recorded over a length of time by the same hand. Some lines she recognized as Scripture, but there were other thoughts as well, such as: “I understand now that you love wisdom so much, that you wish to know and feel it naked so well, that you don’t want any obstructing cloth between you and it. However, it will seldom show itself so openly to anyone. So I don’t know how you can take it with gloved hands. You have to put your bare body towards it, if you would feel it.” Immediately Minka knew that Efran must have this book, and put it in her crowded basket.

She turned, then, to see a silver mirror sitting on the shelf. It was not a very good mirror, for her reflected image was blurry. But the mirror itself looked familiar; she seemed to remember it from somewhere. As she looked at it, her own blurry image faded, and she seemed to see Adele’s face turn slowly toward her. *Minka. Minka? Are you there? Minka, help me. You can help me if you will, Minka. You can—*

Martyn, beside her, took the mirror down off the shelf. Minka blinked, snapping awake to look at him. “Are you finding anything good, Minka?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I think so. Yes. Thank you, Martyn. That—that belonged to Adele—”

“I will buy this,” he said. She watched him take it to the counter and pull a few coins from his pocket.

Hurrying up beside him, Minka said, “It’s silver. It must cost—” She was digging in her royals pouch.

“Just a few pieces,” he said, shaking his head at her.

Flodie remarked, “It’s not a very good mirror.”

Having paid her, Martyn took the mirror outside. Minka left her basket on the counter to follow.

She watched him walk around the shop toward the Passage. Arne left off whistling to watch him. Then Martyn reared back, holding the mirror like a discus, and flung it into the tumultuous river, where it no doubt sank straight to the bottom. He turned back to remark to Arne, "It belonged to Adele."

"Ah," Arne noted, and began whistling, "Evil Will Leave Me Alone." And Minka realized that this was the first time she had ever heard Adele call her "Minka" instead of "Sybil"—if it were Adele.

Minka paused to hug Martyn, then ran back into the shop to claim her basket as others were paying for their purchases. "You have a lot of good things today, Flodie," Tera remarked.

"Some days I do; some days I don't," Flodie said philosophically.

The women weren't the only ones loaded down with bounty. Connor hauled a hutch to the wagon that he planned to present to his wife Lyra, and Koschat showed Mathurin and Martyn a twined rope about three feet long with a pouch in the middle. "A real Polonti sling!" Mathurin cried.

"Yeah?" Arne said in interest. "Let's see yer use it, boy."

Grinning at him, Koschat searched around for a suitable stone. He found one the right size and shape, which he loaded into the pouch. Then he put the looped end of the rope onto one finger and held the other end in the same hand to begin swinging the rock rapidly over his head. "Keep an eye on the lowest branch of that oak," he said, nodding to a tree on the bank of the Passage. Then he released one end of the sling and the branch exploded in the middle.

"Dam'," Arne said quietly.

Connor said, "We should have men training on slings."

"I'll suggest that to the Captain," Martyn said.

Koschat nodded as debris continued to fall from the shattered branch.

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Chapter 17

It was a happy group that returned from Flodie's. Arne delivered Kelsey to her door before detouring to Connor and Lyra's house to drop off the hutch. The rest of them returned to the fortress with their laden bags, Minka with most of the royals left over.

When they unloaded in the courtyard, she paused, looking to Martyn. He walked over to her, and she began, "Adele—"

He shook his head, whispering, "Whoever put her in the mirror will have to dredge her up from the bottom of the Passage."

She closed her eyes, nodding, “Thank you, Martyn.” He squeezed her hand gently before turning to the hilltop stables with his horse.

Minka congratulated the other women on their finds and hugged Cyr again. Then she hastened to her and Efran’s quarters before he could come see everything she bought. She unloaded the bag on their bed, picking up the doll. This she intended to compare with the first, to see just how alike they were. But when she opened her wardrobe to rummage in the bottom, she couldn’t find it. The doll with the cracked head was gone.

She sat back on her heels, thinking hard. Had she put it in the donations bin without remembering it? No, she was fairly sure that she just kept it hidden. On a random thought, she took off the doll’s hat to look at her head again. This time she saw a faint line where the crack had been expertly repaired.

Since she refused to believe what she was thinking, she put the doll in the bottom of the closet again. She shouldn’t be surprised, however, because the faeries took all kinds of liberties with the vaguest permission. Anyway—

She hung up the copper-colored skirt and rose shawl in her wardrobe, seeing how they coordinated in an unexpected but satisfying way. It reminded her of fall on the hilltop. Then she held up the striped cloak. It was unusual in that it had no front opening, but was pulled down over the head. She put it on again, liking the sleeves that covered her hands and the hood that fell well down on her face.

Hearing the outer door open with the query, “Minka?” she replied, “Back here.” She lifted her head under the hood to barely see Efran walk in.

He stood there for so long without saying anything that she lowered the hood to look. He was staring at her with the strangest expression—like shock at what he saw while knowing that it must be exactly what he saw. “Efran?”

He blinked, glanced aside, then wet his lips as he came over to raise a sleeve of the cloak and study it. “You found this at the shop?”

“Yes,” she said. “It may not be a woman’s cloak, but, it feels good.” She took it off to let him examine it.

“I . . . wore one just like it making the trip down from Eledith to Westford when I was thirteen,” he said. “After Therese died, and I had to leave, the old cleric gave it to me. It probably saved my life.” She watched with wide eyes and parted lips as he turned it inside out, confirming something from the seams.

“Well. Interesting coincidence. Did you find anything else?” he asked, dropping the cloak onto the bed.

“Yes,” she said. “Oh, here’s the change. Everything all together was less than a royal, but I gave Cyr a handful,” she said, reaching into the bag. “Here’s the cutest little handmade book. It looks as though a child made—Efran!”

He had dropped to sit on the bed as though his legs had given out underneath him. He was holding the little bark-covered book in trembling hands, unable at first to open it. When he finally parted the cover from the first page, he just continued to hold it. She whispered, “Efran, did you make this book?”

“Yes,” he said tightly. “Therese showed me in one of the Latter Annals how Ares had little books made for him to write down thoughts or Scriptures, and suggested I make my own. And here it is. These are all Scripture verses that she taught me. I’m sure I did not take it with me when I left Eledith.”

“Then the cloak *was* yours. Efran, there is—faerie influence in the shop. Good and bad,” she said.

He quickly looked up at her. “Bad? How?”

She sat close beside him. “There was a mirror I recognized. It had been Adele’s when she lived here. And, as I was looking at it, I saw her. She turned toward me, and spoke to me, asking for my help—”

“Where is it?” he said, reaching for the bag.

“Martyn bought it, and took it out, and flung it into the river,” she said.

“Ah. Good,” he murmured. “So, it’s a shop of things . . . recovered by . . . someone.”

“There was a chest of beautiful clothes that Auntie Marguerite had donated. I took only a skirt and a shawl, but Tera and Kelsey emptied it between them. Which I was glad for,” she said.

“Anything else?” he exhaled.

“This.” She withdrew the other little book, the one with the good leather cover.

He opened it up to read a number of pages, then flipped to the back. “Ryal will know,” he mused.

“Who it belonged to? Who do you think?” she asked.

“I think it’s one of Ares’ little books,” he said.

“Oh, Efran. Really?” she gasped.

He nodded. “Ryal will know.”

“Oh, let’s go show it to him!” she cried, jumping up.

“In a little while. Your bodyguards want me to watch Koschat use the sling,” he said, smiling.

“Oh, dear; it’s deadly. He took out an oak branch with a small rock,” she said.

He agreed. “We should be using it.”

Efran stood to put the small book in his pocket and extend his arm to her. They went first to the nursery to pick up Joshua, who was banging on the door, calling, “Papapapa!”

He and the nursery workers all looked pleased at his father’s arrival. Efran draped the baby sling over his shoulder, then loaded Joshua in it and shifted it to his back. Minka adjusted the upper edge of the sling to support his head as he patted Papa’s shoulder.

“Oh,” she remembered. “Did Captain Neale get married?”

“Yes, about three weeks ago,” Efran said.

“I didn’t hear anything about it,” she murmured.

“He wanted to keep it more or less quiet. He’s a private man,” Efran said. She nodded thoughtfully.

They walked out to the front courtyard, where they saw a group of men wave them over to the top of the northwestern hillside outside the fence. Here, Koschat and a handful of other Polonti were practicing with a couple of slings. So Efran, Minka and Joshua departed the courtyard gates to walk on over.

“Captain. Lady Minka,” Conte said respectfully. “Koschat found a good sling at Flodie’s shop; I brought my own that had been made in Eledith years ago.” He held up two very similar slings; Efran took one to spread the pouch and examine the thin rope that held it.

“This could have been made yesterday or a hundred years ago,” Efran noted.

“Exactly. The Polonti that used them in battle carried pouches of hardened clay balls about two inches wide. We didn’t have time to make any for today, so we’re using river rocks. But hitting the target depends on smooth rocks or balls,” Conte said.

“Right,” Efran said. “Show me.”

They spread out around Koschat, who loaded a smooth stone to begin swinging it with an eye on a crude log mannequin about forty feet away, one of eight or ten set up on the hillside with nothing behind them but a rocky slope. When the first shot sent the mannequin rolling halfway down the slope, Koschat loaded another stone and aimed at the second, putting a gaping hole in it before it fell down.

“I’ve seen enough,” Efran laughed. “Start practicing with volunteers; tell your Captain to make it a priority over routine duties.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Conte said, gratified, and Koschat saluted.

Following, Minka and Efran, with Joshua on his back, walked down the switchback to the notary’s shop. Entering to Ryal’s mildly questioning eyes, Efran withdrew the small book from his pocket and laid it on the counter in front of him. Giardi glanced at it, smiling, but cooed at Joshua.

Ryal picked up the book to begin leafing carefully through it. “Where did you get this?”

“Flodie’s,” Efran said. “The little shop in the northwestern corner.”

Ryal looked up to study him with faded blue eyes, then asked quietly, “How did she get it?”

Efran shook his head slightly. “Minka says there are faeries involved.”

“There would have to be,” Ryal said, handing it back to him. “It is Ares’. I collected it more than once from the grounds below his second-floor window where it landed when he was angry.”

Efran laughed. “That explains the stains on the back cover and parts of the last few pages.” Ryal nodded soberly as Giardi smiled.

Fingering the book, Efran whispered, “I am not worthy, Ryal. I am not worthy of succeeding him in any capacity.” Eyes down, Minka held his arm in disagreement.

Ryal considered that, then said, “Don’t look at it as a succession, but as a new endeavor. Whether you are worthy to rule Lystra or Westford will never be known. But it’s certain that you were chosen lord of the Abbey Lands.”

Efran closed his eyes to exhale, then looked down at Minka clinging to his arm. “Then I just must do the best I can. All right,” he said, straightening. “Thank you for the confirmation about the book, Ryal. Now I’m torn between seeing what else is at Flodie’s or burning it down.” At Ryal’s and Giardi’s look of shock, he added, “Oh, yes, Minka found Adele’s mirror, in which Adele appeared to ask her for help.”

“Oh no,” Ryal said.

“No fear: Martyn tossed it in the Passage, so she’ll have to think of something else,” Efran said, looking back down at the blue eyes. “And I will abide.”

Stuffing the book back into his pocket, Efran turned to leave, but Giardi stuck some papers under Ryal’s nose. He said, “Oh, Efran.” When he turned back, Ryal said, “Lady Trina asked to initiate a divorce from her husband. I have completed the forms, which need her signature. Do you wish to take them?”

Efran considered that. “Do *I* wish to ask Trina to sign her divorce papers . . . ?”

“Would you like for me to give them to her to sign?” Minka asked Efran.

“Yes, actually,” he said.

When Minka took the papers from Ryal, he said, “Both copies must be signed and returned to me so that I can stamp them as certified. Then one must be given to Reinagle.”

“Oh ho! By whom?” Efran laughed, and Ryal nodded ruefully.

When they returned to the fortress, Efran gave her the small book before heading upstairs to the workroom. Minka put both Ares’ little book and the childish bark book on the small table in the receiving room. Thereafter, in passing in or out of their quarters, both of them saw the books; inevitably, they picked up one or the other to look through it.

Minka found the childish book of Scriptures most helpful; Efran, understanding more of the burdens that Ares carried, discovered wisdom in both of them. But they never sat unopened for long. In changing into her chickening clothes, Minka found the divorce papers, which she also put on the small table.

After completing her rounds of the coops and changing into normal wear, she saw again the doll in the bottom of her wardrobe. She picked it up with a heavy heart, stroking its little white dress. She knew she was keeping it as a charm, a talisman, in hope of something that was not going to happen. Now that the doll was whole, it was of no use to anyone hidden here in her wardrobe.

So, in acceptance of her barrenness, she took the doll to the children’s playroom. While they were outside playing, she put it in the toy storage closet, shut the door, and walked away.

That evening at dinner, DeWitt leaned down between Efran and Minka to begin to say something, but Efran said, “You’re wearing spectacles.” Joshua, on Efran’s lap, looked up.

DeWitt laughed at the preemptive interruption. “Yes, and I never realized how much I needed them. Tera found

them at Flodie's. To hear her tell it, they leapt into her basket and wouldn't get out again."

Minka laughed and Efran nodded, then DeWitt resumed in a lower voice, "Stites is the one who married Challinor; they're living rent-free at twenty-two, as Estes gave her permission."

"Stites is worth it. How long do you think they'll last?" Efran asked quietly.

"They're happy, as far as I know, but she's already spent the twenty-five royals that Estes gave her—mostly at Elvey's, from what I hear, and is now asking for the rest of the hundred that you promised her," DeWitt related.

"No," Efran said. "She's married, and not to me. So, no." Minka stifled a chortle.

"Furthermore," DeWitt resumed, "Stites won't give her any of his salary. He seems to think they might need it for food."

Efran quietly choked laughing, then added, "Stites is a good man." Joshua looked back at him, trying to figure out how to make that sound. Efran fed him a bite of cobbler.

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Chapter 18

Before DeWitt could leave to go to his own table, Minka asked him, "Do you have a quill set at your table?"

"Don't I always?" he returned, pained.

She stood, withdrawing the slightly wrinkled papers from her pocket. "If you don't mind, I'm going to borrow it to have Trina sign the divorce papers Ryal prepared for her."

"Ah," DeWitt said.

"Oh. Look," Minka said, nodding toward the front of the hall. Efran and DeWitt glanced at the front, then looked back at her, not seeing anything extraordinary. So she clarified: "Trina and Challinor are sitting at the head table that Efran was supposed to occupy early on [but didn't for fear of being constantly disturbed at dinner]. They're wearing Elvey's, obviously. Look over at Tera and Kelsey. They're both wearing Marguerite's donations. See the difference?"

Both men studied the parties. "Yes," DeWitt said.

Efran snorted mildly, "Trina and Challinor look like stage performers. Tera and Kelsey just look—elegant. Like Marguerite." With a sigh, Minka agreed.

Efran watched her accompany DeWitt to the head tables to pick up his quill set and take it over to Trina. Minka laid the papers in front of her, explaining that Ryal needed two signed copies of the petition—one for her to keep, and one to deliver to Reinagle.

Trina signed both quickly, then waved Minka away like a servant. Unoffended, she returned the quill set to

DeWitt while bending down to whisper something to Tera—complimenting her on her dress, Efran thought.

As Minka headed to the back of the room with the forms, Efran gestured to the door sentry, Cudmore. “Take Lady Minka’s papers down to Ryal, please.”

“Captain,” Cudmore said, trotting up to Minka to request the papers, which she handed over. He carried them out and Minka sat back down beside Efran and Joshua.

While Minka’s two boys were climbing the northwestern hillside the following morning, December 28th, she did some thoughtful pacing, then went out to the courtyard to look down at a nice little house close to Main, almost hidden by Elvey’s. Ellor, on gate duty again, asked, “Do you need a horse and a bodyguard, Lady Minka?”

She winced. “I’m just going to walk down to visit that house right there. You can watch me all the way down, so I don’t need a bodyguard.” He looked dubious, so she said, “Please, Ellor? You tell me when to start out.”

Looking down on the sparse traffic, he said, “All right, Lady Minka, you’re clear.”

“Thank you.” She smiled as he opened the gates for her. She walked down with an eye on the house, knowing that Neale will have left hours ago.

Emerging from between the faerie trees at the base of the switchback, she crossed the east-west road to walk up to the front door and knock, seeing that it was #55. As she waited, she admired the potted plants and flower beds that received tender care from someone.

The door opened a crack for beautiful but wary brown eyes to regard her. “Hello. I’m Efran’s wife Minka. May I come in and visit for just a little while?” she asked with a tentative smile. The young woman opened the door to her.

An hour later, Minka came out again, informed and satisfied. She waved to Ellor on her way up the switchback, and he nodded. As he opened the courtyard gates for her, she patted his arm in gratitude before going into the fortress.

In the late afternoon, the six scouts that Efran had sent to Eurus—Chee, Tiras, Coxe, Finn, Shane, and Graeme—returned to the fortress. Efran sent them to the small dining room for an early dinner, and summoned the five captains, Commanders Lyte and Wendt, Estes, and DeWitt to hear their report.

While the men ate, Efran opened the letter from Justinian that the scouts had brought back. With Minka sitting beside him in a chair against the wall (as he was, for lack of room at the table which he insisted his men occupy) he read the letter out loud:

“‘To my divine celestial object’—Justinian addresses his letters to Minka, by the way,” Efran explained, and the men laughed. Minka looked innocent. Efran resumed:

“‘What a sensation your kindred Christmas comet caused, coloring the whole sky blood red before evaporating like a vision. I assume that as it graced the heathen north, it appeared in your Lands as well. The churches that weren’t even open for Christmas services have now had to unlock their doors for confessions.

“‘At any rate, our divine Lady M was thrilled with the influx of visitors from the Lands, and feasted them to within an inch of their lives, as they will tell you. What news they may have for you about other visitors, I do not

know, but word has it that our Surchatain is so outraged by your Gargoyle's appropriation (as he sees it) of his lawful wife that he is coming with arms to reclaim her. You should probably expect him on your doorstep no later than the 29th—Is that tomorrow?" Efran asked, looking up, and several men nodded. He resumed reading:

"The complication here is that the Surchatain's son and Senior Advisor apparently is also planning on retrieving the Lady T without delivering her to her husband, *id est*, his father, instead taking her to himself. To do that, he must arrive at your Lands with sufficient force close to the same time that the Surchatain does. How your resourceful Gargoyle chooses to entertain so many unexpected guests will be up to him—me," Efran translated again to laughter.

"Best wishes to you and the Gargoyle for the New Year,

"Your Own Justinian Until the Stars Fall from the Sky," Efran concluded.

The men smiled again. Wendt said, "The question of the hour seems to be: what does Trina want?"

Efran grimaced. "And there it is. Yes, Commander, that is the question. She has signed a petition of divorce from Reinagle, but I don't know how committed she is to Folliott."

Wendt observed, "The manner in which he chose to get her down here—if it was his doing—was certainly involved and clever, but, rather brutal handling of the woman he supposedly loves."

"True," Efran agreed. "She showed me a note that was hidden in her dress which said, 'Wait, I will come for you.' She identified the hand as Folliott's but—wasn't swooning at the promise. She said she didn't want to go back to Eurus." He was studying Neale as he said this, but Neale was regarding Wendt.

After a moment's silence, Efran asked Chee, "So, what were your observations?"

Chee glanced at his fellow scouts, then said, "Lady Marguerite's table is unmatched."

There followed a burst of laughter and numerous affirmations. Efran said through gritted teeth, "I'm glad to know that your Christmas Day was not entirely one of hardship."

Chee explained, "It's good you have Justinian's reports, because we heard little and saw less. There were no Goulven to be seen; city business ongoing as if there never were. We also could get no word on the Goulven hunters, who've vanished. Justinian said that Lady Marguerite knew. I had my best-looking man ask her"—he glanced at Graeme, who winced mildly—"and she said he was adorable." There was some choked laughter and threatening glances from Graeme to his cohorts.

"Reinagle is mobilizing," Chee continued. "Impossible to tell how many, because he may have troops gathering at numerous places. But we saw clerks and deckhands reporting for duty with eyes of death. Also, a number of eligible-looking men fleeing south and west with backpacks. Nobody wants to fight you."

"I don't want to kill them either," Efran said. "We have to find a way to resolve it without arms." Again he looked at Neale. "You told me a little of what Trina said to you. Do you get a sense of what she's looking for here?"

Neale opened his mouth, but someone said, "Clothes?" and the room dissolved in laughter.

"Clothes." Efran banged the back of his head against the wall a few times. Then he turned to Minka beside him.

“Why do women have to adorn themselves with expensive threads?”

She, wearing a linen work/riding dress, said hesitantly, “For different reasons. I think with Trina it’s a declaration of freedom.”

“From Reinagle?” he asked.

She nodded. “And from Follriott, possibly. If she said she doesn’t want to go back to Eurus, you will have to—work around that.”

“What do we do? Send her to Crescent Hollow?” Efran asked.

“If you can get her to leave,” she said dubiously.

“Is there someone here she wants?” he asked.

“Possibly,” she said evasively. “But if he turns out to be unavailable, she’ll just find someone else of status.”

“Who is he?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said, which was true. “But again, that’s not the issue.”

“Do I need to ask for a volunteer to court Trina?” He looked around the room, which was suddenly filled with stone statues.

“It’s difficult,” Minka said. “You may not know what to do until they’re all at the gates.”

Nodding, Efran said, “Probably. Well. Unless anyone has more to say, you’re dismissed.”

The men stood, saluting, and then fairly rushed from the room. Efran looked back at Minka. “Will you come with me to talk to her?”

“Yes,” she said, as if it were inevitable.

He went to the nursery to get Joshua, but came back empty-handed because the baby was asleep. So he took Minka to ask the door guard Eustace, “Do you know where Trina is?”

“I believe she requested a bodyguard and carriage to take her down to Elvey’s, Captain,” Eustace replied.

Minka barely suppressed the gasp, “Again?”

Efran told him, “You’re to refuse any further purchases that Trina makes from Elvey’s.”

“Yes, Captain,” Eustace said almost in relief.

Efran and Minka then went out to the courtyard to request horses. While there, he asked Ellor, “Did Trina take a carriage to Elvey’s?”

“She asked for one, Captain, but I told her it would take an hour for setup, so she settled for a horse and two bodyguards,” Ellor said placidly.

Efran looked off. “So I’m driven to consider commendations for men who turn down her requests.”

“Thank you, sir,” Ellor said while Minka quietly laughed.

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Chapter 19

When their horses arrived, Efran helped Minka mount the tall horse, then they rode straight down to Elvey’s. He paused at the two Abbey men, Gaul and Milo, standing outside the covered doorway. “Are you warding Trina?” he asked Gaul.

“Yes, sir,” he said, saluting.

“How long have you been here?” Efran asked.

“Approximately—” Gaul glanced questioningly at his partner.

“Two hours, Captain,” Milo replied, straightening from the slump of weariness.

Efran was almost at the glassy-eyed stage. “Very well. Lady Minka and I will take her from here. You’re to return to the fortress and notify Administrator DeWitt to reject any further invoices he receives for her purchases. You’re dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.” “Thank you, sir.” They saluted and almost ran for their horses.

Efran then told the doorman, “We will be right back for these horses. And bring out Trina’s ride.”

“Yes, sir.” The man bowed, gesturing to a stablehand.

With Minka in hand, Efran entered to smile down at the dresser, Ianna, seated at her welcome table. “Lord Efran! And Lady Minka. How may I help you?” she asked, beaming. She was wrapping the most recent addition to a pile of packages on the table, all marked for Lady Trina.

Efran laid a hand on the package. “First, please note that the Fortress will not pay for anything else that Trina buys,” he said, and her face froze. “Also, is she here?”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Ianna said, white-faced.

“Go get her, please,” he said.

“Yes, Lord Efran,” she said, then directed an accusatory glance at Minka, whose eyes widened.

They waited quietly, without speaking, for quite a while. Finally, Trina emerged from the dressing area, slightly put out. “Efran! I was busy. What do you need?” She was wearing another new dress, evidently still trying it on.

“Your company, Trina,” he said, extending a hand to the door.

“Can’t it wait?” she asked petulantly.

“No, I’m sorry,” he said.

“Oh. Well. Here, take a few. These are all mine,” she said, picking up packages from the table. Minka glimpsed Ianna and Challinor watching from beyond the doorway.

“Not now, Trina.” He took her hand off the packages to walk her away, Minka following.

Outside, he took Trina right over to boost her into the saddle of the Abbey horse. He then helped Minka mount before leaping up into his saddle. He paused to look around, debating a destination, while both women watched. Then he nodded. “We’ll ride around the lake. Nothing but fish in it now.”

Trina reluctantly walked her horse on his left while Minka rode to his right. They ambled quietly along until they spotted an Abbey rider galloping toward them from the east. Efran reined up for the man to pull alongside him and speak quietly in his ear. “I see. Thank you; you’re dismissed,” he said without expression.

As the man rode past them toward the fortress, Efran informed the women, “There are new sheep in the pen.”

“That’s good,” Minka said, watching him, as that was so obviously not the message. Trina was looking longingly back at Elvey’s.

“Yes, it is,” he said, and he kicked the horse lightly to walk again. Trina exhaled in dissatisfaction, but he crinkled his eyes at Minka. She looked at him hard, trying to divine the secret, then looked east, where the rider had come from.

By now they had reached the lake, where at least a dozen people were fishing off the pier. Efran rode right past it, not around it. “Let’s go look at the sheep pen,” he said, and kicked his horse to a gentle lope. Minka did likewise.

But Trina protested, “This dress is not good for riding!” Minka glanced over at the silk skirts flying up over her thighs.

“It won’t be for long,” Efran assured her without looking around.

The animal enclosures came into view—sheep, goats, and cattle. Men working around them stood at attention as they passed, some saluting. Minka was beside herself with curiosity by now, as they had left the sheep behind. But they rode on until coming to the fields being worked. Some men looked to be tilling, others were definitely planting grain. Again, the men who spotted them paused to salute.

The three kept loping; Efran picked up the pace a bit. Trina shouted, “Slow down!”

“We’re almost there!” Efran called back, riding at a fast lope. Minka, on high alert, saw that the beautiful blue-and-gold striped tent had been re-erected. And the front flaps stood open.

Trina, seeing the tent and recognizing it, would have turned around if she could, but her horse was following Efran’s, and would not slow until his did. Shortly, they reined up in front of the tent. A young man emerged to run over to Trina’s horse. As she was trying to get down, she practically fell into his arms. Efran noted carriage horses behind the tent, but Minka was watching Trina with her rescuer.

He kissed her with such feeling that she had to respond. Releasing her just enough to speak, he said, "I'm so sorry for the discomfort I caused you, Trina. It wasn't the best plan, but it was the only thing I could come up with in so short a time." He broke off to kiss her again.

"I found your father," he said, breaking away. "He's had a rough time of it, but is recuperating in a house I've rented with my father's money. He doesn't know that he's funding me—it's just my way of telling him that I resign. At any rate, I'll take you right to Bowring. You look beautiful." He paused to take in the windblown silk.

"Folliott, I don't know how I can ride to Eurus," she began weakly.

"In this," he said, turning to signal. From behind the tent appeared an elegant carriage drawn by two matched horses. A footman opened the door, bowing. "You can sleep, eat, or simply lie in my arms," Folliott told her.

"Oh. Well then," she said, relenting.

As he began escorting her to the carriage, he paused to tell Efran, "You have my gratitude, Captain. And my father will appear at your gates sometime tomorrow afternoon."

"Thank you for the warning, Folliott. God speed," Efran said, smiling.

He and Minka watched him assist Trina into the gorgeous coach, then the footman hopped aboard and the driver slapped the reins. Accompanied by two mounted bodyguards, the carriage started northwest, skirting the Abbey Lands walls until intersecting the main northbound road to Westford. With the rebuilding, Folliott would certainly have arranged suitable lodging for the night before departing for Eurus in the morning.

When the coach was out of sight, Minka turned to Efran to demand, "Was that the message you got outside of Elvey's?"

"Yes!" he laughed. "God in heaven, I will never question Your timing again. And, all things considered, Folliott's plan wasn't that bad. Tied up like that, she couldn't do anything to ruin it."

They returned to the populated Lands at an easy lope with Trina's horse following. As they came to Main, they met Lady Elvey herself riding down the switchback. "Efran!" she cried. "What is this? Why would you cancel Lady Trina's order?"

It was too easy. "She's on her way back to Eurus, Elvey," he said apologetically. "But I'm sure she'll want the clothes. Find out where Folliott's rented house is. He'll pay for them."

"She left for Eurus at this time of day?" Elvey demanded, pained.

"Yes, Folliott brought down a very nice carriage for her. It will be a pleasant ride for them both," he said, smiling.

"Oh." Elvey sagged, then noticed the mouse waiting. "Minka! You need to come shop!"

"I'd love to, Elvey, but you don't seem to have anything I can wear anymore. I don't want silk or satin; I want clothes that I can work in and ride in," Minka said.

"I understand, dear. All right," she sighed. "I'll send a man up to Eurus to track down Trina."

“Good,” Efran said. “Only, don’t approach Reinagle. He doesn’t know anything about it, and you could lose your man.”

“Oh, dear,” Elvey said.

“Good evening,” Efran said, turning his horse. The Abbey horse Trina had taken continued to follow, and Minka rode beside him.

She asked, “What are you going to tell Reinagle when he comes tomorrow?”

“I’m thinking about that,” he said. “All I know right now is that Folliott won’t be mentioned.”

She nodded in agreement, then remembered, “Ryal has the signed and notarized divorce petition.”

Jaw dropping slightly, Efran raised his face. “That may be relevant.”

As they gave up their horses to go into the foyer, he paused to glance up toward an unseen third-floor suite. “She left a bunch of clothes up there, didn’t she?”

Minka nodded. “And when she realizes that, she’s going to demand that Folliott turn the carriage around and come back for them.”

He laughed. “What will you do with them?”

“Leave them up there, for the next stray woman you adopt,” she said flatly. He looked hurt and then alarmed.

The next morning, December 29th, Efran covered with DeWitt and Estes in detail how Folliott returned for Trina and took her away in style, and at precisely the right moment. They discussed various non-lethal ways to handle Reinagle before deciding that Efran wouldn’t know what to do until he saw what Reinagle did. So Efran took Joshua out to hike down and up the northwestern hillside, after making sure that the men were not practicing with the slings.

Minka put on her chickening clothes—Efran’s present to her at Christmas a year ago, and token of the kind of clothes Elvey used to make—then went out to tend the birds. As usual, she had to collect Goldie, an Orpington, from wandering among the apple trees, and then collect her again from pecking at the heels of the archers at practice. They very much enjoyed the distraction of chasing the elusive bird around the grounds before she finally flew back on her own when Minka pulled out the feed.

When her chores were finished, Minka returned to their quarters to change into a riding dress lest she inadvertently set out again somewhere in chickening clothes. Then she paused over young Efran’s little bark book, opening it to read in a childish hand, “Speak the truth in love.”

After the midday meal, Efran sent out scouts to monitor the northbound road. They came back periodically to report that the new inn in Westford was going up rapidly under Bortniansky’s direction, for although it was cold in Westford, there was no snow to impede the work. Also, someone else was building a shop across the street from it, where Ryal’s old notary shop had stood for decades. This everyone found encouraging.

Finally, in late afternoon, Hawk and Stourt came up to the workroom to report. Hawk said, “Well, Cap’n,

Reinagle's coming with a sorry group of about fifty. He must be looking to talk you into whatever he wants because he's not going to storm the gates."

Efran looked troubled. "Anything easy is a trap. All right, I'm coming." He took Joshua back down to the nursery, where he screamed in outrage for several minutes before falling asleep.

In the courtyard, Efran ordered a show of forty archers under Quennel. Barr suggested that a regiment line Main to emphasize the point. Efran agreed before discovering they had to scale this group back to avoid inconveniencing residents who were socializing, buying, tending shop, or working on the construction of the new inn and the chapel.

Captain Melchior offered, "We might have to yield to the citizens, Captain. They'd tear into anyone blocking entrance to the shops."

Efran blinked at him. "So I've become Commander of the Women's Brigade?"

Melchior shrugged. "That's not a slight, Captain. Have you seen Elvey's when she has a sale on?"

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Chapter 20

While resenting the impediments the residents presented to his trying to protect them, Efran sent scouts up the new northbound road to monitor the area for surprise troops. He also dispatched sentries to the far east gates to watch for incursions. Then he, Commander Lyte and all the Captains sat on horses to watch Reinagle lead his group of part-time fighters to the main gates. The faerie trees immediately began picking at helmet plumes, tabards, and ornamental spears.

When Minka, watching from the courtyard, saw that this was to be a battle of words, she appropriated the nearest horse. Ellor objected, "Lady, there may be fighting."

She said, "Look at all the people shopping!" He yielded with a grimace. So she rode down the switchback and up Main at a lope, slowing to approach close enough to hear the principals. The men made way for her.

"Stop that!" Efran ordered the offending faerie-tree branches, which withdrew sullenly, some clutching souvenir plumes. He then turned to their guest. "Hello, Reinagle. What can I do for you?"

"Efran, I'm here for my wife," Reinagle said, admirably restraining his habitual outrage.

"I'm sorry, Reinagle, but she is not here. She showed up in distress several days ago, apparently having been kidnapped. But she was taken away again yesterday by one of your men, evidently," Efran said.

"I don't believe it," Reinagle said. "I believe she was enticed down by one of yours, for I found a love letter she had written to him." Now he was beginning to tremble.

"To one of my men? Who?" Efran asked skeptically.

“A man named Neale,” Reinagle said. His hand shaking, he handed a folded parchment to Efran over the gates.

“Neale?” Efran repeated in a laugh. The men looked at Captain Neale at the side of the road, who shook his head in baffled denial.

Efran looked over the letter. “Yes, this appears to be from Trina to Neale, but if you found it, then it was never sent to him.”

“He must have written letters to her, which she then destroyed,” Reinagle said.

Glancing aside at Neale, who was emphatically shaking his head, Efran said, “Reinagle, I don’t know what she meant by this, but the only Neale we have is recently married. He’s not going to be writing Trina or anyone else.”

“I don’t believe it!” Reinagle shouted. “He’s hiding my wife!”

In mild exasperation, Efran looked at Neale. “Do you mind if we bring your wife out?”

Looking at the men surrounding them, Neale hesitated. “If you insist, Captain.”

Minka said, “I’ll go get her. I’ve spoken to her, Efran. Her name is Tisi.”

Efran looked at her in surprise, but Neale nodded. So Minka turned her horse back up Main toward Number 55. She was gone only for a few minutes, then the men watched her round the corner with someone seated on the horse behind her. In consideration for her passenger, Minka kept the horse to a walk. Neale watched them apprehensively.

Minka drew up behind Efran, and Neale walked over to lift the young woman off the horse and stand beside her. “This is my wife, Tisi,” he said.

The Polonti encompassing them were silent in shock: she was Polonti—a very beautiful, full-blooded Polonti. She looked up at Efran, then glanced around at the silent men.

Few Southerners understood that, although it was common for Polonti men to marry Southern women, those same men strongly disapproved of Polonti women marrying outside their race. It was a possessiveness, an irrational prejudice that lingered despite centuries of assimilation. Polonti women were notoriously adverse to marriage, seeing it as a form of servitude. So anyone who talked them into it needed to be Polonti himself, dammit. The Southerners among the men at the gates were very quiet in the middle of this quibble not their own.

Reinagle, not understanding the silence, shouted over the gates at her, “Are you married to this Neale?”

She shouted back, “He’s Captain Neale, and yes!”

“Has he got another woman hiding in your house?” Reinagle asked, which caused some observers to snort.

She laughed, “If he tried, I’d kill her!”

Wiping the sweat from his lip, Efran turned back to Reinagle. “I saw Trina escorted to a carriage and taken away. Since she was happy to go, I saw no reason to interfere. They may have stopped to rest on the way, but she must be in Eurys by now.”

Reinagle looked around like the old, confused man he was. An associate at his side leaned over to whisper in his ear. Reinagle listened, then turned his horse to begin walking north again, and his mighty men followed in relief.

The Abbey defenders watched them ride over the stone bridge and out of sight. Then one by one, they turned to look at Captain Neale and his fiery Polonti wife. Unsettled, Efran wiped his mouth again. “I didn’t know—where did you meet her, Neale?”

“When I went out to observe the new camp at Sasany Fields, Captain. Tisi is the daughter of one of the founders, Hob. She—wanted badly to leave the camp; he wanted her to have a life outside it. So he gave permission for us to marry,” Neale replied.

“She’s Polonti,” one man hissed at him.

“Yes, I know,” Neale said flatly.

“You can’t marry Polonti,” another grunted.

“Why not?” Minka demanded. The men turned to stare at her; Efran looked to her warningly. As a Southerner herself, she asked them, “Why is it fine for your men to marry us but not your women?” Obviously, she had learned a great deal while visiting with Neale’s Polonti wife. Tisi grinned at her, but Neale looked anxious, shaking his head.

Minka was unheeding, outrage building in her as she looked at the men scowling at Neale. “You’re better than this! You’re all good men; how can you deny your women the right to choose their own mates like you do?”

Some of the men dropped their heads, but longstanding prejudices were not so quickly shaken. Then Minka shouted, “Am I your Moiwahine or not?” Their heads jerked up; Tisi looked startled. “Does my word mean anything or am I just someone to kiss?”

Then Minka looked to Efran, sitting motionless on his horse. “Speak for her, Efran. Defend your man.”

At this direct challenge, Efran slowly raised his face, lips parted. But he shut his mouth and said nothing.

Seeing him silent in the face of her demand for fairness rocked Minka to her core. She whipped the horse around to kick it as hard as she could, loping recklessly to the switchback.

Efran waited until she was well up the switchback, then he looked around at his sullen men. “Look what you did,” he said tightly. “Stupid, stubborn men! You turn on a man for taking a woman to wife that you could never have, and now I’m going to have to apologize to mine!” The fact was, as they all knew, he could not correct them in front of her, for that was a humiliation they were not able to bear.

He went on, “Grow up! This is no different from the *moekolohe* that we’ve suffered from all our lives! So you’re going to turn around and inflict the same hatred on a man who has served sacrificially for you? *Hupo!* [idiots] *Lolo!* [feeble-minded]”

Efran slumped in the silence around him, then looked at Neale standing with his arm around Tisi’s shoulders. His face was down, but she was regarding Efran almost proudly. He said, “Captain Neale, I apologize to you and Tisi for our rudeness. In some ways we’re still savages, but we’re trying to do better.”

Neale did nothing but tighten his lips, for he knew that any acknowledgment of the apology would be merely salt in the wounds. But Tisi, looking around, said, “You are *koa*”—brave, righteous. The men straightened; they would accept this compliment from a beautiful woman.

Efran thanked her: “*Mahalo*, Tisi. Neale, take her home. You’re all dismissed.” As they dispersed, he grimly turned his horse toward the switchback. Then he reined up, remembering, “I forgot to give Reinagle the petition of divorce.” After a moment, he decided, “It’s probably best I didn’t.” So he resumed his reluctant ride.

By this time, Minka was sitting under the faerie tree on the fortress roof while the faeries above her dropped consoling kisses onto her head. She heard, “Reine Minka” in a liquid whisper.

Glancing up, she saw no one, but said, “Go away, Alberon.”

Arriving at the fortress, Efran checked their quarters, but she was not there. He looked in the nursery to see Joshua asleep, but no Minka. So he trotted down the corridor to scan the back grounds, asking the sentry, Seagrave, “Did Minka come out here?”

“No, Captain,” Seagrave said, disquieted.

Exhaling, Efran went upstairs to look into the workroom. Estes and DeWitt glanced up, and Estes said, “We just heard that Reinagle left, Efran. What were you shouting at the men about?”

“I’ll tell you later,” he said, backing out again.

He went up to the vacant third-floor room, but it was still vacant. With dread in his belly, he ran up the remaining flights of stairs to the rooftop. Bypassing the tree, he went to look at the bell tower—and saw the pointed door there again.

Heart pounding, he went into the tower to see the pointed door leading to Adele’s chamber with the dais. He opened the door, finding the anteroom the same as it had been, with the icy glazed walls. There were no torches. He walked into the hall to see the figure on the dais.

But the dress was not Adele’s; it was a gown he vaguely recognized of white silk, pearls, and what looked to be diamonds. When he remembered where he had seen that gown, his chest squeezed in apprehension. So he looked past the long, crimped white hair to the face.

It was Minka. He had to fight to stay conscious and on his feet. Her expressionless eyes turned mildly to him, then looked away indifferently as she stood motionless on the dais. “M-minka,” he stammered. She did not reply, only blinked.

“Minka—why? Why would you do this?” he gasped. “If you can’t love me anymore, you still have Joshua, and Toby, and the children. Why would you abandon them? Oh, Minka,” he groaned. “I can’t believe you would do this. I’m begging you, come back to us.” Again, she did not speak. Her vacuous eyes roamed momentarily over the small, empty hall before resting on nothing again.

Brokenly staring at her, he thought, *She can’t have done this voluntarily. Alberon convinced her, somehow, probably with illusion. He made her think I was berating her, or laughing at her to the men. I will not leave her here like this.*

Remembering the burns that Lorient had received when he simply touched Adele's fingers, Efran clenched his jaw. Then he took one long stride forward and enveloped Minka in both arms.

Wrenching her off the dais, he felt the dress collapse in his arms, and looked down at sparkles fading in the air as the form evaporated. When nothing of her was left but the vanishing dress, he realized that it hadn't been Minka at all—just another illusion.

Throwing off the remaining wisps of diamonds and silk, he started for the exit only to see the handle on the pointed door vanish. Efran pushed on the door anyway, but it wouldn't budge. So he stepped back to kick the door in the area of the lock, and his foot went clear through to the outside. He had made a real hole in the wood.

So he continued to kick, pulling away fragments of wood and slate until he had made a hole big enough to step through. When he was out, standing on the walkway surrounding the bell tower, he looked back at the jagged opening he had made in the side of the wood-framed slate tower.

Breathing heavily, he walked back to the faerie tree, looking around. "Where is she, Alberon?" he shouted. A tree branch swept down to knock him on the head. "Ow!" But then he saw her sitting against the tree practically at his feet.

He sat down beside her, noting that Alberon had been messing with her hair again. The golden flecks were subdued, hardly noticeable, but her hair was curled in smooth faerie style instead of being mussed as usual. Although Efran hated it, he felt this was probably not a good time to say so.

Her head was down as she played with spent faerie-tree blossoms in her lap, heavy with the fragrance of nutmeg. She hadn't looked up or acknowledged him in any way. He pressed against her side to feel that something real was here, at least.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "You were right, and, all the men knew it. But I—couldn't chew on them in front of you. Do you see? We're too proud; they wouldn't have listened. But they listened after you left; you shamed them into it. Minka? Do you understand?" he asked unsteadily.

She lifted her head to look at him, then, and he was shaken by the same vacancy of expression as he had seen in the figure on the dais. "It doesn't matter," she said softly, lowering her face again to sift the blossoms through her fingers.

"Of course it does," he said, touching her arm again just to make sure it was really she. "And I was proud of you for it."

That produced a hazy smile as she turned her eyes to him again. "You're a charmer," she whispered. "And I just want to drop down to the center of the earth where I will never embarrass you again."

Efran turned his head away to say, "Alberon, you *may not* act on what she says in her pain. Go away." He was trembling now. "I was not embarrassed; I was between a rock and a hard place. You were right, but Polonti fight even when they are wrong and know it. I could not let them fight you."

She raised her face to look at the copper and green leaves flitting above them. "Think of it. If you were free of me, think of the beautiful women you could have instead. Like Tisi. I've never seen anyone so beautiful, not even Fanny. There are more like her. Challinor is beautiful. Leila. But they are getting old, and there are beautiful women who are young. Everyone is coming down to the Lands. You'll find someone who is actually beautiful, and gracious, who knows how to keep her mouth shut."

Efran could hardly think how to answer this. “I . . . could not live with such a woman, even if she existed. Your speaking your mind is—part of why I love you, and I can’t live without you.” He twined his forearm around hers to grip her hand. “Minka, if you tore yourself out of my life, there would be nothing good left of me.”

She looked up at the encroaching darkness. “Joshua needs you,” she murmured, leaning forward. He bounded up to help her to her feet. Then he gripped her hand to begin leading her down the various stairs.

But at the third floor, she turned aside and walked down the corridor to the anteroom. Then he watched her go into the vacant room, shut the door, and lock it.

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Chapter 21

Efran stood breathing in the corridor, then ran down to get Joshua out of the first-floor nursery, where he had been crying and banging on the door. Efran scooped him up to take him into the dining hall. There, he glanced around to check on Ella and Quennel, Toby, Noah, Ivy, Hassie, Alcmund, and the other children in the Abbey’s care. One of the men, a Polonti, stopped to tell him how much his chastisement had impressed them all, and that they had nothing but goodwill for Captain Neale and his wife. Efran nodded, hearing nothing of what he said.

Other people came up to talk to him while he held Joshua, feeding him this or that, whatever the baby pointed to. Efran hardly discerned faces, much less understood what was being said to him—until Estes came up and said something that included the word, “Minka.”

Efran looked at him, then. “She’s very angry at me, Estes. I am afraid Alberon will convince her to go with him, in the state she’s in.”

Estes frowned deeply at him. “No, Efran.”

Efran closed his eyes against the tears. “I can only hurt her so much before it becomes unbearable,” he whispered.

“Efran, have more faith. She just needs thinking time. You know that,” Estes said.

“No, I don’t know. Only that I can’t stop hurting her.” Efran looked blankly across the hall.

“Efran, don’t do this. If you give up, you only drag her under,” Estes said.

Efran looked at him as if suddenly waking. “You’re right.”

“Of course I am,” Estes said, patting his arm. Then he turned back to his table where Kelsey was watching, mildly worried.

Efran took Joshua back to the nursery. “Give him his nighttime bottle, please. If you need me, I’ll be at the north end of the third floor.”

“The north end of the third floor,” Cordelia said blankly.

“Yes,” Efran said, turning away even as he heard Joshua crying behind him.

He climbed the stairs to the third floor, going to the suite she’d entered. He thought about knocking, but heeded what Estes said about her needing think time. Yes, he remembered that. Several times—like the time she found out he had slept with Adele—she needed time to think before listening to anything he had to say. So, he would not knock now. Maybe later.

He sat on the floor in front of the door, leaving the anteroom door open. He was tired and hungry, but couldn’t imagine eating or sleeping right now.

There were footsteps in the corridor. Efran lifted his head as Wyeth and Cyr approached, their room being the one next door. They looked at him in concern. “Captain?” Wyeth said.

“Minka’s really mad at me, Wyeth,” he said. Cyr looked anxiously at her husband, who translated it with hand signs for her. She looked back at Efran sympathetically.

“Sorry, Captain,” Wyeth said; Efran nodded as they went into their room. Shortly thereafter, Wyeth came out to light the candles in sconces beside both doors. Otherwise, it was very dark in the anteroom at night, though there were sconced candles all down the corridor.

A while later, Efran saw the night nursery worker coming down the corridor with an indignant, red-faced baby. “Lord Efran, he’s had his bottle and’s got his night wraps on, but won’t lie down.”

“C’m here,” Efran said, extending his arms without getting up. She put Joshua down in his lap. “Thank you,” he added, seeing Joshua arrange himself to go to sleep on his father’s lap.

Efran leaned his head back against the door, watching the candles flicker down the corridor. After a while, he lay down on his back across the doorway, as he used to do as Minka’s guardian. Only now he had a baby lying on his chest, to keep him off the hard wood floor. And Joshua kept batting Efran’s face, wanting to play.

Efran dozed off once or twice, but he was too uncomfortable, physically and spiritually, to sleep. So he played a word game he used to play when pulling sentry duty alone in the night. *One. What’s the one worst thing that happened today? Well, I already know that, so no need to go over it again. Two. What two things do I wish I had more than anything in the world right now? Minka’s love and Minka’s forgiveness. Three. Who are the three people I can most count on? Minka, Estes, and DeWitt. Wendt. Barr. Lyte. Rigdon—all right, never mind. Four. What are my four favorite foods? Whatever I’m eating while Minka is beside me. . . .*

He lapsed into dreaming while he was still awake, which happened sometimes when he was very tired and stressed. In this dream, he saw Alberon coming down the corridor toward him. Efran lurched up. “Stay back. You can’t come in, Alberon.”

Didn’t everything work out well with Trina?

“I don’t care about Trina. But Minka is my life. Leave her hair alone. Leave *her* alone.”

Then Alberon laughed, jabbing him in the side. With the second jabbing thrust, Efran woke. “Efran?” Minka’s voice said. Her door was open a crack, being impeded from opening further by his hip.

“Yes. Let me move Joshua,” he said groggily.

“You have Joshua?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, lifting the sleeping baby to his shoulder and scooting aside so she could open the door.

She did, kneeling beside him in the doorway. “Did you sleep all night here?”

“Not entirely,” he muttered, trying to clear his head. He blinked down the corridor at the early morning light.

“Do you want to come lie down on the bed?” she asked.

He woke up. “Will you lie down with me?”

“I’m hungry. Did you have dinner?” she asked.

“I don’t remember,” he said, studying her hair. It looked almost normal this morning. She had even splashed it with a little water to subdue the curls.

“Minka. . .” He leaned on her so heavily that she sat abruptly. “I’m sorry,” he breathed.

“I am, too. I shouldn’t have said anything,” she murmured.

He groaned, “I keep telling you that it was good that you did. That—brought it out in the open so that I could yell at them about it. Several people thanked me last night, but I don’t know who.”

She rested her head on his shoulder. “Let’s go eat.”

“Yes,” he said, closing his eyes as he laid his cheek on the top of her head. But he didn’t get up.

Minutes later, she asked, “Efran, are you asleep?”

“No,” he said.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“Why don’t you get up?” she asked.

“I don’t want to let go of you,” he said.

“Come. Joshua needs fresh wraps,” she said.

“So do I, then,” he said, looking down at his shirt.

He managed to stand and help her up, then they walked with Joshua down to the nursery, where Efran handed him over, still asleep. Then Efran changed his shirt in their quarters, and he and Minka went to the dining hall for whatever Madea’s kitchen staff had on hand.

As he and she quietly ate eggs with cheese and peach compote, he told her, “He tried to trick me when I came up on the roof looking for you.”

“How?” she asked, disturbed.

Efran told her about finding her on the dais, and grabbing her anyway when she wouldn’t speak to him. Then he described how the exit door vanished so that he had to kick his way out of the bell tower. “Oh, no,” she murmured. “Why?”

He turned to whisper through gritted teeth, “To have you. It’s still, always, to get you.”

“No, no,” she protested. “He just plays tricks. At any rate, Kele told me that any faerie caught in a lie loses half his power. They call it ‘Provision for a Wronged Human.’”

“Is that right,” Efran said absently. He vehemently disagreed that Alberon was just “playing tricks.” Reliving the terror and heartache of seeing her on that dais, Efran knew there was more to it. This had gone beyond trickery to malice, and he could not let it continue. Then he stopped to ponder: any faerie caught in a lie loses half his power? Minka had called Alberon “slippery,” which was very close to lying. “I’m going to remember that,” he murmured.

After eating half her plate, Minka scooped the rest onto his, then leaned on his arm. “Efran, I love the waterfall in the third-floor room; it’s so much easier bathing there than to have a tub filled. Can we keep that room for our use?”

“Yes, of course,” he said, kissing her head. “Whatever you want.” *And I will find a way to stop Alberon’s tricks.*

Before parting in the corridor, he paused to bask in the warmth of her arms around his neck, then kissed her disordered hair. “Where will you be this morning?” he asked.

“In the gardens, first. I want to see what they’re planting,” she murmured. “Oh, Efran, the roses on Renée’s stones are still blooming. They haven’t faded at all.”

“Of course not, not when they have you to enjoy them,” he said. She turned those blue eyes up to him in lively appreciation, and he inhaled in contentment to see it. Estes was right again; he was always right, the villain.

While she went out, he checked the nursery to see Joshua still asleep. Apparently, he didn’t rest well last night for wanting to play. So Efran first went up to the workroom to give Estes and DeWitt a thorough recounting of yesterday’s events: Reinagle’s leaving, Minka’s confrontation with the men about their women, and Alberon’s trickery.

They listened intently; DeWitt even abandoned his columns of numbers. When Efran concluded, DeWitt said, “For all the help that the faeries have been, that level of—playfulness can be detrimental to the defense of the Fortress.”

“You don’t say,” Efran remarked flatly; Estes nodded.

In the ensuing quiet, DeWitt and Estes returned to their work. Estes noted, “I’ve been going through the letters you brought back from Crescent Hollow. I believe we can establish a trade relationship with several of these vendors, so I’m writing them back.”

Efran nodded without comprehension. Instead, he was remembering Minka telling him about seeing Adele in the mirror that had belonged to her. Adele would not have the knowledge or ability to place herself—or her image—in the mirror. That required the help of someone much more powerful. Also, her being tossed with the mirror into the Passage wouldn't prevent his transferring her somewhere else to afflict Minka again—with the ultimate aim of driving her to Alberon. So his offer of “help” with Adele was also two-faced.

Efran stood. “I’m going to see what I can do about Alberon”—which threat was overheard by the one named.

“Good luck,” DeWitt said grimly. Estes regarded Efran a little warily.

Downstairs, Efran walked into the keep, empty at this time of day. He regarded appreciatively the additional benches that Earnshaw had brought in for Scripture readings—such spiritual fortification could only help them. Efran himself needed that now.

Looking up to the window above the crucifix, he turned to fix on the morning light streaming in to illumine the first part of the Scripture engraved on a panel embedded in the stone wall: “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him.” As the sun progressed across the sky, the verses farther down were illumined until, by the end of the day, the whole passage had been lit. Then the following morning, the process began again from the top. As long as you continued to look, you would see and remember the whole thing. It was as inevitable as the sun’s progress across the sky.

Also inevitable was the fact that God’s power was greater than Alberon’s, who was only a created being. And God answered prayer. Efran remembered how He had intervened in the fight with Master Crowe. When Efran was beaten, God showed him what to do.

“God of heaven, I need Your help with Alberon. Show me what to do. Show me how to counteract his illusions and his using Adele. Show me how to protect my wife and my people. There must be a way; You are a God of deliverance, of truth. At least block him from hearing my conversations. You will not abide deception, I know; teach me what I do not see. Teach me—”

“Pardon, Captain.” The door sentry, Doudney, leaned in.

“Yes.” Efran immediately turned.

“Wall gate guards say a fella demands to talk to you; looks shifty. Says his name is Slade,” Doudney said.

“Slade,” Efran repeated. This was a reliable bounty hunter whom Efran knew. “Let him up to the courtyard. I’ll come out to talk to him.”

“Yes, sir.” Doudney withdrew with a salute.

Efran paused to look up at the light, then walked out of the keep.

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Chapter 22

Efran went out to the courtyard gates to look down the switchback, which Slade was ascending at a lope. One of the gate guards, Walch, said, “By the way, Captain, Gaul at the wall gates said that Shanko’s disappeared.”

Efran laughed mildly, “What a shock.” Then he glanced at the boy in mild surprise. He showed much more self-assurance today than the last time Efran had talked to him. The change was . . . interesting.

He stepped back as Walch opened the gates for Slade to ride into the courtyard. He dismounted with fluid grace, then saluted Efran as ex-soldiers did. “Thank you for seeing me, Captain. I’ve just come down from Eurus; Surchatain Reinagle has been deposed by a former ally who styles himself ‘Webbe the Destructor.’ And he’s been appointed Surchatain by the entire Council.”

Efran’s mouth hung open, and he protested, “You can’t be serious.” Slade laughed, and Efran demanded, “Short, round little man with an insecure hold on reality? That Webbe?”

“Yes, Captain. What I heard is that he got a tip about where Reinagle had stashed the greater part of his wealth—amounting to thirty thousand royals, give or take a few hundred. Webbe extracts several thousand, changes the lock to one that only he can open, and becomes the Destructor for real,” Slade said in amusement.

“Is Reinagle dead?” Efran asked.

“No, I hear that he’s Webbe’s new butler,” Slade smiled.

Efran shook his head. “I’m sorry; it’s too fantastic. I don’t believe it.”

Slade sighed, “I wish everything were so easy.” He pulled a folded parchment from his jacket, shook it out with a snap, and handed it to Efran.

Efran took it to skim: “‘Proclamation of New Rulership as of the twenty-ninth of December of the year eighty-one fifty-four from the creation of the world. Heralded by the sign from heaven on Christmas Day, Webbe the Destructor is now proclaimed Surchatain of Eurus.’ Signed by all the members of the Council of Eurus.” Shaking his head in stubborn disbelief, Efran said, “I’ve forged a proclamation or two in my time.”

“Look on the back,” Slade said.

Efran turned the parchment over to see a notary’s seal with the notation, “‘Signed and sealed on this twenty-ninth of December of the year eighty-one fifty-four from the creation of the world by the notary Parsifal.’”

His eyes shot up to Slade’s humorously uplifted brows. “Get me a horse!” Efran called over his shoulder.

While waiting, he carefully folded the document to put it in his pocket while Slade stood by in composure. When his horse was brought, Efran bounded up into the saddle, saying, “Come.” Slade agreeably mounted to ride down the switchback with the Captain, who immediately turned off at the notary’s shop.

Entering the shop with Slade, Efran withdrew the document while Ryal and Giardi looked on, curious. Placing it on the counter back side up, Efran demanded, “Is that notary’s signature genuine?”

Ryal took up the parchment to study it. “Parsifal. Yes, absolutely. He uses the curlicues that are almost

impossible to forge.” Turning the document over to the front side, Ryal read it and gasped, “What? That’s the first I’ve heard of this! Webbe! It’s almost unbelievable.”

“Isn’t it,” Efran uttered, eyeing Slade’s bare smile. “How much have you got in your strongbox, Ryal?”

“We’ll check,” Ryal said, nodding at his wife.

Giardi went to the back room, then emerged shortly with the somewhat battered box. “Twenty-three royals and change,” she said.

“Give it to him,” Efran said. “I’ll reimburse you.” Ryal took the box and upended it over the pouch that Slade held out.

“Thank you kindly, Lord Ryal,” Slade said, inclining his head. Then he saluted Efran: “Always a pleasure doing business with you, Captain.” While Efran stood there shaking his head, Slade trotted out to remount and turn up the road north.

“How could this possibly happen?” Ryal said, stupefied.

Efran said contemplatively, “Someone, whom I’m guessing to be Folliott, told Webbe where his father stashed his money, much of which was probably Webbe’s to begin with. As you know, he with the greatest wealth usually winds up ruling Eurus, regardless of mental stability.”

“I can hardly comprehend it. Or imagine what he will do now,” Ryal said.

“Which is why I must share this immediately with a few other people,” Efran said, folding the document to return it to his pocket. Then he went out to remount and ride up to the fortress.

He ran up the stairs to the workroom, entering to announce, “I need thirty royals for Ryal, Estes. I just robbed his strongbox.”

“That was uncivil of you,” Estes said mildly, rising to fetch a pouch from their money cabinet.

Meanwhile, Efran unfolded the document to put it on top of DeWitt’s column of numbers. “Oh, he’ll need silvers, too,” Efran told Estes. So Estes pulled out a box of silver pieces, a handful of which he added to the pouch.

“What?” DeWitt exclaimed, reading the proclamation. Estes came to look over his shoulder at it, extending the pouch in Efran’s direction. “How—is this real?” DeWitt demanded, turning it over.

“I just verified the notary’s signature with Ryal,” Efran said. Handing the money pouch to the door sentry, he said, “Have that run down to Ryal.”

“Yes, Captain!” He saluted, turning away with the pouch.

“Don’t run down the stairs,” Efran told the sentry, now gone. To DeWitt and Estes, he said, “The bounty hunter Slade just brought it to me. Said that Webbe was tipped off to the location of Reinagle’s treasury, and Reinagle is now Webbe’s butler.” He gave the document to Estes for his perusal.

“Folliott?” DeWitt posed.

“He must have had a lot to do with it,” Efran said. “He just wanted Trina. And enough to support her in style.”

Estes said, “The twenty-ninth. Yesterday! This is dated yesterday, when Reinagle was down here demanding Trina.”

“Exactly,” Efran laughed, taking the parchment back to fold it and put it in his pocket. “While Reinagle was here, Webbe was usurping him in Eurus.”

Estes asked, “Does that mean Webbe will be back demanding his children?”

“I don’t know,” Efran said. “But I think he suddenly has a lot of other things to do—that is, if he wants to hang on to the rulership and the money.”

“He can’t, unless Folliott or someone tells him what to do,” DeWitt predicted, returning to his column of figures.

Estes observed, “Slade must have ridden through the night to get here with that information.”

“For which he was well paid,” Efran said.

“I can hardly wait to hear Justinian’s view of it,” Estes said, reseating himself over his papers.

Efran laughed, nodding.

That afternoon, Lorient watched Tess with Cloud, the stubborn white mare. It had been almost three weeks since he had told her to stop trying to train the horse and just make friends with her instead. Tess had taken that to heart. All training equipment stayed in the tack room, except the halter, which Cloud wore continually.

So Lorient watched Tess lure her with apples only to stroke her, talking sweetly to her. With these tactics, Tess discovered that Cloud’s weakness—besides apples—was to be scratched under her chin. She lifted her head high to be scratched in just the right spot, which Tess did righteously. Then the scratcher would remove her hand and turn away, so that the horse pursued her. After Cloud had pursued enough, Tess would turn back to scratch her again. And when the horse accidentally did something important that Tess wanted her to do, like stepping back instead of running off, kicking or biting, she received an apple.

Today, when Cloud was getting her chin scratched, Tess risked slipping up on her bare back, continuing to scratch. Cloud fidgeted a little, but didn’t do anything to interfere with the scratching. Tess stayed up for only a minute or two before slipping off again. She continued to scratch under Cloud’s chin, then rewarded her with an apple.

“I can’t believe it,” she said, turning to Lorient.

He smiled, nodding briefly. “Go ahead and put her up; let her think about what she learned today.” When Tess reached for Cloud’s halter, she didn’t balk at all, but walked complacently with her to the stables.

After grooming her and fastening her stall door, Tess turned to Lorient, watching from the stable door. She walked over to whisper, “Thank you for working with me.” He smiled briefly, then began to turn away. But she jumped up to grasp him around the neck and kiss him. He held her lightly.

Dropping down, she said, "Take me to Croft's."

"I have duty," he said, not unkindly.

"After you get off at sundown?" she asked.

"All right," he said. She inhaled at the double victory as he left.

That evening at dinner, the new Delano's ale was unveiled. This brew, made with gruit instead of hops (just like the new Goadby's ale), was labeled, "Delano's Hard Ale." As there were only thirty bottles in this trial batch, only a few select customers were given it to taste, among them Dobell, DeWitt, Lyte, Wendt, Cutch, Gabriel, all the Captains, and Efran, of course.

No one voiced an opinion until Efran had received his bottle. While Dobell stood by with practically the whole hall watching, Efran opened it, took a swig and flinched slightly. Taking another swig, he laughed, "That's excellent. Drink at your own risk."

All the other samplers agreed with this assessment, except Wendt, provisionally. "I can't afford to stagger"—being blind, of course. "And you men who value your positions will steer clear of it." A few of those hearing nodded.

Efran asked Minka beside him, "Do you want to try it?" Shuddering, she shook her head. He whispered, "I'm so glad you're honest with me." She glanced up in adoration.

Dobell, tasting his, agreed with Efran, Wendt—and Minka. "It's very good, although it's much stronger than what we've been drinking. But, it's good to have as backup; we've only got seven cases of the new Goadby's left."

At that, Efran set down his bottle with a thump. "Seven cases? Gabriel brought back fifty cases from Crescent Hollow less than a month ago!"

"That's correct," Dobell said, taking another swig. "So there's been a lot of it drunk or, resold."

Efran evaluated that, then told him, "Lock the rest of it up. Tell Madea to make the bulk of her order the mild ale and lager. And lock up the hard ale with the new Goadby's."

"Yes, Captain," Dobell agreed, taking another swig.

As Efran and Minka were eating venison and vegetable stew, he with Joshua in a sling on his chest, a sentry brought up a sheaf of loosely bound pages to place in front of him. "Captain, here's the doctor's manuscript on treating the Goulven. He asked you to have a look at it."

"Yes, thank you," Efran said, shoving his empty plate and bowl to the side. He flipped open the first page to begin reading.

Minka placed a hand on his leg. He looked over as she asked, "Do you want me to hold Joshua while you read?"

"He's not in the way," Efran said, studying her. She was pale, looking at the scars on his shoulder, partially visible under his work shirt.

Seeing his look, she admitted, “I . . . can’t get over nearly losing you to that—that—”

He crinkled his eyes at her. “I won’t let the King of Faerie separate us; how could I let crawly things?”

She laughed, laying her head on his shoulder while he turned back to read around Joshua, asleep in the sling.

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Chapter 23

Efran read through the entire short manuscript, then stacked the pages thoughtfully. Wallace began his treatise with a thorough discussion of Goulven physiology before recounting the Fortress’ experience with them. Following, he touched on Barthelemon’s methods of eradicating the Goulven, but highlighted their own discovered methods of immobilizing the victims and treating them with gruit ale or spirit vinegar. His emphasis was on saving them rather than killing them to stop the plague.

Efran looked around the diminishing hall, then gestured to the sentry behind him, Tomer. “Yes, Captain?”

“Is Soames still here? Find Soames for me,” Efran said.

“Yes, sir.” Young Tomer stepped back, scanning the hall, then ran off to intercept his object before he escaped.

Shortly, Soames approached the back bench on which Captain Efran and his crew were seated (although by now, the children had wandered off to play before bed). “Yes, Captain?” Soames saluted.

Efran turned around to hand him the manuscript. “Your father, Shardlow the bookseller—he binds books, doesn’t he?”

“Oh, yes, Captain,” Soames said, looking over the pages in interest.

“Ask him to make three clean copies of this manuscript and bind them. Deliver them and the bill to DeWitt. Oh, and make sure he credits Wallace as the author—I don’t think he even put his name on it,” Efran said, craning his neck to see the front page.

“No, sir, he didn’t. My father will be delighted to do this. Whom should he contact with questions about wording or style? The doctor?” Soames asked.

“Yes,” Efran said.

“Excellent, Captain, thank you. I’ll take it to him tonight,” Soames said. “Good evening, Lady Minka.”

“Hello, Soames,” she smiled in contentment.

“Very good. You’re dismissed,” Efran said. Soames saluted and left the hall.

The following day, Minka received a letter from Justinian in the late afternoon, when his messages usually

arrived. “Oh, I know what this is about,” she murmured, running up the stairs to the second-floor workroom. Bursting in with the letter, she gazed around the room to exhale, “Where is he?”

Estes replied, “Probably hiking down the hillside with Joshua. He’s been preoccupied lately.”

DeWitt added, “Could we possibly hear what’s in that folded paper you’re waving before you go down the hillside after him?” He said this looking over his spectacles at her, which was very effective in communicating how deeply he meant whatever he was saying.

“Yes,” Minka laughed. “It’s dated yesterday, December thirtieth.” She broke the seal to spread open the parchment and read:

““To Minka””—which they knew to be a paraphrase of the greeting—

““I delayed sending this until I could verify the facts, which your Gargoyle may not believe despite my exhaustive proofs. Nonetheless, here it is:

““Webbe the Destructor is now Surchatain of Eurus, having been so named by a unanimous Council. And the reasons that the Council voted unanimously to name him Surchatain are as follows:

““First, it is apparent that secret negotiations toward this end had been in progress for weeks. Webbe, having gained access to the funds that Reinagle had previously appropriated from somewhere, disbursed lavish sums upon each Councilor to secure his vote.

““Second, the Council asked Webbe to submit a list of his priorities and actions for their approval. This he did verbally, and what follows is the amanuensis’ transcription of his stated goals, to wit:

““One: Webbe the Destructor vows to rid the territory of the flying Goulven, which are giant birds that eat the brains of cows and sheep. As he is the only one who can see them, he is the only one who can fight them. One such bird attacked in the midst of this deposition, which compelled him to interrupt his speech in order to flay the air with his sword. This he did, declaring the Goulven bird to be lying dead at his feet.

““Two: Webbe the Destructor vows to reclaim his children that the King of Faerie has locked in underground caverns. Although they are adored by the faeries as royalty, they are pining to be free to see the sunlight again, if they only had eyes. To this end, he is waging war with the King by means of great and terrible mesmerizing Words. Obtaining these words requires hours of contemplation with the new and improved Goadby’s Best Ale.

““Three: Webbe the Destructor vows by the hairs of his head to raise the palace of Westford to its former glory by lifting the fallen rock beneath the palace so that it stands as high as the hill upon which the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea rests. And when this is done, the hill upon which the Abbey stands shall be lowered by the same depth into the Sea, so that the Abbey shall be as the palace is now, and the palace shall be as the Abbey is now. This shall be achieved by the power of the King of Faerie when he is subdued by Webbe the Destructor’s greater force due to his appropriating *Guillebeaux*.

““Given these priorities, the Council has bound Webbe by a solemn oath as well as cash payments (to them) to pursue only these objectives and leave all other trivial matters to the Council. This he has sworn by the hairs of his head, which is his highest oath.

““All this is no doubt good news for the citizens of Eurus, but I am unsettled by certain references to the King and underground caverns. Therefore, I wish your Gargoyle to be fully apprised.’

“From Justinian,” Minka ended, again in paraphrase. But they were all three troubled.

DeWitt mused, “Yes, Efran needs to see this, but what it means is anyone’s guess. How in the world did Webbe make contact with the King of Faerie?”

Estes murmured, “Or he with Webbe, which is more likely.”

DeWitt asked, “Does it seem that he’s been stepping up his—‘tricks’ on Efran?” At this, Minka put a finger to her lips in warning. DeWitt’s brows shot up, and he looked at Estes.

“I will go find him,” she decided, folding the letter to put it in her pocket. Then she paused, “Where is that Council notification about Webbe?”

They glanced around the table, then Estes said, “I’m fairly sure that Efran still has it.”

“All right, thank you,” Minka said, turning out.

First thing, she went down to their quarters to look where he might have put that document. She looked in their bedroom and on the little table in the outer room, but didn’t see it. As she thought that he put on clean pants this morning, she checked the laundry basket for the pants he had been wearing yesterday. She found them, and in the pocket, found the document.

“We may need this,” she murmured, putting it in her pocket with Justinian’s letter. *Why?* “I don’t know,” she whispered. “But it’s proof of something unbelievable.”

She went out to the courtyard, then, looking to the hilltop to the left. Efran, ascending with Joshua on his back, looked over to see her in the courtyard. He waved, then altered his angle to reach her faster.

At this time, Lorient was just sitting down with Tess at Croft’s. She said quietly, “I’m glad you came. I was afraid you were mad at me.”

He looked up, slightly puzzled. “Mad? Why?”

“You didn’t come out to watch me with Cloud today,” she said. She picked up a spoon to stir her tea, and even Lorient noticed that she had tea instead of ale.

“I had to make up work from the other days I came out to watch you,” he said.

She stopped stirring to stare at him. “I had no idea you were missing work.” She raised her cup to drink.

He smiled. “You thought Captain Barr keeps me on because I am beautiful?”

She had to put the napkin quickly to her face for spewing tea. Then she choked, laughing, “That’s not funny.”

“Then why are you laughing?” He placidly picked up his fork. He was learning to eat with his left hand, given the state of the fingers on his right.

“Because—” She wiped her face with her napkin. “Other people may consider you beautiful.”

He looked at her almost pityingly, shaking his head. She inhaled, then said, "I made several big mistakes with Barr, but the worst was not appreciating him for who he is. I'm not going to repeat the same mistakes with you."

He looked down at his plate of venison. "I am too old for you," he repeated.

She replied, "But you're here, sitting at the same table, eating with me. And that's all I'm going to ask of you today." She quietly, triumphantly, picked up her tea again, then squinted down in the nearly empty cup.

As Efran was making his way across the hillside toward the courtyard gates, Minka impulsively went out of the gates to start running toward him. He frowned, waving her back, which she ignored. She just felt anxious to reach him.

Then he paused to glance back at Joshua, to make sure he was secure in his sling. Hoisting it a little higher on his back, Efran reached over his shoulder to pull up the top edge of the sling holding his head. Then he began toward her again. Minka ran harder.

With the next step, Efran suddenly disappeared, dropping clear through an unexpected weak spot in the hillside. Running toward the spot, Minka saw that the hole was artificially round, not a natural break at all. Moreover, it was closing up again.

Vaguely, she heard men shouting behind her. Before the hole could close entirely, she sat on the edge and pushed off feet first. By the time she had landed on the stone below, the hole nine feet above the floor had closed.

Efran, raising from his knees, looked over at her in alarm. The fact that they could see each other in the dim light was the second clue that this was not an accident, nor a natural occurrence. The tricks were ongoing.

Standing, Efran helped her up. "Are you hurt?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "No, I'm all right."

"Check Joshua," he said, turning his back toward her.

She lifted the upper edge of the sling that had held Joshua's head securely on Efran's back during the abrupt drop and landing. He turned his head to look at her, and then look around, curious but unafraid. His parents looked around.

They were standing on a ledge above a deep cavern. About forty feet below them was a broad pool, to the right of which were openings in the side of the hill, allowing a free flow between the cavern waters and those of the Sea. Waning afternoon light came from those gaps, which would be closed in another hour, due to the rising tide. But this light was not what illumined the shelf on which they stood.

"So, Efran and Minka. And you brought my son to visit me," Adele's voice said.

The two turned to look behind them. There, in a lighted alcove of the rock, stood Adele on her dais. Faeries periodically emerged from one side of the rock to pass in front of her with, "Hail, Queene Adele," before disappearing through the rock on the other side. Her white eyes stared sightlessly at them, as always.

With an arm tight around Minka, Efran turned back to the gaping cavern before them. She leaned into him

without fear. Had he disappeared without her, she would be losing her mind right now; as it was, she was sure that the men who had seen both of them drop were scrambling to search for them. But she had hold of him here and now, and nothing would make her let go.

There was a ripple in the air over the pool in front of them, followed by a streak of light that enlarged to permit Alberon to appear in his kingly attire. “Reine Minka,” he said in mild displeasure. “You dropped in.”

“It was an accident,” she said indifferently.

“Let her go, Alberon. Your quibble is with me,” Efran said, feverishly working out how to quietly transfer Joshua to her keeping.

“Quibble? Oh, no, friend! You misjudge. I am merely giving you the chance to say good-bye to your sister,” Alberon said in that watery voice.

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Chapter 24

Efran considered that, then replied to Alberon, “You said you were going to ‘help’ us with Adele; you would take her to your realm, where she would have ‘no power’ in ours. Yet we find her still creating mischief.”

“Cracks in the realm,” Alberon said dismissively. “A natural phenomenon, like holes in a hillside.”

“Holes that open and close again? That is not natural in our realm,” Efran observed.

“You invited us to your realm,” Alberon said.

Minka replied, “I invited good faeries who acknowledge God their Maker, not tricksters who try to steal people.”

“Oh, Reine Minka, you wound me,” Alberon said. “Can I help wanting both of you in my realm? Think of the entertainment: two immortal sisters bound together forever by their love of the same man.”

“What?” she barely gasped.

“Here is the situation,” Alberon said, businesslike. “I wanted Adele to be my Queene, as I had wanted you. And I was using the dais to train her in faerie qualities of grace and patience. But she—alas!—is unfortunately bound by her love of your husband. I have been working very hard on her with all my power to dissolve her bond to him, which she resists. So I am driven to other measures.”

“That bond is one-sided,” Efran said tersely. “I have no love of her nor bond with her.”

“Oh really,” Alberon said. “It seems to me that there is a distinct bond on your back.”

Efran’s face drained at the mention of his son. Alberon went on, “And don’t your sacred Scriptures say the same? ‘A man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’” [Gen. 2:24]

“She was not my wife,” Efran said, sweating.

Alberon replied, “Oh, but ‘do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, “The two shall become one flesh.”” [1 Cor. 6:16]

Efran looked down. “The fact that I am a sinful man does not give you the right to take my wife.”

“That’s not what we were discussing,” Alberon said, checking his fingernails. “I was explaining to you, dense mortal, that your sleeping with Adele has created a bond between you that my power is inadequate to dissolve.”

“What do you want?” Efran said tightly, meeting the eyes that were unnaturally glowing.

Alberon inhaled as if deciding, then replied, “Satisfaction for the trouble you’ve given me.” Efran’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “You see,” Alberon went on, “Your inviting faeries onto your lands brought in their King as well. So, in fact, all of your Abbey Lands are *mine*.”

“And how do you arrive at that?” Efran asked.

“Because, Lord Efran, I am a more powerful lord than you. Therefore, I rule.” Alberon smiled benignly. “And because I rule your Lands, all the people on it are also *mine*. Your little Minka is *mine*. And this is what I will do: having your Minka as my Queene will mollify Queene Adele, thus weakening her bond to you—for Adele does love having her sister to play with. Adele will be content not to have you as long as her sister does not have you, either. Then when you die alone, I will erase your memory from both my queenes, so they will learn to love me alone.”

Sweat dripping down his face, Efran looked at Minka beside him. She was fully faerie again, wearing the dress of white silk, pearls, and diamonds. Her hair was golden white, curled in faerie fashion down to her waist. His teeth began chattering in fear—until he looked into her eyes. And in them he saw Minka, his Minka, defiant and outspoken.

“I understand, Alberon,” she said, turning to him. “You are stronger than any of us; your logic and your knowledge of Scripture are impressive, for a faerie or a human. But isn’t this a rather boring way to get what you want?”

Alberon looked at her in surprise. “Why, Queene Minka, what do you suggest?” As the sun was dropping into the Sea, coloring the water a blood red and diminishing the light of the cavern, Alberon waved for torches to appear on the walls. He still stood in the air, about six feet from the shelf on which they stood.

“A game!” Minka said, raising her silken shoulders. “Isn’t life all about fun, anyway? Let us play word games, since you are so knowledgeable about humans.”

Alberon laughed. “The delightful Queene Minka seeks to trap me. Do you think to save your Efran with a game, dear Queene?”

“Why can’t I try?” she asked. “If I’m to forget him forever when we’re done, what harm is there?”

“Oh, you are so charming, my sweet one. I will play your game,” Alberon said.

Abruptly, Adele spoke on her dais behind Efran and Minka. “Don’t, Alberon! She’s crafty; she’ll twist you up—”

“Shut up, darling Queene Adele,” Alberon said, and although Adele’s lips kept moving, and her arms waved in exasperation, no sound came out of her mouth.

“Now, how do we play this game, dearest Queene Minka?” Alberon asked. Efran could hardly look at her; he could only watch her game play out however God ordained.

“First, I need to know the meaning of one of your words,” Minka said. Adele, behind them, continued to silently rail.

“Which word, dear Queene Minka?” Alberon asked, curious.

“*Guillebeaux*,” Minka said. “What does that mean? Am I pronouncing it right?” In case she wasn’t, she spelled it out.

Alberon looked surprised, even wary, and Efran raised his face. “Why,” Alberon began with almost human uncertainty, “where did you pick up that trifle, dear Minka?”

“I don’t know. Around,” she said dismissively. “What does it mean?”

“It’s a word that can be used against one’s enemies,” he said as if lecturing a child.

“Oh! How?” she asked eagerly.

He laughed, “Dear Minka, is this how you think to defeat me at a word game? Make me instruct you in the use of words of power?”

“It *is* a word of power,” she whispered.

“Yes, faeries are able to use words as weapons,” Alberon said, condescending.

“But Alberon,” Minka said, eyes glinting, “I thought it was against Faerie Law for you to help the enemies of the lord whose land you are on.” Behind her, Adele was attempting to spell out words to Alberon with hand signs. But he wasn’t looking at her.

Alberon laughed richly. “Whom should I help? And why? I need no one’s help to do all that is in my mind.” A legitimate question was how Alberon himself was able to usurp the Lord of the Lands under Faerie Law, but Minka would not be drawn down rabbit trails. She stuck to her preordained plan.

“You gave Efran’s enemy a word of power. And whether you need him or not, that helps him,” Minka said.

“Enemy? What enemy of Efran’s did I help?” Alberon asked, frowning at his Queene-to-be.

“Surchatain Webbe of Eurus,” Minka said with relish.

“Webbe?” Alberon laughed. “That silly little man with pretensions of grandeur? Who thinks he’s a mighty force to be reckoned with?” His laughter echoed through the cavern. “Oh, yes, we had several bottles of ale together, and I probably got a little free with secret words. But he has no idea how to use them and he’s no enemy of Efran’s.”

“Oh, he is silly, and his pretensions are very great. But he is Efran’s enemy,” she said, brushing past the illusion of faerie dress to pull out Justinian’s last letter from her pocket. “Here is what he stated to the Council of Eurus as one of his goals—” And she read from the letter:

“‘Webbe the Destructor vows by the hairs of his head to raise the palace of Westford to its former glory by lifting the fallen rock beneath the palace so that it stands as high as the hill upon which the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea rests. And when this is done, the hill upon which the Abbey stands shall be lowered by the same depth into the Sea, so that the Abbey shall be as the palace is now, and the palace shall be as the Abbey is now.’” Efran blinked, hearing this for the first time.

“So?” Alberon scoffed. “He could do nothing unless he had a hundred Leviathans to knock out the Abbey Hill.”

“But he can do a great deal as Surchatain of Eurus,” Minka said.

Efran watched, holding his breath, as Alberon said, “But he’s not, silly Queene Minka. That’s absurd.”

“Are you saying that Webbe is not Surchatain of Eurus?” Minka asked carefully.

“Of course that is what I am saying. He could be Surchatain only in his feeble imagination. ‘Webbe the Destructor,’” Alberon chortled.

Minka inhaled in gratitude to the God of heaven that Alberon was too proud to be cautious. Restraining her desire to gloat, she reached into her pocket for another document, this one notarized. “You lie, Alberon,” she said, opening the document to extend it to him. “Webbe has been declared Surchatain of Eurus by a unanimous vote of its Council. And I demand satisfaction under the Provision for a Wronged Human.”

Alberon looked at her for a frozen moment, then took the document she held out to see the fact stated in ornate lettering, with seals, ribbons, and curlicues.

They could see the power drain out of him: the light around him faded; his face became more human-looking, less godly, his form less lordly. Suddenly he was falling—Minka and Efran leaned gingerly over the shelf to watch him land in the cavern pool far below with a great, almost human splash. He swam to a nearby ledge, crawling up on it. Then he looked up at them, baring his teeth in fury, and ran away.

Several things happened at once: the torches vanished, plunging the cavern into darkness. Adele fell off the dais, crying out. The hole which Efran had fallen through opened up again, exposing torchlight from searchers. It appeared to be a genuinely weak spot in the earth which Alberon had enlarged and put to use. So Efran whistled piercingly, waking Joshua.

Immediately, torches were thrust into the hole. “Captain! Are you all right? Is Lady Minka?”

“We’re here; we’re fine. Haul us up,” Efran called back. He glanced at Minka, no longer dressed as faerie, but in her usual riding clothes.

A looped rope was lowered to them. Efran took off the sling with Joshua to drape it across Minka’s shoulder. Then he had her sit in the loop, holding on to the rope above it. Looking up, he called, “You’re pulling up the lady with Joshua first. Take care.”

“Yes, Captain!” a man called. Efran held her steady as the men raised the rope, guiding her through the hole.

When she and Joshua were out, the rope loop was lowered again. Efran turned to Adele as she lifted herself up from the ledge. In the torchlight from above, he saw that she was wearing one of the work dresses that Minka had given her. And when she looked up at Efran, he saw her blue eyes. "I can see," she whispered in wonder. "I can see again."

Efran merely adjusted the loop around her posterior, saying, "Sit. Hold the rope." As she did, he looked up to shout, "You're bringing up Adele now."

There were some exclamations above, but they began hauling her up as well. When she was unloaded, the loop was lowered for him. He jumped up to grasp the rope above his head, then brought up his right foot under the rope and stood on that foot with his left, the rope in between them. He did that once more to reach the ground. Helped by the men, he sat on the ledge, untangling from the rope. Then he stood to wrap up Minka and Joshua in his arms.

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Chapter 25

Captain Towner was holding Adele by her upper arm as she gazed around in blank wonder. He asked, "What do you want us to do with her, Captain?"

Efran looked down at Minka. "Do you have the key to the third-floor room?"

"Yes, in our quarters," she said in disappointment.

"She'll only need it for one night," he told her. Turning to Towner, Efran said, "I will get your man the key to lock her in the vacant room at the north end of the third floor." Towner saluted in acknowledgment, gesturing to a nearby soldier.

To Adele, Efran said, "You will stay there tonight. You may take all the clothes in the wardrobe and I will give you sufficient funds to get you settled in Eurus or Crescent Hollow, whichever you choose. Tomorrow morning, we will put you in a carriage to the destination of your choice. You will never come back to the Lands again."

Looking up at the clouds passing over the moon above the torches, she said, "I have my sight back."

"Yes, which is an act of mercy to us all," he said. Taking Joshua off Minka's shoulder, he put the baby on his left arm while he held her on his right to walk back to the courtyard.

Men with torches surrounded them to illumine their way, particularly watching for weak spots in the ground. But Efran, Minka and Joshua were accompanied by a throng of starlight faeries saying, "Hail, King Efran."

Efran's head jerked up. "I am not your king."

"You have deposed Alberon. You are now King of Faerie. We obey your commands," they said in voices that twinkled like the stars.

He looked down at Minka, whispering, "What do I do?"

“We’ll talk,” she said, with a shake of her head.

To the glittering crowd around him, he said, “Go to your places for the night.”

“Hail, King Efran,” they said, scattering up to the sky.

The soldiers around them watched in subdued awe, but Adele laughed richly, “At least they do what you say.” Efran ignored her.

In the courtyard, they were met by a relieved, grateful and astonished fortress crowd who watched Adele climb the steps in the grip of a soldier. Efran paused to tell Estes and DeWitt, “We’re coming to the dining hall shortly. I’ll tell you everything.”

Minka went into their quarters and came back out again with the key, which she handed to Efran. This he gave to Stephanos. “Take her up; put the man of your choice at her door.”

“I’m starving!” Adele protested.

“Take her up,” Efran reiterated. “Have someone bring a plate to her room.”

Stephanos took her by the arm, whistling, “Evil Will Leave Me Alone,” and everyone who knew the song laughed.

Efran, with Minka, then handed Joshua over to the nursery workers. “Give him his bottle and bring him back to us in the dining hall, please.”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” she said, lifting the chunky baby off his arm.

He and Minka then went to sit with the children at their usual back table in the dining hall. Temporarily abandoning their spouses, Estes and DeWitt followed Efran and Minka in to stand at the table, along with a number of soldiers. They all wanted to hear what happened.

While he and Minka ate, Efran gave his hearers the condensed version of their confrontation with the King of Faerie, but fully credited her for her word games. Relating her play the word of power, he turned to ask, “Where did you get that?”

“Justinian’s letter,” she said, finding that she had stuffed it back into her pocket. But Alberon had taken the official notification of Webbe’s rulership down to the cavern waters with him. So Efran finished up by describing how she had trapped Alberon into insisting that Webbe was not Surchatain.

“He didn’t know?” DeWitt asked Minka. “I was under the impression that he heard everything.” Efran was silently reading Justinian’s letter.

“Not out of his realm,” she said. “He only had power in our Lands because I had invited the faeries here. As far as I know, they haven’t been invited to Eurus.”

“If you beat Alberon in the word game, then you should be Queene,” Estes observed, smiling.

“No, Efran forbade it,” she said, smiling back at him. “And the faeries recognize him as my head, as I do.”

Numerous eyes looked to Efran, whose face registered only bewilderment at what he was reading.

Finally handing the letter to DeWitt, Efran asked her, “How could you sift out the—the delusions from what was actually useful in Webbe’s ramblings?”

“Well, I just tried to think like he does. It’s not so hard after actually listening to him,” she said thoughtfully.

“Minka, you scare me,” DeWitt said, looking over the letter. Efran laughed, nodding.

Estes said, “Here’s something I’m wondering about: Alberon obviously didn’t know that Webbe had been elected Surchatain. So was it really a lie when he simply didn’t know?”

Minka said, “What does an honest man say when he’s asked a question that he doesn’t know the answer to? What do *you* say?”

“I don’t know,” Estes said, smiling.

“Yes,” Minka said. “Even his saying, ‘I don’t think so’ or ‘I can’t believe that’ would have gotten him off the hook, I think. But he said Webbe could be Surchatain only in his ‘feeble imagination.’ And the moment I showed him the proclamation, he started fading.”

“Wish I could have seen that,” DeWitt said, lifting up; Estes nodded as they turned away.

DeWitt and Estes went to sit with their wives at the head tables while others withdrew to their own places, talking. At the approach of a nursery worker with a sleepy baby, Efran turned to take him to his lap. Joshua sat up to lazily point to the custard. “Pumpkin custard,” Efran told him. Joshua sleepily agreed that was what he wanted. He ate only a little before passing out. So Efran handed him back to the nursery attendant for the night.

Following goodnight kisses for all the children, Efran and Minka went back to their quarters. While she flopped onto the bed in exhaustion, Efran paused over the small table. He had not told anyone how disturbed he was at Alberon’s accusation that he was eternally bound to Adele because he slept with her.

Was it true? Was there no deliverance from that one night of desperate, mistaken judgment? Seeing the little books on the table, he picked up Ares’ book to thumb through it, looking for something, anything to enlighten him. But he didn’t find anything particularly relevant.

So, reluctantly, he picked up the childish book of Scriptures that he had made under Therese’s direction, knowing that he hadn’t gotten all of the verses down exactly right. But opening it tonight, he read: “All creation will be set free from bondage to obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.” [Rom. 8:21]

There it was: his declaration of freedom, and seeing it was like a mountain of stone being lifted from his back. Then he realized—yes, that verse had been recalled to him just days ago. But he must be hard-headed enough to have required a second thumping.

Efran closed his eyes in gratitude, then looked around the room. “We need a calendar in here,” he called to Minka. Not receiving an answer, he went to the bedroom to see that she was already asleep. He crawled into bed to insert her in his side; she snuggled down and he dropped off.

Early the following morning—January 1st, 8155—Efran had engaged and paid Wade’s carriage service to take

Adele to Eurus or Crescent Hollow—the hire was the same to either city: 5 royals. (The price had gone up due to the Goulven scare.) Efran also had sent up an early breakfast to her room; the kitchen helper who had delivered it came back to report that he found her dressed and ready to leave.

Efran met her and her baggage in the foyer. She was positively radiant in Abbey Lands' haute couture. "Where have you decided to go?" he asked, handing her a heavy pouch of 50 royals.

"I think I'll enjoy Crescent Hollow very much," she said luxuriously, well able to hold onto the pouch. "Be careful with that box; it contains hats," she admonished one volunteer baggage handler, who grunted in reply.

When she turned back around, Efran told her, "Don't come back."

"Oh, don't worry, darling Efran. I won't claim any more of you . . . unless I have an army at my back," she said, turning her blue eyes to him.

He said, "Minka freed you and got your sight back."

That reminder closed her mouth. With nothing else to say, she walked out. Then he told the sentry, "See that she's followed at least five miles down the road to Crescent Hollow. Then send whoever followed her up to the workroom—we're going to dispatch a rotation of permanent spies to watch her."

"Yes, Captain."

Efran had started to turn away, then grimaced, "Oh. Also, tell Ryal that Adele is not dead after all, so he'll have to revoke her death certificate and issue a divorce for Loriot instead."

"Yes, Captain," the man said with an admirably blank face.

On his way down the corridor, Efran caught a maintenance man. "Please take a crew up to fix the bell tower—I put a pretty big hole in the side. But I think it's safe to go up there now."

"Yes, Cap'n," the man said.

With that, Efran resumed walking to the back grounds to look for Minka. Joshua was one year old today. "We need a calendar in our quarters," he reminded himself. "DeWitt will find me one."

Shortly thereafter, someone told Loriot that Adele had been spotted alive and seeing. For all his strength and experience in battle, Loriot did quake. Then he asked Captain Barr for time off to see to the matter, which Barr granted with genuine concern.

Loriot went straight to the notary's office. Finding Ryal himself at the counter, Loriot said, "Lord Ryal, I believe . . . you had Adele declared dead, yet she—I hear that she's here, and I—I—"

Ryal handed him a notarized document. "That has been corrected. Here is your decree of divorce, Loriot, effective immediately. There is no charge. And I understand that she is on her way to Crescent Hollow."

Loriot lifted his face, a man redeemed. "Thank you, Lord Ryal." And he folded the document carefully with badly scarred fingers to put it in his pocket and return to work.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on January 1st of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

NOTES:

Efran's method of rope-climbing is demonstrated [here](#).

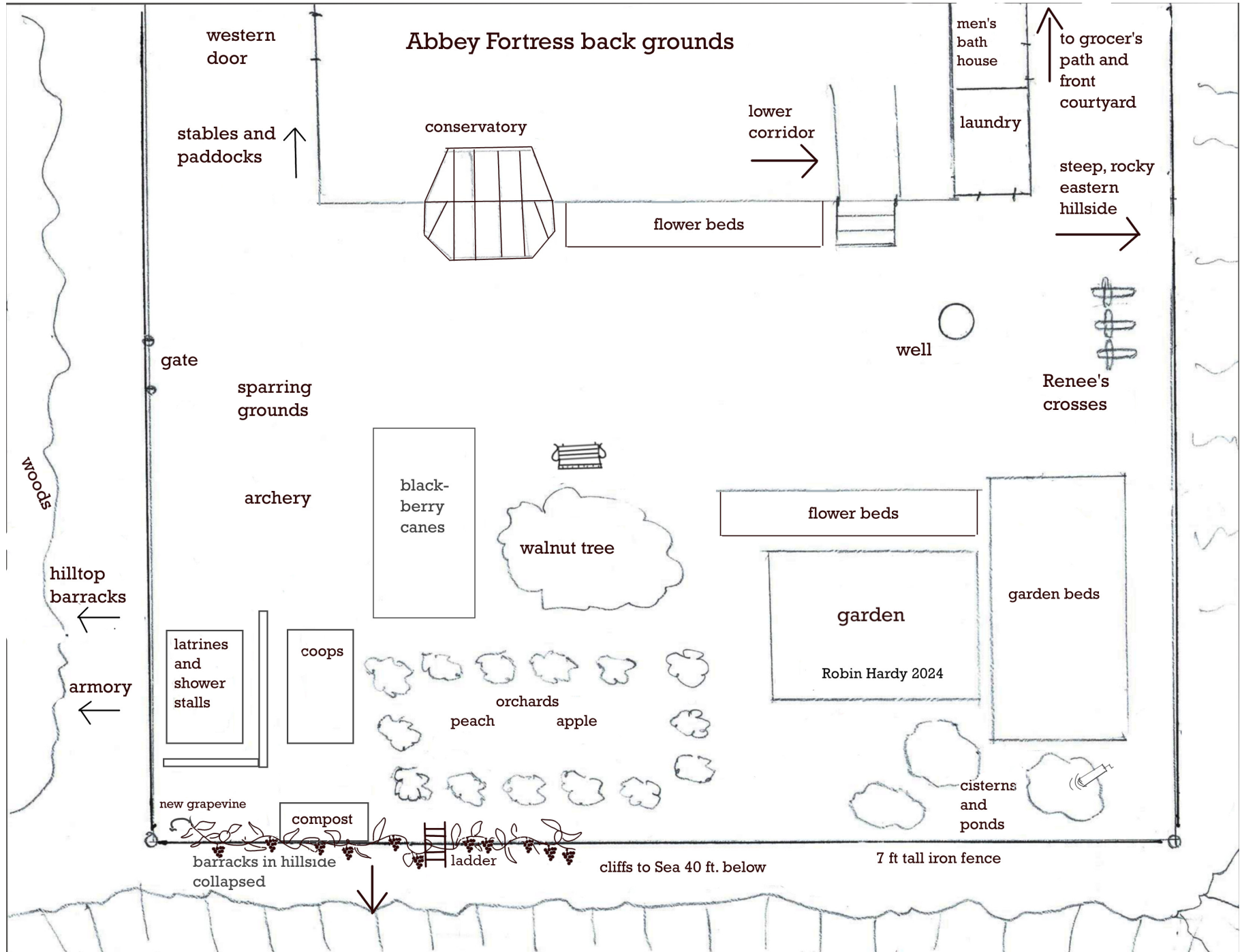
The quotation in the handwritten book of thoughts that Minka finds at Flodie's is paraphrased from Google's *The Whole Works of King Alfred the Great*, p. 725, sec. 42.

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Provision for a Wronged Human*
(Book 14)

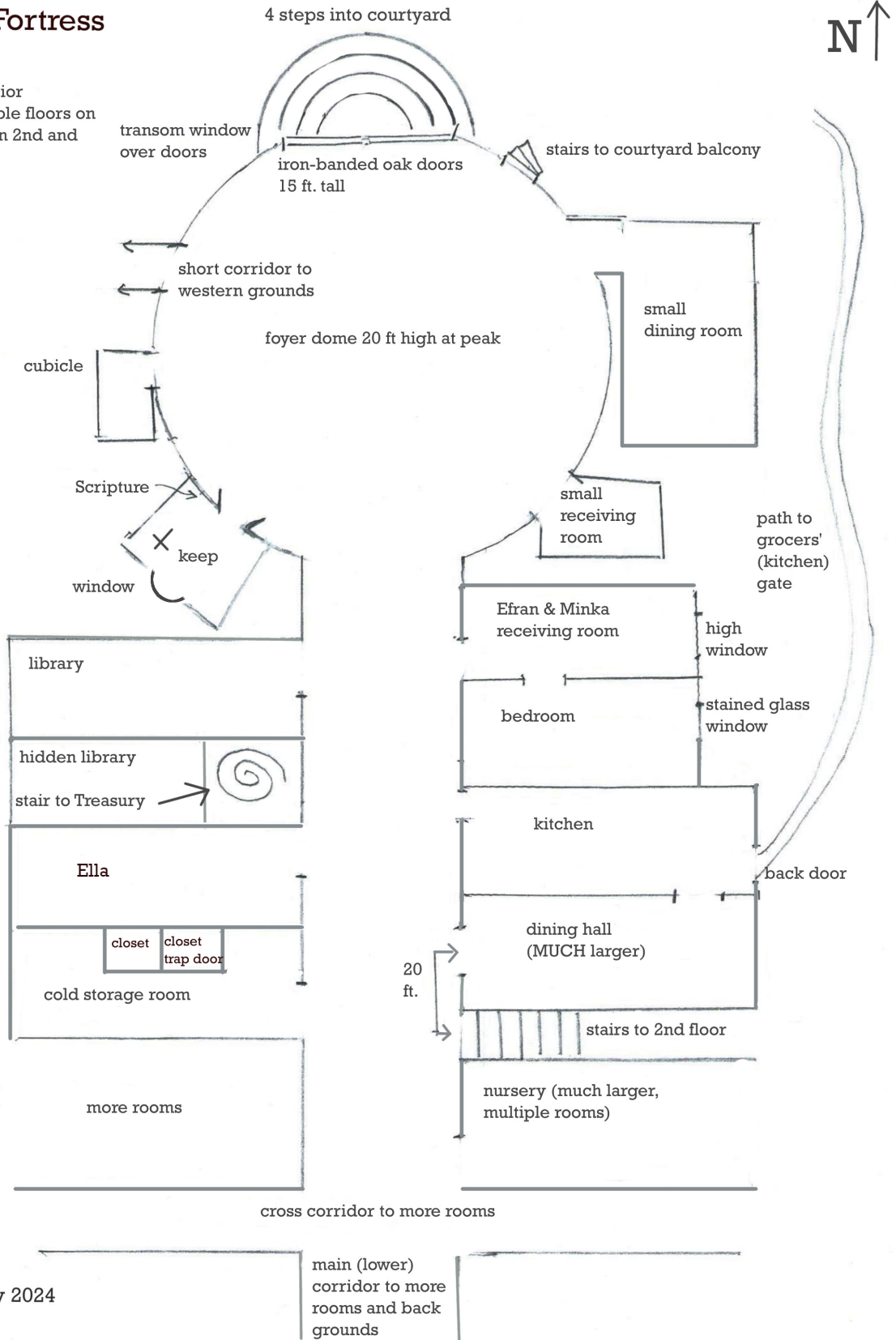
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Adele—ah DELL	<i>koa</i> —KOH ah (brave)
<i>aike</i> —AY kay (shooting by instinct)	Koschat—KOS chat
Alberon—AL ber on	Leila—LYE la
amanuensis—uh man you EN sis (plural: -ses, -seez)	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
Ares—AIR eez	Leviathan—leh VIE ah thun
Arne—arn	Livesey—LIV see
Barthelemon—BAR thuh luh mon	<i>lolo</i> —loh loh (feeble-minded)
Beischel—BESH ull	Lyra—LEER ah
Bethune—beh THUNE	Lystra—LIS tra
Bortniansky—bort nee AN ski	Madea—mah DAY ah
Bowring—BOWE ring	<i>mahalo</i> —mah HAY low (thank you)
Bullara—bu LAR ah	Marguerite—mar ger EET
Challinor—CHAL en or	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Conte—cahnt	Melchior—MEL key or
Cordelia—cor DEEL yah	Milo—ME low
Cyr—sear	Minka—MINK ah
Delano—deh LAN oh	<i>moiwahine</i> —mo wa HEE nee (queen)
Doane—rhymes with <i>loan</i>	opprobrium—uh PROH bree um
Dobell—DOH bull	Parsifal—PAHR seh ful
Efran—EFF run	Pieta—pie ATE ah
Eledith—ELL eh dith	Pleyel—PLAY el
Elowen—EL oh win	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Elvey—ELL vee	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Enon—EE nun	Portia—POOR sha
Erastus—eh RAS tis	Quilicus—QUIL eh cus
Estes—ESS tis	rapini—rah PEE nee
Eudoxie—you DOX ee	Reinagle—REN ah gull
Eurus—YOUR us	Reine—rayn (queene in waiting)
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	Renée—ren AY
Eustace—YOUS tis	Salotto—sah LOT oh
Flodie—FLOW dee	Sasany—SASS an ee
Folliott—FOH lee uht	Seger—SEE gur
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)	Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)	Stites—stights
Goadby—GOAD bee	Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Goulven—GOHL vin (hard g)	Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Graeme—GRAY em	Sybil—SEH bull
Guillebeaux—GILL eh bow	Telo—TEE low
Hartshough—HART soh	Tera—TEE rah
haute couture—oat coh TURE	Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Heaphy—HE fee	Tiras—TEER us
<i>hupo</i> —HOO poh (idiot)	Tisi—TEE see
Ianna—ee AN ah	Tomer—TOH mur
insigne—en SIN yeh	Trina—TREE nah
Ionadi—ee YON ah dee	trough—troff
Jehan—JAY han	Venegas—VEN eh gus
Justinian—jus TIN ee un	Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
Kele—kay lay	Webbe—web
Kelsey—KELL see	Wystan—WIS tan



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



NOT TO SCALE

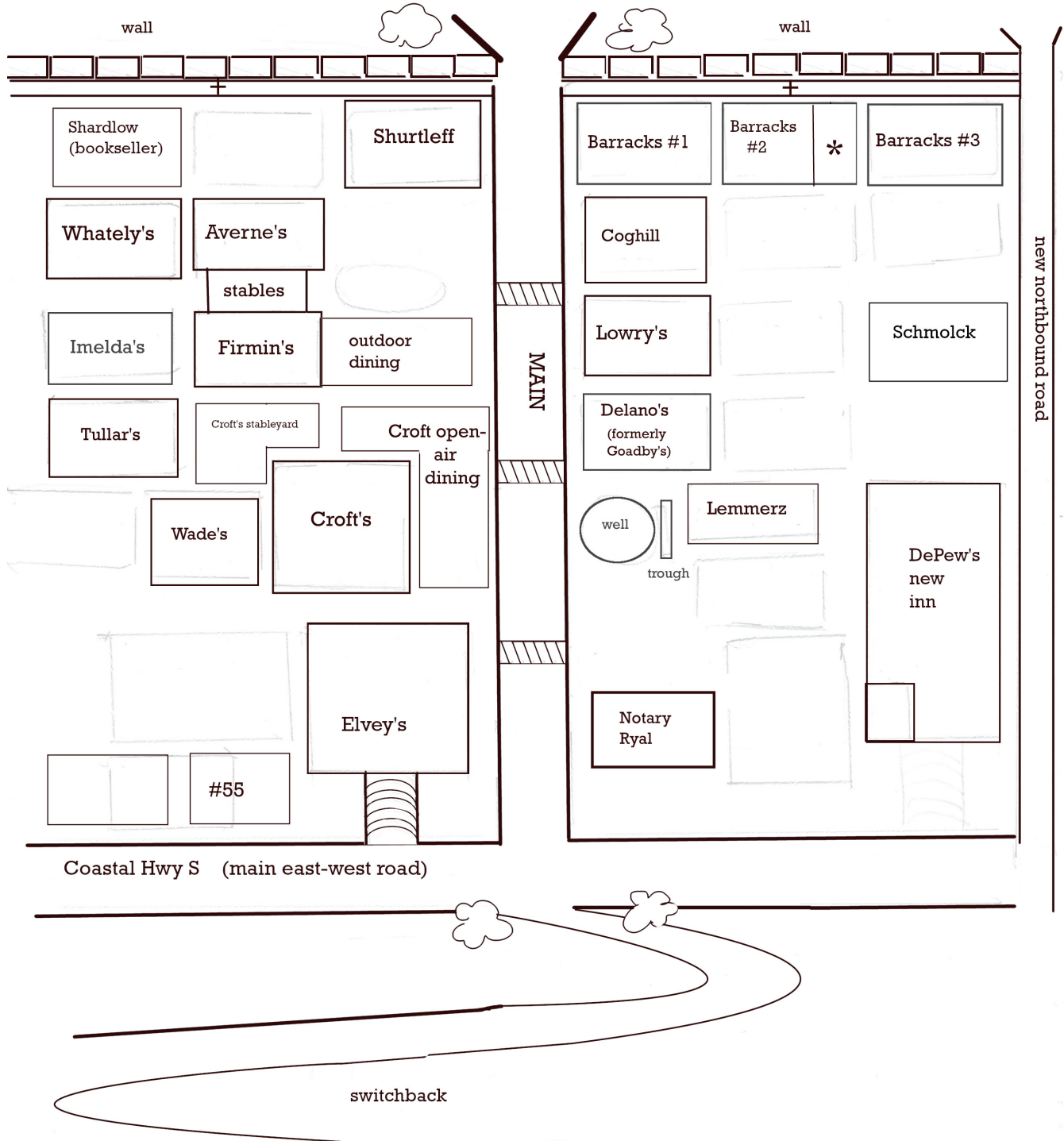
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main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds

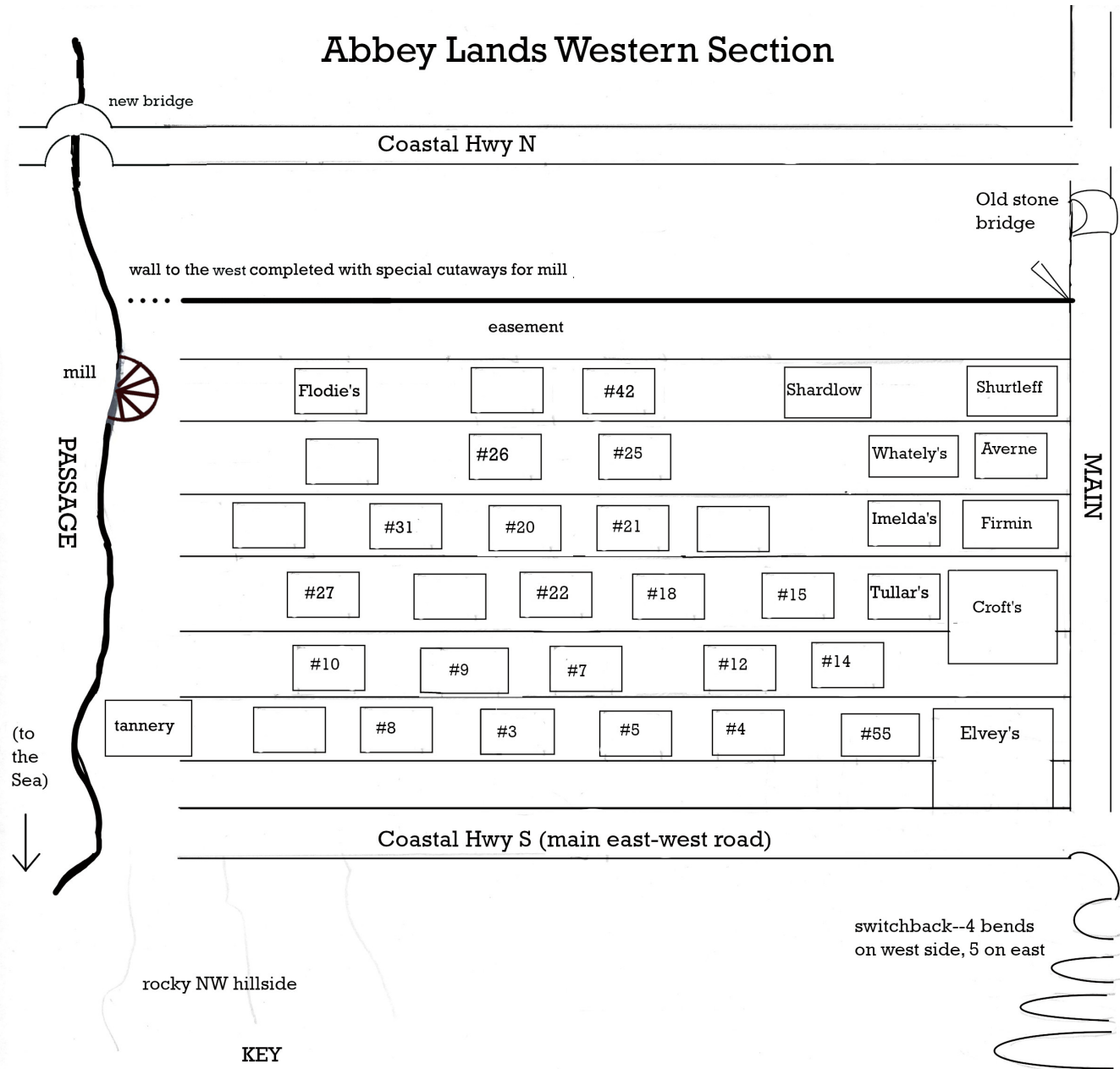
Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements



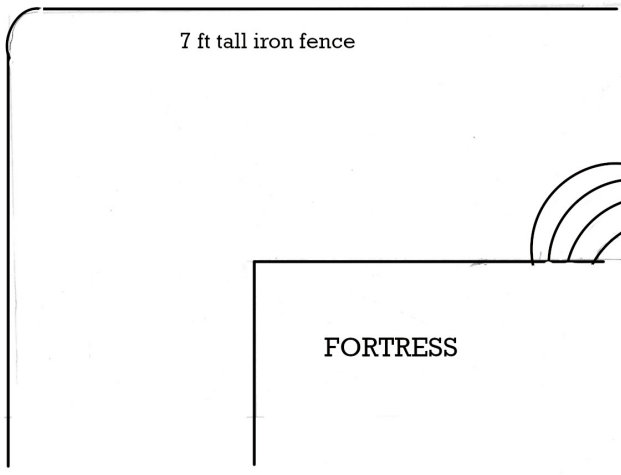
Abbey Lands Western Section



KEY

- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - Challinor & Stites
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening

woods

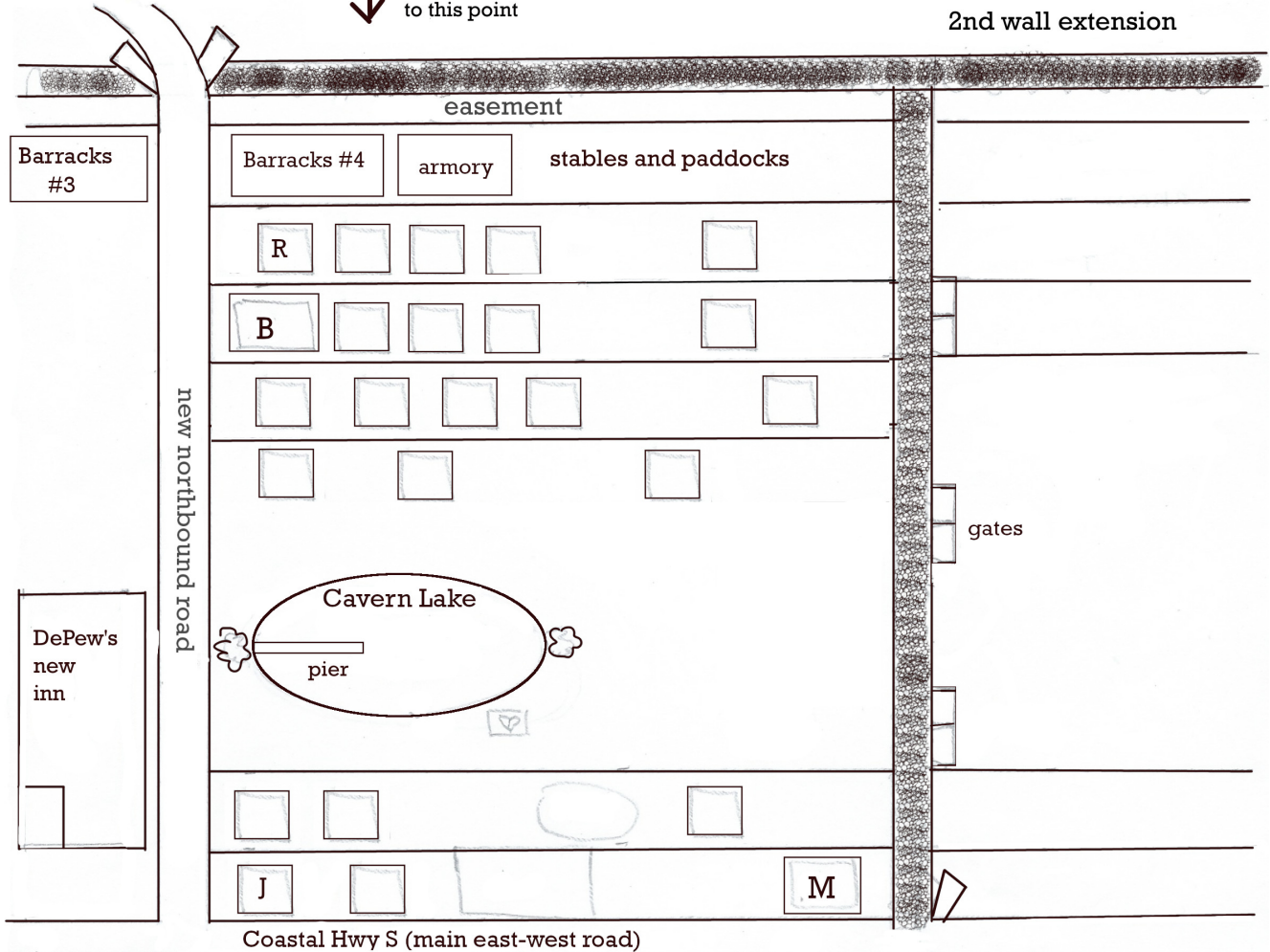


road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

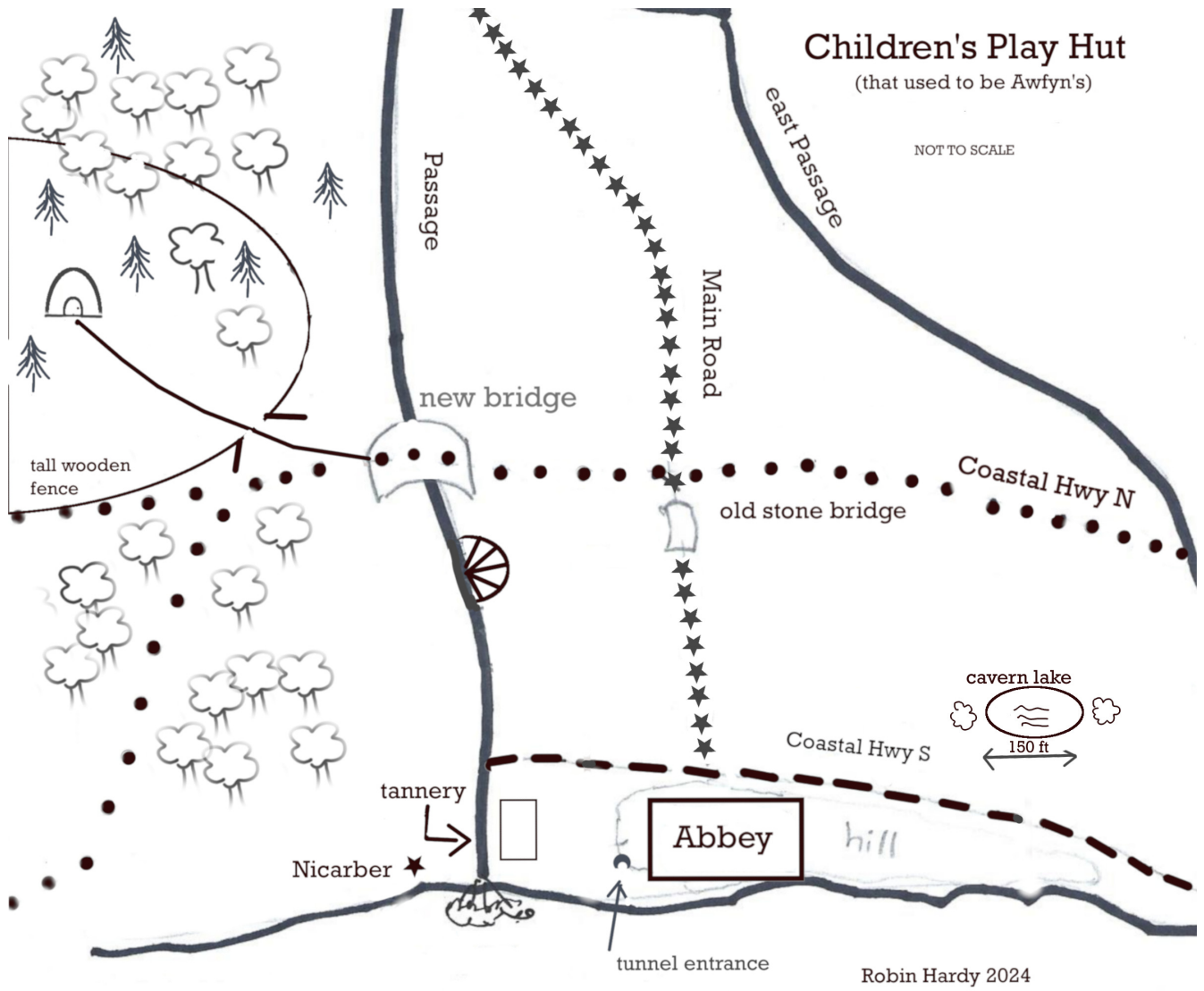
↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point

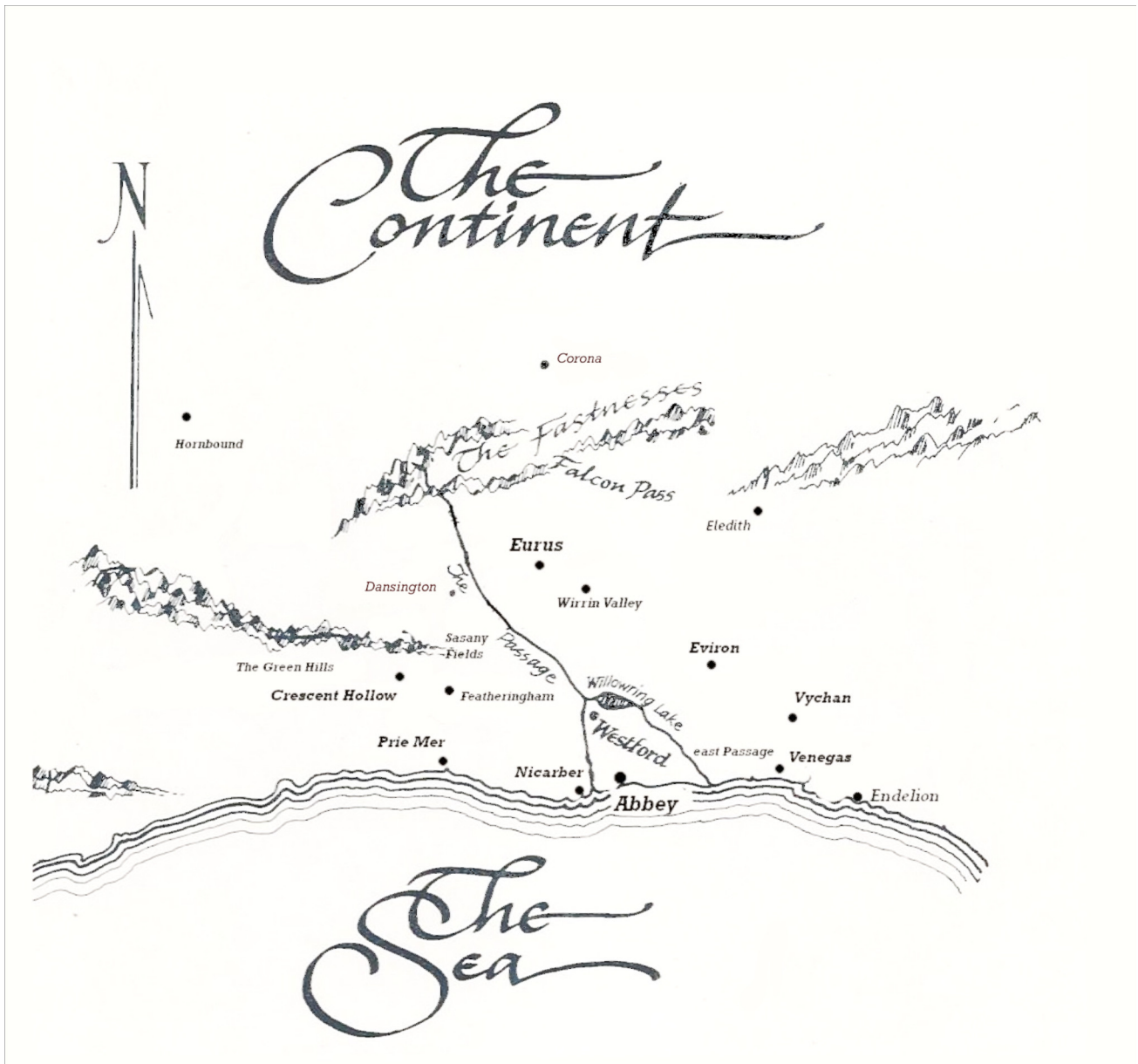
2nd wall extension



Coastal Hwy S (main east-west road)

- A
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D
- E
- F
- G
- H
- I
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- R - Delano's office







Standing Goddess (Book 14:
*Lord Efran and the Provision for
a Wronged Human*)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy

Poor Adele. She looks kind of resigned, doesn't she? It's a shame that she let herself be tricked by Alberon, but at least her plight isn't permanent, as we discover by the end of the chapter. Here, she's portrayed by the lovely [Princess Maria Carolina of Bourbon-Two Sicilies](#)¹ (Below is her original appearance).



In this depiction, Adele is standing in part of the [Cave of Hercules](#) in Morocco.² Her crown is on loan from [Queen Marie of Romania](#).³

The faeries that hail her may look like cherubs, but I couldn't find any faeries online that I liked, and I can't draw what's in my head. So you get [putti](#), half of whom I can identify. The familiar pair in the lower left corner are actually from a larger work, [The Sistine Madonna](#).⁴ The tyke lounging in Adele's dress is one of a trio painted by [Bernardino Luini](#).⁵ The lute player in the lower right corner was painted by [Rosso Fiorentino](#).⁶

I could find very little about the remaining three who, as Adele noted earlier, are whimsically dressed (in novelty boxers that you can find on Amazon). The text of the books they're holding is certainly Latin, but Google can only translate part of it for me: "In the beginning was the Word"; "the book of generations," and "Christ the Son of David." (For balance in the composition, I had to flip the putto hovering over her left shoulder, so the Latin is backwards in that image.) I found these three images at [this Chinese store](#). Wikimedia Commons [gives credit](#) to a Carl Timoleon von Neff for two of the images, but they look derivative to me—the Latin has been erased from the pages so that the putti are holding up blank books, for some reason. This [Dutch marketplace](#) has one of the cherubs whose book has retained the Latin. But I can find no trace of the originals.

Robin Hardy
May 9, 2024

PS. I am claiming no copyright on this illustration.

1. From the Palace of Versailles via Wikimedia Commons
2. The cave is well lit and beautifully photographed by [Diego Delso](#) on Wikimedia Commons.
3. Displayed at the National Museum of Romania; image via Wikimedia Commons
4. Painted by Raphael in 1513
5. Titled *Three Putti Standing Atop Clouds, Gazing Downward in Adoration*
6. It is a surviving fragment from an alterpiece painted by Fiorentino in 1521.