



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

Book 32

Lord Efran
and Oldknow

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Minka gaped down at the swaddled baby boy in her arms. “He’s huge,” she breathed in wonder.

“I know!” Geneve laughed from her cushioned chair. Her husband Melchior looked on in complacent agreement.

Still in shock, Minka raised wide eyes to them, then to Efran beside her, who was trying not to laugh at her. “How old is he now?” she demanded, as though it were Efran’s fault that they had not come to see him earlier.

“Just right at two months,” Geneve said. He had been born on December 22nd; today was February 24th.

“What’s his name?” Efran asked.

“Dagnall,” Melchior said, shifting.

Efran raised his face in recognition. “The great Polonti warrior who led his inferior numbers to defeat the northern Camacho tribes when they tried to assimilate his band.”

“Yes, how did you know?” Melchior asked in surprise.

“We have a book on him in our adjunct library in the dining hall,” Efran explained. “That is, we did, but our second copy disappeared, so Tallmadge is printing out another for us from Shardlow’s stock.” Tallmadge the printer had started out with a tabletop printer for small jobs such as calling cards and stationery, but had recently acquired a fancy new freestanding printing press, which allowed for the printing of book pages. It was much faster than copying by hand, once the type was set. Shardlow was the bookseller.

Efran glanced down as Dagnall began squirming in Minka’s arms, uttering the beginnings of a demand.

Her eyes grew wide. “I feel like I’m holding a small earthquake. What’s wrong?”

“He’s probably hungry again,” Geneve said, holding out her arms.

Minka handed him over with difficulty, then looked aside in disappointment at the gift she and Efran had brought. “The wraps are probably too small for him already,” she grumbled.

“Oh, we’ll use them, never fear,” Geneve said, putting Dagnall to her breast before he could raise his voice to maximum volume.

Meanwhile, Efran was asking Melchior, “Gabriel said you were back at work. Where?” Melchior had almost been killed during the insurrection nearly a year ago.

“Lower barracks, special training,” Melchior answered.

“Ah.” Efran glanced uneasily at Geneve. The advanced techniques of special training were rigorous, sometimes debilitating. Soldiers who wanted to learn them had to meet weight, height and strength requirements to be enrolled.

“Geneve’s given her permission,” Melchior added with the shade of a smile.

“Very good,” Efran said lightly. He was sure she had no idea what was involved in special training, thinking it to be along the lines of what Master Nares taught. Special training exceeded that. Nares had grown a little lazy with his status as “Master.”

Minka, watching Dagnall nurse, asked timidly, “Does it hurt?”

Geneve glanced up. “Not usually, but I have to wash up and use the lanolin when he’s done.”

“We’ll leave you to it, then,” Efran said, a little hasty. Nodding to Melchior, he drew Minka outside to lift her onto Rose.

This time, she didn’t argue with him. He hopped up on Kraken to turn his head back toward Main from the western section with Minka’s mare following placidly. She sighed in despondence, “I could never survive that” —giving birth to a baby that big. He agreed, but didn’t say so. In belated outrage, she asked, “Why do Polonti men produce strictly Polonti babies with Southern women? He’s got the black hair and everything. He looks like a little Melchior!”

Efran raised his shoulders, laughing. “Dominance. It’s how we survive, being lured into marriage with you Southerners.”

“Lured,” she repeated skeptically.

“Permanent and binding *moekolohe*,” he affirmed, that being Southern women’s sexual attraction to Polonti men while disdaining them publicly.

Now she was offended. “Kelsey and Geneve and I are very courteous to you all in public.”

“Yes, this is the revised version of *moekolohe* that you taught me—the one where you haul out the heavy weaponry to make us marry you,” he said easily. He smiled at her sideways, and she looked vaguely guilty.

“Is it wrong if it works?” she asked, quoting him.

He laughed, “Not at all; it’s a very successful strategy. But there will be countermeasures.”

As they emerged onto Main, she exhaled, “I give up. Where are we going?”

He paused before answering, having glimpsed an old man walking with the help of a large staff. He turned from Main onto Chapel Road to head east. Not having seen him before, Efran watched a moment before saying, “There’s a new shop—” then he saw Verlice, in his sky-blue suit with top hat and walking stick, strolling down Main without a care in the world.

It had been almost three months since Verlice had been caught participating in illegal gambling, for which he was fined and assigned to dig on the new sewer lines, living in Laborers’ Hall, till it was paid off. Efran sincerely doubted that Verlice had stuck with the digging long enough to pay off his fine, which was substantial. Efran watched him stop in front of Croft’s to greet Vories, obviously at work there. She came over to lay an affectionate hand on his arm and kiss his cheek.

Minka, watching them as well, screwed up her face. “Wha—? Isn’t he still married to Faciane?”

With a light groan, Efran said, “For now.” He turned Kraken to release him at Ryal’s shop. Minka dismounted by herself, and when they went in, Kraken led Rose to play in the nearby water trough. So neither Efran nor Minka noticed Faciane looking over to Croft’s from the outdoor dining area of Averno’s, just one door down.

The notary’s counter was fortunately empty of customers at the moment, with Ryal sorting forms. Efran leaned over to begin a question, but Ryal said, “Giardi is picking up a few books for me at Shardlow’s, Efran, but I’ll give her your regards when she returns. Hello, Minka.”

Without a thought as to allowing her to respond, Efran said, “Good. Thank you. But now—Marguerite’s son Verlice. Has he paid off his fine?” Minka waited warily, wanting to know the answer while unsure whether it was any of her business.

“Yes, I believe so,” Ryal said, turning to withdraw a ledger. Opening it to a certain page, he said, “He was fined thirty royals on December twenty-second. Thereafter, he paid minimally—usually one [royal] and six or twelve [silver pieces] once every week or so. Then three days ago, he paid the remaining balance of eight and ten in one lump sum.”

Efran exhaled in disgust, and Minka demanded, “Did he get Vories to pay for him?”

“Probably,” Efran grunted.

Ryal said, “It’s perfectly legal unless she files a complaint.”

“Well, there’s nothing for me to do about it, except—keep quiet to Marguerite,” he said uneasily, with a bare glance at Minka.

“I won’t say a word!” she said, offended.

“I know. Thank you, Ryal,” Efran said with a conciliatory arm around her shoulders.

As they stepped out, he saw Seagrave circling his horse on Main, having seen the Captain’s horse at the water trough behind the community well. Spotting the Captain, he rode around traffic to reach him with a salute.

“Captain, Lady Minka,” Seagrave said. “Commander Wendt would appreciate your presence in the conference room of Barracks A. We’ve received a messenger from Crescent Hollow.”

“Oh ho. Did he ride through the night?” Efran asked, retrieving Kraken from his water play. It was now midmorning.

“No, Captain, he arrived last night. He was put up at Averno’s [right across the street from Barracks A] till the Commander could see him,” Seagrave said.

“What’s his message?” Efran asked, mounting. He turned to see Minka adequately getting on Rose by herself.

“Ahhh,” Seagrave began hesitantly, and Efran glanced over. “Apparently, from what I hear, the Council of Crescent Hollow wants Rondi to come back as Regent.”

“What?” Efran almost pulled Kraken up in the middle of Main.

Minka said, "That's insane. They tried to kill her!"

"Why does the Commander need me there? He has many ways of saying 'no,'" Efran observed.

Seagrave disavowed, "I'm not going to speak for the Commander, Captain, but I believe he's looking beneath the surface here."

"Of course. We'll come look, as well," Efran said, nodding back to Minka. Anything involving Rondi, she'd demand to know about it. They progressed at a walk down Main.

Dismounting at the barracks, Efran told Kraken, "I think they're tired of having to refill the water troughs after you've been playing in them." Kraken yawned, so Efran said, "All right, then." He turned with the intent of helping Minka down, but she was following Seagrave into the barracks.

Before entering, Efran paused to ask one of the door guards, Nee, "Is the messenger's carriage at Averde's?"

"Yes, Captain," Nee said, saluting.

"Was it searched for monkeys?" Efran asked.

"Yes, Captain, after what we've all heard, they gave it a long look-see. None found," Nee said. So Efran went on in.

In the conference room, he found Commander Wendt, his Second Gabriel, and the scribe Viglian standing with Minka beside the long table. The well-dressed Hollowan messenger was finishing up a plate and ale. He should have fed himself at Averde's already this morning; whether he did or not, Wendt fed him just as a courtesy.

"And here's Captain Efran," Wendt said. "Efran, this is Lord Quackenbush of Crescent Hollow. If you and Minka will have a seat here, we'll discuss his objectives."

"Yes, Commander," Efran said blandly. He sat Minka to the right of Wendt, who was seating himself at the head of the table with Quackenbush to his left, Gabriel next to him, and Viglian a chair down from Gabriel, with his parchments, quill and ink. As Efran sat beside Minka, they all looked expectantly at the Hollowan.

Quackenbush, slouching over his ale, bags prominent under his eyes, regarded Efran a moment, then looked back at Wendt to ask, "Do I have to go over all that again?"

"It will be sufficient for you to hit the high points. Captain Efran will let us know if he has any questions," Wendt said genially. Efran's gentle smile foreboded questions.

So Quackenbush sighed, "The Council of Crescent Hollow wishes the Regent Rondinelli to resume her duties." And that was it.

Efran glanced at Wendt's half-smile, then asked Quackenbush, "Why?"

Quackenbush unwillingly elaborated, "The position is open."

Efran almost started laughing, but merely asked, again, "Why?"

Raising his hands in surrender, Quackenbush admitted, "Surchatain Borgnino has resigned to avoid being

deposed over the monkeys. No one can figure out how to get rid of them and the Market District merchants are calling for blood.”

Efran glanced off, then said, “So you figure that a thirteen-year-old girl can step in with a better idea?” Minka leaned over to whisper to him, and he added, “Excuse me—a fourteen-year-old. Already?” he asked Minka. She nodded, brows raised.

Returning to Quackenbush, Efran asked, “So?”

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Chapter 2

The messenger Quackenbush hedged, “Regent Rondinelli seemed competent in the few months that she served.”

Efran nodded slowly. “She did stay alive, didn’t she? So, you need help with the monkeys.”

Quackenbush looked at him blearily. Efran leaned back to fold his arms over his chest and study the ceiling. Then he asked, “Isn’t there a river that runs west of Crescent Hollow?”

“Yes, the Cataldi River runs through the valley near the brewery that’s owned by Seger now,” Quackenbush said.

“Yes, that’s where I saw it,” Efran said, remembering. “You need to do two things to get rid of your monkeys, and neither involves Rondi. First, you need to temporarily move your Market merchants to stationary barges on the Cataldi River. They must make sure they don’t bring aboard any stowaways. Draw up your gangplanks at night; grease your mooring lines and the rat guards around them. Keep a skeleton crew on hand to catch any strays that make it over. That should drive all the Market monkeys to the dump.

“Then you hire trappers to get you at least two live bobcats from the Green Hills and turn them loose in the dump. They don’t bother people, but they’ll take care of your monkeys and your rats,” Efran told him.

Quackenbush slowly sat up. “Barges and bobcats,” he murmured. “Yes.”

“Don’t bring your merchants back to the Market District too quickly, or they’ll have to move all over again,” Efran said.

“Yes, I’ll take back word immediately,” Quackenbush said. But he didn’t get up, appearing to have something else on his mind.

So Efran encouraged him with, “Go do that.” Turning to Allyr at the door, he instructed, “Go see that his carriage is made ready.”

“Yes, Captain. Lord Quackenbush?” Allyr said.

“Yes. Thank you, Captain Efran,” Quackenbush said, ponderously rising.

“You’re welcome. Hurry on back now,” Efran said.

The messenger departed with the guard, and those remaining in the conference room looked at each other. Wendt said, "That was clever, Efran."

"Thank you, Commander, but not brilliant or anything," Efran muttered. Minka straightened in disagreement and he smiled briefly at her before asking, "Is Commander Barr still sending scouting reports from Crescent Hollow, Commander?"

"Yes, usually every other day. He hasn't mentioned anything regarding Rondi," Wendt said.

"Then something's up," Efran said, scowling again. "Are we really going to pretend that if he came demanding Rondi, he's happy leaving with tips on getting rid of monkeys?"

Wendt considered that, then asked, "What are you thinking, Efran? That they're going to try to take her again?"

"We can't rule it out. And she travels freely over the Lands. Isn't she still working at The Lands Clothing Shop?" he asked Minka.

"Yes, and I help her, sometimes," she said. "She's good about taking bodyguards."

Efran grunted, "I don't want to count on bodyguards alone against another scheme to kidnap her. Are Barrueta and her daughter Colletta still here?" Originally from Crescent Hollow, they had been given the task of luring Rondi back there, which had failed.

"Yes, they're sharing a house here, in the eastern section," Minka said.

"Well, then," he said in conclusion, and Minka exhaled, knowing what that meant. Glancing reluctantly at her, he told the Commander, "I'll take three men with me to Featheringham tomorrow morning, then we'll hop on over to Crescent Hollow—" about an hour's ride from the previously abandoned stone complex. "I want to give Quackenbush time to get back with his report. It shouldn't take long for us to nose around, see why they really want Rondi," he somewhat promised. Minka nodded glumly.

To Gabriel, Efran said, "Please have Kaas, Teschner, and—" He resisted the next name that came to his mind, but it stubbornly persisted, so he resumed, "—and Neale dressed out as Hollowan workman; we'll leave at first light tomorrow."

Gabriel said, "Will do, Captain." He noted that Efran had chosen three men of the Forty, one of whom had betrayed him in the insurrection, and then bitterly repented. Since Efran had restored Neale to service, he had worked quietly at whatever was assigned him. And he was the only one of the insurrectionists who had survived and stayed at the Lands.

As Efran and Minka rose to leave, he reassured her, "That gives us a lot of time to spend with the children this afternoon." She hugged his arm, and they went out to the water trough, which Kraken had emptied playing in it again. He shook water from his head without remorse, and Rose looked innocent.

When they got to the switchback, they were in for a surprise: Jonguitud was out sunning with his babies on the northwestern hillside beside their nest and the hole over the cavern waters below. The two babies were over four months old now, almost full grown. And the children had spotted them when they came out to the back grounds to play.

So when Efran and Minka appeared on the grounds, they were met with cries and demands to go see the babies. Worse, Jonguitud had taken his offspring down the hillside to perch at the bottom of the hill on the edge of the road, expecting conversation.

In resignation, Efran conscripted four soldiers—Chilcott, Dango, Melott, and Verrin—to help herd the children down the switchback and west on Chapel Road to meet the dragon family, minus the mother, Gevorgyan. She was apparently, *apparently* away for the moment. Because she had the ability to camouflage herself as well as fly, Efran never knew exactly where she was until she appeared directly overhead.

So with Efran carrying Joshua, and Minka holding hands with Isreal, the soldiers carried or walked all the rest of the children—Toby, Noah, Ivy, Alcmund, Chorro, Elwell, Hassie, Jera, Acy, Pim, Calix, Calo, and Alson—down to see the three snobbles eaters. (The last child, Alson, was a new 7-year-old boy who was soon to be adopted into a Lands family.)

When this large group of excited and scared children approached, they were surprised to see several other visitors already engaged with the hydra and his mixed-breed babies. Pia was here with two of her Polonti escorts, as well as Lwoff, the hilltop armory attendant and the wild animal expert.

As neither Pia nor Lwoff was handling the babies, Efran instructed, “Everyone keep your hands to your sides; we’re just talking today. Hello, Pia, Lwoff, and, uh, Jonguitud. What do you—”

While Jonguitud waved his heads at the children, his nearly grown babies scampered over to get a closer look. The two-headed camouflaged baby was sniffing Elwell almost before anyone could discern it among the rocks. Pia said, “That one is a girl; her name is Svizzi. The black one is a boy named Busi.” True to his name, Busi had used his wings to flap over and attempt to land on Calix, but was intercepted by Dango. Given that the baby weighed over a hundred pounds, Dango merely guided it to the ground.

Busi licked his arm in appreciation and Lwoff said, “They’re already comfortable around people, Cap’n; not sure why.”

Efran glanced over to Minka, who raised her brows innocently, and he said, “Yes, well, they got the chance to meet a person when they were newly hatched.”

“Lady Minka?” Lwoff asked in surprise. “Aye, nice work, Lady; you’ll have no fear of ’em now. Ain’t that right, Pia?”

“Yes, they’re almost tame,” she said. Svizzi was nosing Calo, the toddler in Verrin’s arms. Distrustfully, the soldier pushed one head away, but the other came up to lick Calo’s leg, which made him laugh. Verrin pushed that one away, too.

Efran asked, “Jonguitud, where is their mother?” She was definitely still wild.

“Back with clan,” Jonguitud said, one head stretching out to point north.

“She’s gone?” Efran asked in surprise.

“Fly away,” Jonguitud confirmed.

“And left you with the babies,” Efran noted judgmentally.

“Coming back for Svizzi,” Jonguitud said.

Efran asked, “Oh? Gevorgyan’s coming back for the one who can’t fly? When?”

One of Pia’s Polonti attendants suddenly picked her up to carry her a little ways off as Lwoff shouted, “Incoming, Captain!”

Seeing only the blurring of the sky directly above him, Verrin fell down in the road, covering Calo. Svizzi climbed up on Verrin’s back to bleat upward, and the great winged dragon suddenly appeared, reaching down large claws for her baby.

In her excitement, Svizzi clutched Verrin’s jacket with her sharp baby talons, so that he began rising with Calo when Gevorgyan lifted Svizzi. Chilcott ran over to grip the baby’s foot in one hand and Verrin’s jacket in the other to pull them apart. The jacket ripped; Verrin fell to his knees still holding Calo, and baby Svizzi ascended before blending in with the sky and her mother to invisibility.

Everyone was shocked into stillness for a moment, then Efran said, “We’re done here. Back up hilltop.” Lwoff saluted as the children began quietly walking to the switchback. Jonguitud and Busi dove back into their fishing hole.

Toby patted Verrin on the back, and Minka said, “Verrin and Chilcott should get commendations, Efran.”

“Yes, they will,” he agreed. The two honorees glanced at each other in satisfaction; Chilcott was especially gratified, as he had almost jumped into the Sea before the Lady Minka convinced him he had worth.

Calix demanded, “We can go see Jonguitud and Busi again, can’t we, Efran? *They* didn’t do anything wrong, and neither did we.” The other children agreed that this was only fair.

Efran groaned, “We’ll see.”

“Verrin needs a new jacket,” Hassie pointed out, and he grinned down at her.

“Verrin will receive a new jacket. Tell your Captain when we get up hilltop,” Efran said.

“Yes, Captain,” Verrin said.

As they ascended the switchback, the children began coming around to the possibilities. Alcmund said, “I think that would be fun, to ride on a dragon.”

“But what if they drop you?” Jera cried.

“Efran will catch you,” Noah assured her.

“We’re not going to try it,” Efran said firmly.

Coming to the courtyard, he and Minka walked them around the western side of the fortress to the back grounds where Efran dismissed Verrin to go request a replacement jacket. “Now, run check on your frogs,” Efran exhaled, letting Joshua down to toddle off to the pond with the other children. Dango, Melott and Chilcott accompanied them.

Efran and Minka sat on the east-facing bench under the walnut tree just to keep the children and the pond in sight. “Something always happens,” he muttered.

She smiled. “But you have good men, Efran.”

“True,” he agreed. After a moment’s thought, he asked, “Is Rondi getting messages from anyone in Crescent Hollow?”

“I don’t know. She hasn’t mentioned any,” Minka said.

“Will you ask her? And tell Ellor that if she does, you want to know,” he said.

“You want me to read her messages?” she asked reluctantly.

“No, not yet. I just want to know,” he repeated, and she nodded. Efran then sent down to the wall gates asking to be informed when Lord Quackenbush departed. Within minutes, he received confirmation that the Hollowan lord had left the Lands.

Before sunrise the following morning, February 25th, Efran met Kaas, Teschner, and Neale at the wall gates, dressed as workmen as instructed. Scrutinizing Efran’s usual work clothes, Kaas said, “Captain, you’re likely to be drafted to dig ditches wearing that to Crescent Hollow.”

Efran laughed, “No fear, I have the proper suit to change into at Featheringham.” He patted the pack he had just strapped behind the saddle.

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Chapter 3

“Yes, Captain,” Kaas said, reining around, and they rode out of the gates up the northbound road over the stone bridge, past which they turned west to cross the new bridge over the Passage and ride toward Crescent Hollow.

Depending on the weather, it was about a six-hour ride to Featheringham. On the way, Efran told them, “I just want to look around, see if we can sniff out why they’re telling us they want Rondi back—and see if they’re really having such trouble getting rid of the monkeys.”

Teschner said, “That last point is sure, Captain—that’s all we’ve been hearing about for some time now.”

“Probably,” Efran admitted.

After Law class that morning, before Rondi left for work at The Lands Clothing Shop, Minka paused to ask, “Rondi, Efran wanted to know—have you received any messages from anyone in Crescent Hollow?”

Surprised, Rondi said, “Yes, I did, just a few days ago! How did he know? Anyway, I don’t know the sender. Do you want to see it?”

“If you don’t mind,” Minka said.

“No, it’s a relief to show it to someone. I sure didn’t think I had any friends left in Crescent Hollow,” she said, turning up the stairs.

“We got you out—when? Six months ago?” Minka asked, following her up to the second floor.

“Yes, I think so. It was toward the end of August, so, yes,” Rondi said. Coming to her door, she opened it and went directly to the bedroom while Minka waited in the receiving room. Then Rondi came back out immediately to hand her the open letter. “I’m glad you asked. I wasn’t even sure what to do with it.”

“You didn’t answer it?” Minka asked, glancing at the letter.

“Oh, no,” Rondi grimaced. “Answering someone I didn’t even know? I thought about showing it to Mathurin, but it’s better for Efran to see it. Now, I’ve got to run to the shop. Are you coming today?”

“Maybe a little later. I need *another* flat cap—I put Milo’s down somewhere and it just disappeared—but I hate to take one meant for some poor man waiting for his. Speaking of which--take two men,” Minka said, lowering her chin like Efran.

“I will,” Rondi laughed. As she trotted down the stairs, Minka paused in the second-floor corridor to unfold the letter and read:

“To the Lady Rondinelli
“From her servant Lord Bickerstaffe

“Dearest Lady Rondinelli:

“Forgive my impertinence to write you, as we have never been formally introduced. However, I much admired your comportment as Regent of our fair city, and was shocked and bewildered by the conflicting accounts of your disappearance from Plumtree and its subsequent conflagration. I was to be astonished to hear that you are residing in the Abbey Lands in apparent felicity. Can this be true?

“Having admired you from afar, I am desirous of learning your state in person. May I beg of you an invitation to visit you in the Abbey Lands? I shall bring however many royals your Steward requires as compensation for your time.

“I earnestly await a favorable response directed to me in Room 12 of the Elegance Inn.

“From the sincere heart of your ardent admirer, Bickerstaffe.”

“Oh, dear!” Minka snorted. “This is too rich for words. How in the world did Efran know—? Never mind that; what to do with it now that he’s gone? . . . to Crescent Hollow.”

Tapping the letter, she took it downstairs to the foyer doors. “Ellor,” she said thoughtfully.

“Yes, Lady Minka?” he asked, watching her play with a folded parchment.

“Ellor, I need a messenger, please,” she said.

“Yes, Lady Minka.” He emerged to the top fortress step, looking around. Then he pointed, calling, “You!” and waved imperiously. Shortly, he directed young Dirkes into the foyer with, “Lady Minka needs a messenger.”

Dirkes ran up to her. “Yes, Lady Minka?”

She handed him the letter. “This must go to Commander Wendt. Please tell him that Rondi doesn’t know the sender and didn’t know what to do with his letter, so she gave it to me. I believe the Commander will know what to do with it.”

“Yes, Lady Minka!” Taking the letter, Dirkes ran out to the courtyard, where the gatesman Cudmore had a horse waiting for him. Tucking the letter securely into his pocket, Dirkes climbed into the saddle, then Cudmore and Doudney opened the gates for him to ride down the switchback and up Main to Barracks A.

Entering in importance, Dirkes saluted the Second Gabriel and said, “Dirkes reporting, sir. Lady Minka sends this letter for the Commander. She said it was sent to Lady Rondi, who doesn’t know the sender and didn’t know what to do with it, but Lady Minka was sure that Commander Wendt would know.”

Gabriel took the letter with the reassurance, “Lady Minka is correct, as usual. You’re dismissed.” Dirkes saluted again and trotted out to ride back to the fortress and report to Ellor on the successful delivery to the Second. Meanwhile, Gabriel opened the letter to read it, then started laughing. “From Lord Bickerstaffe, who’s so important as to reside in room number twelve of the Elegance.”

While he was still mulling over the letter, the Commander entered with Captain Towner. “Why are you laughing now, Gabriel?” Wendt asked mildly.

“Over unexpected opportunities, Commander,” Gabriel said, handing him the letter. “Lady Rondi received this from an unknown admirer in Crescent Hollow, so Lady Minka wanted you to do something with it.”

Wendt read the letter with an expression of pained disbelief before handing it off to Towner. He read it smiling and handed it back to Gabriel.

Wendt said thoughtfully, “I’ve met Lord Bickerstaffe—he was part of a coalition of Crescent Hollow nobles who came to Westford to visit Surchatain Lietes. Yes, Bickerstaffe’s a large, huffing man in his fifties whose wife rules their household with an iron rod. And there is no earthly chance that this is him.

“So, Gabriel, you’re Lady Rondi’s new social secretary. Think of a new name, under which you’ll pen a gracious invitation to ‘Lord Bickerstaffe’ to visit, and we’ll have Averde’s here reserve a room for him. Oh, and, send a copy of this letter right away to Efran at Featheringham; if it doesn’t catch him there tonight, they’ll find him in Crescent Hollow. He may want to look up ‘Bickerstaffe’ while he’s there. I don’t remember whether Efran met him or not, but he knows what he looks like.”

“Yes, Commander,” Gabriel said. He handed the letter to Viglian with, “Copy it out, please.”

“Yes, sir,” Viglian said. All these men were smiling, for some reason. Within minutes, two riders—Eymor and Heus—set out for Featheringham with the original letter for Captain Efran.

In midafternoon, Efran, Teschner, Kaas, and Neale arrived at the stone complex of Featheringham with newly reinstalled gates. Today, it was not much colder than it was at the Lands—all the men needed were light jackets.

Once inside the gates, they were directed to Commander Barr's headquarters in the house, which had been refurbished to the army's needs. Barr had his personal quarters here, as did his new Second Coxe and the new Featheringham Captain Truro. Barr needed the officers because anywhere from 70 to 150 men were here on a rotating basis.

Because the officers were here full-time, they had to resign themselves to living like monks, with little opportunity to meet women. However, there was room in the compound for a few eateries and an independent wash house, so women began drifting in to staff those, as well as the positions in headquarters for cooks, laundresses, and cleaners. So, conditions were improving.

As for the large, grim, windowless building where Lady Nierling's captives had been chained to work, that also had been refurbished. The fetters and chains had been torn out for scrap iron, and windows put in all the walls. With the long tables already there, this became the mess hall—brighter, warmer, and quite satisfactory.

Efran and his men stopped at the compound briefly to rest the horses, get a quick bite, and for Efran to change clothes. While the horses were watering, Teschner told Barr about Quackenbush's request to have Rondi redelivered to them. Efran took his pack to Barr's quarters to change, then reemerged wearing the striped dark gray pants, old charcoal coat, and string necktie on his white shirt.

Barr nodded at the ensemble, but the men who were seeing it for the first time looked intrigued. "Who died, Captain?" Kaas asked.

"I don't know yet. We have to go see," Efran replied, stuffing his work clothes into the pack. "But it was a great disguise last time I was in Crescent Hollow"—appropriate for a Polonti and alarming at the same time. "Who've you got there now?" he asked Barr.

Barr looked to his scribe Numan, who replied, "Mohr and Gaul, Captain."

Settling the coat on his shoulders, Efran said, "Good. We'll lodge at the Elegance tonight, but I want to use what remaining daylight we have to scout a little, see if I can drum up some business. Are the monkeys still an issue?" he asked abruptly.

"A big one," Barr said wryly. "They've done so much damage that the price of produce has blown up, so everybody's as mad as the merchants. Surchatain Borgnino has disappeared."

"So we heard, which is the excuse Quackenbush gave us for wanting Rondi back. We're off, then," Efran said.

"Happy hunting, Captain," Barr said. Grinning, Coxe and Numan saluted him.

In his undertaker costume, Efran rode out with Teschner, Kaas and Neale for the remaining hour of travel to Crescent Hollow. They arrived to find the city fairly tranquil, except--

In walking down a prominent side street to the center of the city, the men's horses shied as a troop of monkeys darted across the street in front of them to vanish between two shops. A pair of men chasing them with nets stopped on the sidewalk to look around, so Teschner pointed them to the gap in between the shops. One of the men called, "Mortician! Do you kill monkeys?"

Blandly, Efran answered, "No, I have too many people to assist out of this life." Looking both disappointed and disturbed, the two pursued their quarry in between the shops.

As Efran's group continued walking their horses down the street, Neale said, "It's strange, the monkeys running on the ground to escape. They're tree-dwellers, you know—their tendency is to go up."

Efran considered that, then looked down an alley to their right that appeared to intersect with the path taken by the monkeys in between the shops. "Well—let's just have a look," he said, nodding to the alley. It was wide enough only for two riders abreast, so Efran and Kaas led with Teschner and Neale following.

Shortly, they arrived at an intersection of narrow passages where the monkey chasers were looking around, especially in crevices at the base of the walls surrounding them. "Where did they go?" one man demanded, while his companion drew his head out of one crevice to observe, "There's an opening about twenty feet down, but it looks small."

"You won't catch them there," Neale said, eyes raised. So the rest of the men looked up at fifteen or so small simian heads peering down at them from the quadrangle of rooftops above. Seeing the upturned faces, the monkeys began screeching and throwing handfuls of roof debris and poop down at them. Efran and his men quickly turned their horses to retreat the way they had come, leaving the monkey catchers to run down the alley through a gauntlet of flung poo.

From there, the Landers walked to the Elegance Inn, where Efran and Kaas waited with their horses out front while Teschner and Neale went in to rent a large room with two beds and two cots. When they returned with a key, the four of them set out in the waning afternoon for the Market District.

There, they found harassed, bleary-eyed produce merchants fighting a defensive war against the guerrilla tactics of the monkeys. This involved coordinated strikes by several groups of monkeys targeting diverse sections of produce at the same time. They leapt on boxes and crates to seize a fistful which they crammed into their mouths before running off again. The most successful defense against this maneuver was a dog chained in front of the artichoke bins. The monkeys steered clear of them, but so did the customers.

After watching this chaos for a little while, Efran said, "I'm convinced. They have a crisis on their hands." As they turned their horses back toward the Elegance, he added, "All these monkeys can't have been bred from the three that escaped from our Faire, could they?" That was five months ago.

Kaas said, "No, I don't think so, Captain. But the presence of the Faire monkeys here could have lured the native monkeys down from the Green Hills." They glanced to the north where the low mountains loomed before them.

"Ah. Yes," Efran agreed.

They returned to the inn to order dinner brought up to their room. While they were eating, there was a quiet knock on the door, and a voice said, "It's Corwyn and Tourle."

Neale got up to let them in. They saluted Efran, who said, "Sit. Did you just come from Featheringham?"

"Yes, Captain," said Corwyn. "Thank you, sir, but we need to get right back. We appreciate your wearing the costume, sir—it was easy to find you; we just asked at the desk for the undertaker." Efran looked smug and Corwyn continued, "Commander Wendt wished you to see this letter, sir." As he handed over the wrinkled, folded parchment, he explained, "Lady Rondi gave it to Lady Minka, who brought it to the Commander."

"Really," Efran murmured. He opened the letter to scan it, then his brows lifted in surprise and he read it aloud for the entertainment afforded his men. They laughed, but mostly in disbelief.

Standing from his half-finished dinner, Efran said, “Oh, the timing is perfect. Stay just a moment; I’m going to go knock on number twelve here.”

Tourle said, “Let us just stand by the door while you do that, Captain,” to which Corwyn earnestly agreed.

While Efran was nodding, Kaas said, “Twelve. Which floor is that on?”

“Right above us,” Efran said, moving to the door.

“Then I’ll just stand quietly in the stairwell, Cap’n,” Kaas proposed.

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Chapter 4

Mildly peeved, Efran told Kaas, “All right, stand in the stairwell, but that’s all. The friendly neighborhood undertaker shouldn’t need so much protection.”

Teschner said, “Yes, sir, we’ll just sit uselessly here.”

“Don’t pout,” Efran said on his way out. Two heartbeats later, both men remaining in the room got to their feet. While Teschner followed his fellow soldiers to the stairwell, Neale stood at the door of their room, watching. Teschner looked up to Kaas at the exit to the second floor, who looked down to give him a thumbs up. This Teschner relayed to Neale.

At number 12, Tourle and Corwyn flattened themselves on either side of the door while Efran lifted his hand to knock. Shortly, a haggard young man flung open the door to be considerably surprised by the solemn figure in black. They stared at each other for a moment, then Efran said, “I’m here for the body.”

“Body?” the young man gasped. “There’s no—who called you?”

“I was called to room number twelve of the Elegance Inn for the body. Show me where it is,” Efran instructed. Meanwhile, he was studying the sandy-haired, clean-shaven, blue-eyed man, who looked nothing like Lord Bickerstaffe.

“I haven’t got a body here,” the alarmed occupant of room #12 said.

Efran looked dour. “Hiding bodies is an infraction of the rules sent down by the Ministry of Sanitation. I must enter to see that there is no body.”

“Blast you! Come look then, you Polonti death merchant, but stay out of my luggage!” the man said, flinging the door open wide.

Efran came in then, eyes sweeping the small room. Although “Bickerstaffe” was wearing something akin to Efran’s work clothes, he had several nice suits hanging up with alteration tags on them. A small table contained the remains of his dinner and some good parchment on which was a letter in the making. There was a page of

completed script sitting to the side, and a glance told Efran that “Bickerstaffe” was copying the contents of the completed page onto his letter in progress.

Noting all this took an instant, then Efran bent to look under the table. “What is your name?”

“What the devil does that have to do with anything? Can’t you see there’s no body?” the man said, sweating.

Efran straightened grimly. “I must report this to the Ministry of Sanitation.”

“My name is Rawlins. You want to check under the bed?” He waved in aggravation. So Efran leaned down to check under the bed, and saw a partly open case in which gold could be glimpsed. Rising, he went over to open the small built-in wardrobe, seeing more nice clothes, shoes and boots. Belatedly, Rawlins/Bickerstaffe went over to the table to cover the partial letter.

Efran looked at him in disappointment. “There’s no body.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, blast you!” Rawlins cried.

“This must be reported to the Ministry of Sanitation,” Efran said, returning to the door and stepping out into the corridor.

“Be sure to tell them how thoroughly you searched,” Rawlins said, aggrieved, and slammed the door.

Walking away, Efran murmured to Tourle and Corwyn, “Nervy youngster, definitely not Bickerstaffe. He’s being paid to write Rondi, possibly others, but he’s not used to playing a rôle. You’re going right back to Featheringham?” Efran extended the crumpled letter to Tourle.

“Yes, Captain,” Tourle said, stuffing the letter back into his pocket.

“Good. Tell Commander Barr to relay that information to Commander Wendt; it might be fun to have ‘Bickerstaffe’ visit the Lands and talk to anyone but Rondi. Or Minka,” he added quickly, and Corwyn hid a smile. They picked up Kaas at the head of the stairwell and Teschner on their floor. Neale watched from the door of their room while Tourle and Corwyn saluted and left, then the Captain, Teschner, and Kaas returned with Neale to finish dinner and talk about what he had observed in Rawlins’ room.

The following morning, February 26th, Efran redonned his undertaker clothes. He sent Teschner and Kaas to quietly observe the Market District today and see if there were any hint of a Lord Quackenbush or the implementation of Efran’s suggestions for monkey control. “But be back to the inn for the midday meal,” Efran instructed. Meanwhile, he and Neale headed to the nobles’ district to see what, if anything, had been done with the smoldering pile of ashes that had been Grand Councilor Zollicoffer’s estate Chaudoin.

Locating the lot was easy, as the layout was deeply impressed on Efran’s memory after his hours-long search for Justinian there. Efran had finally found him behind a metal door that he had passed several times. Thanks to the butler’s tardiness in lighting the wick to the Incineration Room, Justinian was still alive when Efran thought to check behind the door that had singed jambs.

Today, he and Neale stopped at the empty lot which had been cleaned up and was now for sale. “Well, that’s encouraging,” Efran said. “Here’s hoping they get a relatively uncorrupted Grand Councilor to build here. Now, let’s hop over to look at Plumtree.”

“The name is familiar, but I’m not remembering who lives there, Captain,” Neale said, glancing around.

“Historically, it’s been the Surchatain’s house, and it’s where Rondi lived when she was Regent,” Efran said. “It, ah, sustained some fire damage, as well.”

“For which you were blamed, if I remember rightly,” Neale said.

“And rightly so, I’m afraid, but I wouldn’t have bothered if they hadn’t tried to poison her,” Efran said, peeved.

“Certainly justified, then,” Neale said.

“That was my thinking,” Efran admitted.

They walked their horses placidly down the broad avenue leading to Plumtree. Even from a distance, they could see guards milling around it. As they drew closer, pulling up to the end of the long drive, they watched deliveries going around to the back door and construction underway on an outbuilding. “Well, they seem to have recovered,” Efran murmured.

Spotting him, one of the guards began hailing him. “Undertaker! Come here!”

Efran raised his brows to Neale. “Looks as though I might have to perform my duty. Remind me where the city dump is?”

“We’ll find it, I hope,” Neale said, following as Efran spurred Kraken forward at an easy lope.

They drew up to the guard at the front steps of the house. Pointing to the construction, he said, “You’re to remove a body over there.”

“Construction accident?” Efran said, looking to the right where a few men were standing around.

“Just go,” the guard waved. So Efran and Neale turned their horses to trot over to the area of interest.

There, the men parted for the undertaker and his helper to look down at a young teen, probably 13 or 14, writhing with a bloody cut in his side. First of all, Efran observed, “He’s not dead.”

“He will be shortly,” one man grunted, obviously the supervisor. “Besides, he’s not much help to us. Take him.”

With a stony stare, Efran said, “I don’t have my wagon with me, so you’ll have to lend me your donkey and cart there.” Efran nodded toward their means of hauling construction materials to the site.

The supervisor winced. “You’ll return it?”

“You don’t trust your undertaker?” Efran asked darkly. Since all men would need him someday, a couple of workers quickly unloaded the cart to lift the groaning boy into it and turn the donkey around. Efran dismounted to lift the boy’s shirt and look at his wound. With a shake of his head, Efran climbed into the cart to take out his own kerchief and press it onto the wound. He looked up to tell Neale, “You drive.”

“Yes, sir.” Neale hopped off his horse to climb into the driver’s seat, looking down at the boy in the back.

As Neale prompted the donkey to a walk, one man told Efran, "Won't do any good."

Efran replied, "Don't tell me how to do my job." The worker backed off with raised hands.

Kraken walked alongside the cart that Neale drove while his horse followed. The construction workers and palace guards then watched the undertaker and his helper remove the nearly dead down the long drive.

On the return trip to the inn, Efran kept his kerchief pressed tightly into the boy's side. Breathing heavily, he watched the undertaker try to save his life and lose a job. When they arrived, Neale turned to ask, "On around to the stables?"

"Yes," Efran said, so Neale guided the donkey around back with the horses following. Climbing down from the cart seat, he whistled for the hostler. The man came ambling up, but paused in dismay when he recognized Kraken as the destroyer of stalls.

Efran climbed out of the cart bed. With his bloody kerchief stuck to the boy's shirt, Efran reached over the side to lift him, telling the hostler, "My horse will be too busy to do any damage to his stall on this trip." Kraken lowered his head, and Efran asked Neale, "You got any money on you?"

"A couple of royals," Neale said, searching his pocket.

"That'll do," Efran said. As Neale handed those to the hostler, Efran told him, "Have your boy return the cart to Plumptree."

"Yes sir, right away." The hostler turned to call, "Awtrey! Get over here!"

"Yeah, Pa?" The boy came running up.

He stopped abruptly to see a kid about his own age being carried away from the cart by the undertaker. Efran paused to tell him, "Take this cart back to the construction workers at Plumptree."

"Yessir," Awtrey said, pale. He climbed into the driver's seat to turn the donkey's head.

As the hostler took the horses, Efran told him, "My helper will be down shortly to see to them."

"That's good, sir," the man said with a sober glance at the next candidate for last rites.

Turning with the boy to the back entrance, Efran nodded to Neale, "Get the doors for me."

"Yes, Captain." Neale opened the back door, preceding him in to check the stairwell and take the key from Efran's pocket to open the door to their room.

Laying the boy on a bed, Efran told Neale, "Bring us more water, then see if you can find some rags."

"Yes, sir." Neale slipped out the door again.

After taking off his coat and rolling up his sleeves, Efran brought the washbasin and hand towels to the bedside. Dipping one towel into the water and squeezing it out, he lifted the boy's torn and bloody shirt to begin washing the wound. It was a nasty cut, but not deep. Noting the bruising around it, he asked, "How did this happen?"

The boy groaned, “Wotton got mad ’bout sumpin; threw his adze. I’s just in the wrong place.”

“What’s your name?” Efran asked, carefully cleaning the wound.

“Mattias. You goin’ to bury me?” he asked in a gasp.

“I can’t; I’m not really an undertaker. I’m going to try to keep you alive, instead. My name is Efran.” Studying the wound, he saw that it had mostly stopped bleeding.

Neale came in at that time with a bucket of water and armload of towels. As he set the bucket on the floor and the towels on the bed, Efran told him, “This is Mattias. He doesn’t want to be buried yet.”

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Chapter 5

“Oh,” Neale said as though surprised. “I guess we’ll hold off burying him, then. Do you want anything to eat?”

Efran looked down at Mattias. “Do you feel like eating?”

“Yeah,” the boy said, struggling to sit up. He was pretty lean.

“See to the horses, then bring him a bland mash and a lager,” Efran told Neale.

“Yes, Captain,” he said, exiting with a glance back at the boy.

Mattias watched Neale leave, then turned to study the Polonti. “Who you Cap’n of?” he asked. Although obviously in pain, he wanted to know more about the undertaker who decided not to let him die.

Working the filthy, torn, bloody shirt off him, Efran said, “I’m with the Abbey Lands. Can you sit forward?”

“Yeah.” With a grunt, the boy leaned over. Efran pulled off the shirt to drop it to the floor, then dipped a towel in the bucket. Beginning with Mattias’ mop of dark red hair, Efran washed him down to his scrawny back, chest, and arms.

“All right, you can sit back against the pillow there. How did you pick up the bruises?” Efran asked.

“Not being fast enough,” Mattias muttered, leaning back in the feather pillow again.

“How old are you?” Efran asked.

The boy’s jaw jutted out. “Fifteen,” he declared. At the Captain’s skeptical look, he added, “Prob’ly. I don’t really know.”

“Stick out your hands,” Efran instructed, bringing up another wet towel. When Mattias did, Efran began washing them thoroughly. “Well, at the Abbey Lands, we take in children who have nowhere else to go. So when my men and I are done here, we’re taking you with us.”

The boy's eyes began watering at what he perceived to be a threat. "You goin' to work me?"

"When you're all better, of course you'll work. But it will be something you want to do," Efran said.

Shortly, Neale returned with a serving cart carrying the boy's mash and lager, but also a pot of stew, bowls and ales for the men. "The kitchen's getting up the midday meal, so I thought to save myself a trip," he explained.

"Good thinking," Efran said. While he put the bowl of mash on Mattias' lap with a spoon, he asked, "Did Kraken cooperate?"

"Docile as a lamb," Neale replied. They both watched Mattias take up the spoon to eat intently until the bowl was clean. He then drank half the lager and sank back onto the pillow. Efran rescued the bottle before it tipped over, then helped Mattias lie back down. He went right to sleep.

Efran said, "We may have to hire a carriage to get him back to the Lands." This was likely impossible: anyone who had a carriage for hire would demand a larger deposit than Efran could produce right now, and his undertaker costume would raise uncomfortable questions.

"We'll figure something out, Captain," Neale said.

About that time, Kaas and Teschner arrived from the Market District. They noted the boy in the bed and the bloody rags with some surprise, and Efran told them how the undertaker was called to premature duty. As Neale passed around the ales and bowls of stew, Efran asked, "What did you see at the Market?"

Kaas grunted, "A bunch of idiots."

Teschner snorted, "That just about sums it up, Captain. There were four men with nets scrambling around trying to catch the monkeys. They did net—how many?" he asked Kaas, who shrugged with a mouthful of stew. Teschner answered himself, "Six or eight, perhaps, while a far greater number just did more damage getting away." Shaking his head, Teschner started eating.

Wiping his mouth with one of the towels, Efran looked over to the bed where the boy lay sleeping. "All right, then. We've looked in on Bickerstaffe, the Market District, the nobles' district, Plumtree, and—picked up an orphan for the Abbey. I think we're done here; I want to get Mattias out to Featheringham to recuperate before we try to bring him to the Lands. The only problem is, how to carry him," Efran mused.

Mattias blearily opened his eyes to look over. "Wotton and his crew goes off work for an hour at midday; leaves poor Qui hitched to the cart."

Efran and his men eyed each other, then all of them stood at once. Efran handed his pouch to Teschner with, "Pay our bill, and pay for four pillows and the two heavy blankets. Neale, start gathering all our things up here, including the pillows and blankets. Kaas, come down to the stables; you and I'll get the horses geared up."

On his way out, Efran paused over the bed to tell Mattias, "We'll be right back." He leaned down to take a fresh shirt out of his pack and toss it on the boy. "Can you get that on?"

"Yes, Cap'n," Mattias said agreeably. He lifted up to pull on the too-large but clean shirt over his head.

Within minutes, the men and their horses were ready to leave. As instructed, Neale came out carrying Mattias.

Efran, on Kraken, said, “Hand him up here to me; I’ll carry him over to Plumptree so we can see what’s there.”

“Yes, Captain.” Neale lifted the boy while Efran bent to slide one arm under his back and the other arm under his knees. He held him like that while nudging Kraken with his legs. Neale mounted and the four of them set out at a walk. The pillows and blankets had been tied behind the saddles on top of the men’s packs. When they passed the city information board, Kaas leaned over rip off the latest Public Notice. As so many of these notices seemed to disappear, two had been posted. So Kaas took the second, as well.

Approaching the front of Plumptree, they looked over to the side where the construction area appeared to be abandoned but for the donkey attempting to graze around the cart harness. Teschner was shaking his head. “Guards at the doors are going to question our making off with the cart.”

From Efran’s arms, Mattias pointed: “Go on down this street; there’s a dirt road that leads right to the work.” The men followed these directions to amble up the dirt road out of sight of the door guards and anyone else, at this time. Only the donkey raised her head as Mattias said, “Hey, Qui. I’m thinking they have better fodder for you at this Featheringham.”

“Kaas,” Efran instructed. Kaas dismounted to hop up into the driver’s seat of the empty cart and tap the reins on the donkey’s back.

She started toward Mattias, and Efran said, “Let’s get down the road into those trees before we switch out. Teschner, put five royals there on top of the tool bin”—to pay for the cart and the donkey. Teschner slipped off with the pouch to do this, then quickly remounted.

Warily glancing around, they turned out of the construction area onto the road, walking far enough to get out of sight of Plumptree. Although several people noticed the odd group, no one questioned them. At Efran’s nod, Kaas pulled the cart to the side of the road, then climbed down from the seat, pretending to check a wheel until the road was clear. Then the group pulled in among the trees.

Holding Mattias, who watched attentively, Efran waited while Kaas, Teschner and Neale untied the blankets and pillows from the horses to pack them in the cart. It was a little cooler today than it had been yesterday. With the pillows padding the cart bed, Teschner took Mattias from Efran to place him in the cart and tuck the blankets in tightly over him. “Oh, I like this,” Mattias breathed.

Scanning the road beyond the trees, Efran said, “Teschner, tie your horse to the cart and drive. Let’s see if Qui will trot for us.”

“Yes, Captain,” Teschner said.

When they were ready, Efran waited for the road to clear both ways before gesturing ahead. They walked down this road which led to the coastal highway north, going east. With traffic coming both ways, however, Efran looked down to tell Mattias, “You’re dead.”

“Right,” he breathed, covering his face with one blanket before placing his arms at his sides under both blankets. Shortly, he went to sleep. Due to the jostling, he soon woke again. But riders and carriages that passed them gave them wide berth.

Once on the highway, they were still unable to go faster than a trot, to accommodate Qui pulling the cart. Given this pace, Efran said, “Kaas, read us the Public Notice.”

“Yes, Cap’n.” Kaas pulled out one of them to read it from astride his horse:

“To all concerned citizens of Crescent Hollow:

“Your esteemed Councilors have heard your complaints about the primate, ah, in-festation in the Market District and are taking strong measures to address it. First, the ineffective, er, Bor-gnino has been retired and we are endeavoring to have the temporary ruler responsible for this outrage brought back to give an accounting for it—”

“Rondi,” Efran said.

“No doubt,” Neale agreed.

Kaas cleared his throat in umbrage at the interruption, then continued reading, “Nonetheless, as you are more concerned about recti-rectifying the problem rather than assigning blame, we have in-initiated a number of corrective measures, including--’ blah blah blah,” Kaas improvised, as he was stumbling over the long words and elaborate script, which he had to read while trotting.

Teschner, driving beside him, raised a hand. “Here, we’re bouncing less.” Kaas grumbled, but handed the notice down to him.

Teschner scanned it, then said, “Yeah, lots of lines describing netting and setting traps, which we saw how well all that works. Oh, and it says, ‘We have also set up a special board of Councilors to address your complaints and suggestions. Therefore, all further such must be directed in writing to the Board of Primate Control at Plumtree.’” That elicited laughter, and Teschner paused to read on silently, occasionally glancing up at Qui.

Then he said, “Oh, here’s something else: ‘As regards a replacement for Borgnino, we, your Councilors, are carefully evaluating candidates, but as of this time, are assuming the duties of Surchatain as a body.’”

“Did they sign it?” Efran asked.

Teschner looked past a few more paragraphs of blather, then said, “Yes! They are Grand Councilor Squitieri and Lord Councilors Lutkin, Bodycomb, Fothergill, Allnutt, Malfatto, and—” he paused in surprise, then looked up to add, “Lords Quackenbush and Bickerstaffe.”

There was astonished laughter in response, then Neale said, “Wait—isn’t Squitieri the one who can’t read?”

They all paused to think about this, then Efran said, “I believe you’re right. And by coincidence, there are our old friends Quackenbush and Bickerstaffe.”

Kaas asked, “But the ‘Bickerstaffe’ you saw in room twelve—Rawlins—was just a stand-in, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, certainly,” Efran said. “Anyway, don’t you have another notice, Kaas? Good, hold that for Commander Wendt; Teschner can give his copy to Commander Barr.” The men acknowledged this, and Mattias listened quietly to everything.

Given this entertainment and the speculations derived from it, the two hours required to reach Featheringham at a trot passed quickly. When the party arrived in the early afternoon, the soldiers on duty hailed the undertaker, his helpers and his not-quite-deceased.

Chapter 6

While a couple of soldiers unloaded Mattias into the Featheringham infirmary (which was located in the large, luxurious house Lady Nierling had built for herself), Teschner gave Barr his Public Notice and Efran gave him a rundown about the boy and everything they had seen in Crescent Hollow. “Mattias can tell you more; we’re going to leave him here to heal up while we ride on to the Lands today.”

“Yes, Captain,” Barr said, perusing the notice in amusement.

Before leaving, Efran glanced over at Qui being taken to the stables for hay and water, then he went into the infirmary to check on Mattias, lying on a proper bed with one of the inn’s pillows under his head. Seeing a spot of blood on his shirt, Efran said apprehensively, “The ride made you start bleeding again.”

“Just a little, Cap’n,” Mattias said in reassurance.

“All right.” Turning to the soldier on duty at the infirmary, Holroyd, Efran said, “I want daily updates on him.”

“Yes, Captain,” Holroyd said.

“Good.” Efran paused as though reluctant to leave, then patted the boy’s shoulder and walked on out. Mattias turned his eyes around the luxurious room, plastered and painted white, with decorations on the walls, and a large window overlooking a flower garden. Seeing all this, he exhaled at his amazing luck to get picked up by the undertaker.

It was midafternoon before Efran’s party rode away from Featheringham, which meant that they would arrive at the Lands late at night. But he didn’t want to wait.

While they were on the road, Minka decided to pay a visit to the chapel. She was waiting at the courtyard gates for her bodyguards when someone behind her said, “Dihle at your service. You look lovely today, Lady Minka.”

Startled, she turned to see a soldier she did not know bowing to her. He had—not quite a lisp, but an unfamiliar accent. One of the gate guards, Lund, hissed, “You haven’t been summoned and you don’t speak to her, stupid.”

“Oh.” Dihle raised a brow at the Polonti, then walked off—fortunately, before her bodyguards, who were approaching with horses, heard him. She greeted Martyn and Youshock in relief, and they rode down the new switchback at an amiable walk.

Arriving at the chapel, Minka fell on Hartshough when he answered the door. “Oh, Hartshough, I do want a bracer or an hors d’oeuvre, but I couldn’t even look at it until Efran can tell us what’s in it.”

“That is quite all right, Lady Minka; I must experiment with new recipes, first,” he said, patting her in consolation.

During this greeting, Youshock nudged Martyn, nodding toward an elegant, deep purple carriage sitting off to the side. Youshock whispered, “You won’t believe where I’ve seen that carriage before.” Martyn looked at him sharply, so they began a whispered conversation as they entered the chapel behind Lady Minka.

She exhaled to Hartshough, “Good, I’m glad you’re experimenting. Is Auntie . . . ?” She hesitated upon hearing voices in the seating area—specifically, Marguerite’s and that of another woman. But she could not see them, nor they her, because of the slender faerie trees scattered around the hall. While they were not burgeoning, they were in leaf.

As Hartshough turned toward the sitting area to bow, Minka heard her auntie say, “Minka’s here? Yes, of course, bring her in.”

So Hartshough bowed to Minka, extending a hand toward the seating. “If you will, Lady Minka.”

Cautiously, Minka entered the view of the women, and felt immediately self-conscious. She was wearing one of her linen riding dresses, now showing the wear of being a favorite, and her hair was awkwardly growing out from a severe cut and straightening—the lower half practically white, while the roots were brown. And she didn’t have a flat cap to hide it anymore.

Worse, Marguerite was wearing a nice dress, and her visitor was beautifully dressed. Marguerite was sitting in an armchair while her visitor sat on the end of the divan closest to her. Both looked over as Minka sat warily in the second chair. Her bodyguards positioned themselves unobtrusively about ten feet away from the grouping.

Marguerite said, “Lady Minka, this is Lady Eneide, formerly of Westford. She, ah, claims to have a letter from Efran promising to marry her.”

Minka turned appraising eyes to the lady, who was certainly older than Efran and not beautiful. When Minka said nothing, the woman asked, “You’re his current wife?”

Efran’s “current wife” did not answer, so Marguerite told Lady Eneide, “Minka is Efran’s one and only wife, and Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

“Oh, Lady Sovereign,” the woman said. “Then I suppose you should see this.” She extended a folded paper which Minka took. It was dated September 3rd, 8148.

At first glance, the handwriting looked like Efran’s, somewhat. It did resemble how he wrote when he was tired or stressed. He would have been 22, and a Captain by that time. Since it was purportedly written seven and a half years ago, the writing was faded, and uniformly so. It was splotched here and there, but not difficult to read. And it said,

“3 Sept of the year 8148

“To ~~M~~ Eneide:

“Ever grateful for your kindness to save me, I do swear to marry you when you are free of the beast you serve now.

“I am faithful, can you be
“Captain Efran”

Minka silently studied the letter. It sounded like Efran, in the grammar, the terseness and the acknowledgment of

something great done for him. But there was something more, something that resonated in the faulty punctuation of the closing.

Handing the letter back to her, Minka said, "I have no knowledge of this. Efran is not here now."

The woman raised thin, superior brows at her. "And when will he be back?"

"I don't know. But I am sure he will answer it when he returns. Our notary Lord Ryal must see it," Minka said.

"Excellent idea. Take me to your notary," Eneide said, standing.

Minka stood, and her bodyguards Martyn and Youshock immediately came to her side. Going to the doors, she told one of the guards, Graeme, "Send to the fortress to ask DeWitt to come down to Ryal's, please."

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said, whistling to a man nearby. Minka, with her bodyguards, took a shortcut through the chapel yard and Ryal's yard to quickly arrive on his doorstep. Lady Eneide, in her cumbersome dress, followed through the grass with gritted teeth.

Entering the shop, Minka stood in line behind two customers. Martyn and Youshock placed themselves on either side of the door, opening it as the first customer left, and holding it open for Eneide to enter. Looking around in dissatisfaction, she eventually chose to sit in a chair against the wall while the notary dispatched his last customer. Giardi, beside him, was watching Minka and the unknown woman alertly.

When the last customer left, Ryal said, "Hello, Minka. What can I do for you?" He also knew that something was amiss.

She smiled at him. "Hello, Ryal, Giardi. This is Lady Eneide. She has a letter that she says is from Efran, in which he promises to marry her."

He and Giardi looked quickly at the woman, who rose from the chair. Soames, at work in the back room, raised his head. Ryal said, "I see. Lady Eneide, will you come to the back room so that I may take your statement?"

"Yes," she said. So Soames quickly cleared his transcription work off the table to set up his note-taking equipment at the small amanuensis table.

While Giardi stood at the door to watch, Ryal, Eneide, and Minka entered the back room, her bodyguards with her. Ryal and Eneide sat at the table, but Minka stood at the wall. Ryal asked, "May I interview you, Minka?"

"You can, but I know nothing about it, Ryal," she said calmly.

"Very well, then I shall ask the one who knows," he said, turning back to the lady. As an afterthought, he asked Minka, "Efran is in Crescent Hollow?" She nodded, so, after checking to see that Soames was ready to take notes, Ryal turned once again to the complainant. "Lady Eneide, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this interview?"

"Yes," she said. At this time, Marguerite entered the shop quietly. At the tinkling bell, Giardi looked over. Marguerite smiled guiltily, as she hadn't been invited, but Giardi nodded to the other side of the door. So Marguerite stood just outside the back room to listen, unseen.

"Very well. May I see this letter?" Ryal was asking Eneide. She handed it to him. He looked it over briefly, then

extended it to Soames with, “Copy that, please.” Nodding, Soames took it to copy the text while Eneide watched suspiciously.

When he had returned the letter to her, Ryal asked, “Please tell me the circumstances surrounding this letter, Lady Eneide.”

As she opened her mouth, the doorbell tinkled. Giardi turned to gesture, and DeWitt came to the door with a mildly perturbed air. “Sorry for the delay. We have a minor crisis on our hands because no one can find Hosmer, and he’s needed.” Hosmer was the primary garderobe cleaner in the fortress. DeWitt glanced at Marguerite beside the doorway, and she winced, putting a finger to her lips.

Minka told Eneide, “Show Administrator DeWitt the letter, please.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Eneide said, extending the letter to DeWitt as he entered the room.

He read it at a glance, then looked up sharply. Returning the letter to her, he hissed at a soldier, “Get Estes down here.” Then he stood against the wall with Minka to watch.

Ryal resumed, “Now, the circumstances which prompted the letter, Lady Eneide?”

“Yes,” she said. “There was some kind of battle in the marshes behind our house—”

“Where was this house, Lady Eneide?” Ryal asked.

“In northeast Westford, not far from Willowring Lake. There is a marshy area of continually damp ground there. As I said, there was some kind of hasty battle there—I watched from the back of the house as the young man, the Polonti, led his men into the marshes against some—ruffians, I don’t know, who had taken shelter there.

“The men in blue chased them back out again, but the young leader didn’t come out with them. I went out to look, because I know how people can get trapped back there—the family next to us lost a son who drowned in the marshes there.

“So I went to look, and found him unconscious, sinking in the mire. I pulled him out, which was very difficult, as he was heavy, and you surely know how fierce the pull of the bogs are. He came to a bit while I was pulling, and braced himself on the edge to get a knee up, so then I could pull him all the way out. Then I helped him to my house, and made him take off his clothes, down to his breeches, so that I could wash them.

“He sat at my table, and I gave him ale, and part of the roast I was to serve my husband. He asked me what happened, and I told him that I had saved his life, and he said, ‘thank you.’ We talked for a bit, and I told him that if he were truly grateful, he would promise to marry me after I divorced that beast of a husband, and he said yes, he would. So I presented him with the paper and quill, and he wrote that out, all of his own. Then he asked for his clothes, though they were still wet, and put them on. As he started to leave, carrying his boots—which I wouldn’t let him wear in the house—I reminded him of his promise, and he said, yes, he would remember.

“Well, the long and the short of it is, the beast is dead. When we couldn’t afford to live in Westford anymore because of his drinking, we moved to Guerry, and he died of a drunken fall coming back to our house there. I had heard about the Polonti soldier that came here, and found it’s him, Efran, so I’ve come to claim the promise he made to me,” she finished.

The whole shop was silent for a few minutes. Then Ryal said, “I’m afraid your claim is nonenforceable, Lady

Eneide. His promise was certainly made under duress, and it's quite possible he had no idea what he was saying, having almost suffocated in the bog."

"Oh, really," she said flatly. "According to the Law of Roman, a promise made upon the saving of a life is binding for the lifetime of the one saved."

There was another silence, then Ryal said, "Soames, fetch the book of the Law, please." The young scribe got up to do that, then brought him the great book opened to the proper section. While Ryal was reading it, the doorbell tinkled, and Estes came in for DeWitt to whisper to him.

Ryal then said, "I see that you've quoted it almost exactly, Lady Eneide. But the fact remains that he cannot be held to a promise made when he was incapacitated by a near-drowning."

"That is your opinion, but I have another that overrides it," she said, withdrawing another parchment from the pouch at her side. "Before coming to you, I went to the notary of Westford, Lord Shaffer. This is his opinion that Efran is to be bound to his promise." And she spread the signed and sealed document before him.

After reading it, he raised up and said, "This opinion is contingent upon Efran's remembrance of making the promise after his near-drowning."

"Then ask him," she challenged.

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Chapter 7

"When Efran returns, we certainly shall ask him," Ryal said. Turning, he asked DeWitt, "Administrator, may we put Lady Eneide up at The Lands' Best Inn while we wait for Efran?"

DeWitt was agreeing when she said, "I have already secured a suite there, but you may pick up my tab."

As she rose, DeWitt said, "Lady Eneide, please allow us to keep the letter to show Efran the moment he arrives. You already have many witnesses as to the state and content of the letter."

Raising her brows, she said, "Why not?" And she handed him the letter before sweeping out of the shop.

After she had safely left, DeWitt turned to flail his arms. "This is insane! It's tantamount to a forced confession. Can you deny the accusation, Minka?" He was referring to the recently discovered addendum to the Law of Roman which gave the Lady Sovereign of the Lands the power to refuse spurious accusations made against the Lord Sovereign.

She shook her head. "I know nothing about it. Efran never said anything of it."

DeWitt then turned to Estes. "You were in his regiment. Do you remember anything about it?"

"The battle against brigands in the marshes? It was—when?" Estes asked, searching.

“September of ’48,” DeWitt said, looking at the letter. “Here’s what he wrote.”

Estes took the letter to look at it. “He sounds half conscious here. Forty-eight,” he mused, looking off. “Oh, yes. It was one of those hit and run bands that preyed on the outlying clusters around Westford. Yes, Efran had a handful of us out patrolling; we saw them coming off a hit and chased them. When they saw us coming after them, they tried to deflect us into the bog. Efran was the first to hit it, so called out a warning. The rest of us backed off to catch the band coming back out. We had to chase after them, but killed at least half of them. We didn’t notice Efran gone until he joined us walking back to the barracks all wet. We didn’t think anything of that, either, since he’d found the bog first. He never said anything about it.”

They looked blankly at each other, then DeWitt asked Minka, “She came to you?”

“No, she was talking to Auntie when I came to visit her,” Minka said.

“Why—?” DeWitt began, then answered himself, “She expected to find the Commander. All right, I’m going to talk to him.” As he left, Marguerite went home, intending to talk to Wendt later.

Estes put a hand at Minka’s back. “Where’s your horse?”

She looked off as though vaguely searching, and Youshock offered, “If I remember right, they’re back at the chapel, Lady Minka.”

“Oh. You’re right,” she said.

“I’ll bring my horse over and we’ll ride up to the courtyard together,” Estes said.

“Yes, thank you,” she said.

This they did. Once up hilltop, her bodyguards were officially off duty, so Youshock told his partner for the day, “I’m going to Captain Chee to ask for a few days off.”

“Why?” Martyn asked.

“To go nose around my hometown of Guerry,” Youshock said.

Inhaling in comprehension, Martyn said, “I’d like to come along.”

Youshock smiled. “It’s nice little town; good people who’ll talk freely to one of their own.”

“I have to check in with Captain Rigdon, then’ll meet you at the barracks,” Martyn said. With that agreed, they parted.

After looking in on the children, Minka got a horse and two more bodyguards (since Youshock and Martyn were suddenly unavailable) to go visit Auntie again. Once Minka had thoroughly unburdened herself on her about this supposed promise, she returned hilltop, and Marguerite went to see Madgwick.

Late that evening, Minka was still awake enough to hear someone at the door to the corridor. She turned her head on the pillow as the door slowly opened. Efran came into the bedroom to quietly shuck off his undertaker coat by the light of the bedside candle. Seeing her eyes fixed on him, he whispered, “Sorry to wake you.” She

raised her arms to him. Bracing a knee on the bed, he leaned over to gather her up. “I need to bathe,” he smiled into her lips.

“In a minute,” she said, pulling him down.

A half hour later, they went up to the third-floor room with the waterfall, and stayed there the rest of the night.

When neither the Captain nor Lady Minka was found in their quarters the following morning, someone thought to go check the third-floor room that the Captain favored for the waterfall. In his breeches, he answered Goss’ knock on the door to murmur sleepily, “Yes, I’ll be right down—to the workroom? All right, I—” He exhaled, looking back toward the bedroom. “I think I have to bring Minka something to put on—”

But she appeared beside him, wearing a sumptuous lounging robe. “I’m more dressed than you are.”

“Haven’t I got my pants up here, at least?” he asked hopefully.

“You’re lucky I made you put those on,” she said, casting a glance at his underwear.

“All right. You—walk in front of me,” he told her.

Meanwhile, Goss was fighting to keep a straight face. “I’ll go down before you both, Cap’n.”

“Right,” Efran said, and they proceeded down to dress before coming back up to the workroom.

When Efran entered with Minka, he was surprised to see not only Estes and DeWitt, but Ryal, Soames, Commander Wendt and Gabriel seated around the table. “What is all this?” he muttered.

Gabriel stood to go over to a side table which had been loaded with breakfast dishes—ham, eggs, peach compote, rolls with butter, mild ale and unfermented grape juice. “What would you like, Captain? Lady Minka?”

“Thank you, Gabriel; we’ll get it,” Efran said, as Minka had already begun serving her own plate. He did the same, bringing his plate and ale to the long table to look at his administrators suspiciously. To confirm his forebodings of a beatdown, the faerie tree in the middle of the table had skinned up considerably.

As Efran sat beside Minka, who was already eating, DeWitt passed The Letter to him. “Do you recognize this, Efran?”

But Ryal immediately interjected, “Efran, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?”

Efran’s head shot up. “This is a hearing?” he asked in alarm. “Yes, of course, I do, Ryal.” Before being distracted by evidence against him, he made sure to take a few bites, then a few more bites as he took up the sparse writing to look at it.

He stopped chewing to concentrate on the letter, brows drawn down. Several people in the room were silently willing him to say, *No, I don’t recognize it*. But he lowered the paper, looking into the past, then sat back, breathing, “Yes, that was—”

He looked at the date again. “Yes, I remember that. But I don’t remember—” He brought up the letter to read, “Eneide. I don’t remember what she looks like, but, yes.” He turned to Estes to say, “You remember the butchers

of Greenhalgh? Nasty bunch that killed for no reason when they robbed. We caught up with them on the southwest shore of Willowring Lake, and your stupid young captain didn't know about the bogs there. I got caught in one, and couldn't get out. I had sunk up to my knees when Eneide brought a farmhand out with rope."

Efran started laughing here while those around the table watched, unsmiling. "So this farmhand tosses the loop of the rope to me, and I raised my hand to catch it, but it landed around my arm and my neck, and when he started pulling it taut, it started choking me. I'd've been hanged in the bog if my arm weren't caught as well. Meanwhile, I was still sinking." He was laughing while relating this whole fiasco. Soames was writing fiercely.

Drawing a breath, Efran said, "I fell face down in the mud. I must've been still conscious, though, because I could turn my face up. But I was sinking faster. The farmhand ran off, I think, because, then, Eneide waded over to grab my arm and pull. Wait, that was after—after I found the branch. Who threw the branch in? She must have tossed it to me. I was able to jam it down into the mud to get a hand on firm ground, and she grabbed my arm to pull. I crawled out, then, and shucked off the rope into the bog." He shrugged, looking at Minka, who was studying him.

Ryal asked, "What then, Efran?"

"Oh, you want to know how the letter came to be," Efran said, regarding it again. "It's a wonder I could write at all; my arm was numb. Anyway, yes—she led me to her house, but wouldn't let me come in with all the mud on my clothes, so I had to strip at her back door for her to put them in the wash barrel. Then she took me inside to give me something to eat, I think. I was still pretty woozy. Ah, she was talking at me the whole time, and then she said, 'I saved your life, so you need to marry me when I can get rid of this beast I'm married to.' And I said, 'Sure. I'll marry you.' She said, 'You have to write it down in a letter.' So I did."

"Why?" DeWitt exploded. "Why would you agree to marry her?"

Efran looked at him in mild surprise. "Because she did save my life, both from the bog and the farmhand." Looking at their grim faces, he asked, "Has she come back demanding to marry me?" He looked amused.

Ryal said, "Yes, Efran, and there is such a stipulation in Roman's Law that a promise made due to a life saved is binding. Lord Shaffer has already ruled that you're bound to follow through with that promise if you admit that you made it."

Again Efran laughed. "Yes, I made it, and I was vaguely aware that I was promising to marry her for saving my life."

"Vaguely," DeWitt repeated to Ryal. "He had been not only caught in the bog, but half strangled. He can't be bound to such a rash promise."

Ryal waved almost helplessly. "Shaffer has already ruled that if he remembers promising—"

"Shaffer isn't our notary!" DeWitt shouted. "You are, Lord Ryal, and you're entitled to dissent to save the office of the Lord Sovereign!" At this point, Estes, Wendt, Gabriel, Soames and Minka were just listening.

"It doesn't matter," Efran said, and he was not laughing as everyone looked at him. He turned to study Minka's large blue eyes and two-tone hair. "I'm not divorcing you for anything. If I have to choose between you and the lordship of the Abbey Lands, I'm done with it. The Lands has revolted against me twice now, but you've never left my side, not even when I was walked to the gallows," he told her. Her eyes started watering.

He turned to the man for whom he had the deepest respect. “Rule however you like, Ryal. If you rule I must abide by this stupid law, I’ll take Minka, Joshua, and the children we’ve legally adopted and leave. If something as inane as this can depose me, why should I stay?” he asked.

In the dense silence of the room, Ryal said, “The Law is not stupid; this interpretation of it is. I hereby rule that because you had been choked and were only vaguely aware of the promise you were making, you are not bound to throw over the responsibilities you carry as Lord Sovereign.”

“Thank you, Ryal,” Efran said, looking at Minka as she wiped her eyes.

Wendt observed, “Shaffer ruled without even hearing Efran’s testimony. How can that be valid?”

Gabriel added, “He was also the one who came predisposed to rule against Minka at her hearing. He’s got it in for us, for some reason.”

“True, Gabriel, and it’s not, Commander,” Ryal said. “You’re correct, Administrator. It’s not a conflict of interest for me to defend the Lands against a spurious application of the Law.”

DeWitt sighed, “I apologize for raising my voice to you, Lord Ryal. That was disrespectful.”

“Your passion was well-founded, Administrator, and in some cases, I need more of that myself,” Ryal said.

Efran said, “Thank you, Ryal, DeWitt.”

Estes asked, “What happens now, when two area notaries disagree on something so important?”

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Chapter 8

Ryal replied, “According to Continental Law, when two notaries issue conflicting judgments in the same case, they both agree to accept the decision of another judge.”

“Who would that be?” Gabriel asked.

“I will have to communicate with Shaffer to select someone,” Ryal said.

Estes observed, “Whoever Shaffer wants will rule in his favor.”

Gabriel said, “Anyone outside the Lands will rule in his favor. They’ve all been trying to take us down ever since the beginning.”

Soames was opening his mouth when Ryal paused thoughtfully. “Actually, there is a provision in the Law for just this scenario—The Rule of Divided Judgments. Each side selects five prominent citizens to hear the testimony, then all ten vote on the verdict. If either side can lure even one opponent to their case, that side wins. If the vote remains five to five, then the situation remains unresolved unless one side chooses to resolve it militarily.”

Having heard what he was thinking, Soames returned to his note-taking, but Efran was shaking his head. “I’ll leave before I subject the Lands to a battle on my behalf.” There was a grim silence, then he looked to Wendt. “Did—anyone report to you on our visit to Crescent Hollow, Commander?”

Wendt leaned back. “Yes, Efran. Kaas showed up at the barracks at first light this morning. That was a good job all the way around.”

Nodding slightly, Efran looked to DeWitt. “Did you get a report, and the Public Notice?”

DeWitt replied, “Yes, good save of the boy, Efran. How old is he?”

“I’d guess thirteen. Smart kid. I asked Commander Barr for daily reports on him,” Efran said, absently eyeing the faerie tree. “So are we done here?” he asked Ryal.

“As far as I’m concerned, yes. I appreciate your forthrightness, Efran,” Ryal said.

Efran smiled hazily. “That I didn’t lie about remembering? If it gets to the point where I have to do that, I’m finished anyway.” Looking back to Minka, he stood to extend his hand to her. She took it, and they left.

Those remaining in the workroom were quiet a moment, then Ryal said, “I’ll make it a priority to draw up my conclusions and offer Shaffer to pick five for a joint hearing. Giardi has passed the notary exam, so that will help my workload, but any more men that you can pay to study for a license would be appreciated, Administrator.”

“We’ll advertise that widely, Lord Ryal,” DeWitt said. “I only hope that, ah, Efran doesn’t decide it’s not worth the fight—”

“Efran’s not going anywhere,” Estes said stubbornly. “He may complain, but if you’ve ever seen him in battle, you know that he goes to the wall.”

“That’s true,” Wendt said quietly.

“I’ll get right on this, then,” Ryal said, standing. The others stood while Soames gathered his notes. Glancing at him, Ryal added, “If you would, Administrator, get me another copyist or two for Soames’ notes of today. He’s also licensed as a notary, but I’ve been exhausting him taking notes.” Soames shook out his writing hand wryly.

“Yes, Lord Ryal,” DeWitt said almost meekly. And they all went to their separate duties.

At this time, Efran and Minka had just come out to the back grounds. The garden crews were preparing beds and planting, even in late February, but the children (including Joshua and Nakam) were not out of class yet. So Efran led her to the apple orchard.

“They’re budding already,” he noted, fingering a twig. “It was such a shock to see them untended beyond the fence, rotting away”—in his last Time jump. “It was almost as bad as seeing—” He cut himself short to not call up any painful memories for her.

“Efran,” she murmured, drawing him toward her. “We can’t leave the Lands. This is the children’s home, and security; it’s where they sleep and eat, and where their friends are. What will Alcmund and Calix do without you and Toby? Or Chorro without you and Isreal? And Ella? Rondi?”

He exhaled, looking over the Sea. “Then I’ll just be a floor sweeper,” he offered.

“Until marauders come over the gates again, and you ride down to meet them,” she said. He shrugged slightly. She persisted: “This inanity is not going to take you down, and you know it.”

He dropped his head, gritting his teeth. “It’s just so—relentless.”

“That’s just so you don’t get bored,” she tossed off.

“You optimists are going to be the death of me,” he groaned, enclosing her in his arms.

Today the Lands were accommodating a large number of visitors, from all over. With the influx of traffic, the wall gate guards were unable to search vehicles as thoroughly as they needed to, in order to find stowaways or contraband. So one carriage of visitors from Crescent Hollow passed through the open gates in between merchants on either side who were submitting to checks of their cargo.

The bright green carriage ambled down Main and east on Chapel Road to the impressive entrance of The Lands’ Best Inn. The footman climbed down to lower the step for the visiting foursome to debark, then he assisted the driver in guiding the carriage to the stableyard. When the horses had been tended and the carriage secured, the driver and footman departed for the inn’s bar. In the ensuing quiet, the pair of monkeys who had stowed away in the comfortable storage space behind the driver’s seat emerged, yawning, to climb down and explore the stalls.

Not finding much of interest there, they traversed various yards until crawling through a hole in the fence surrounding the inn’s kitchen gardens. And it was paradise.

Over the next several days, Ryal, Soames and DeWitt dogged Westford’s notary Shaffer to arrange a hearing on The Letter according to the Rule of Divided Judgments. The Landers were anxious to clear up any questions regarding Efran’s authority. Shaffer was at first disinclined to cooperate, as he was offended by Ryal’s contrary judgment as well as his contention that Shaffer was negligent in issuing a ruling without bothering to interview the defendant.

When Shaffer remained indifferent to all their efforts, DeWitt unleashed the fiercest mover of men ever known: the nagging woman. He told Eneide that they wished to rule on her claim immediately, but the Westford notary was dragging his feet. So Eneide got in her carriage and rode to Westford, where she camped on Shaffer’s doorstep at night and haunted his shop during the day.

By March 2nd, Shaffer buckled like a waterlogged tent, and the hearing was set for March 4th. During these intervening days, Youshock and Martyn returned from Guerry to talk to Commander Wendt, and then left again. Also during these days, the head gardener of The Lands’ Best Inn discerned the vandals in his domain. In response, he let his bulldogs loose in the gardens at night, which of course terrified the monkeys. Unable to forage because of the workers during the day and the dogs at night, the monkeys huddled, looking for a better option.

Because Westford was still in the throes of rebuilding, Ryal and Shaffer jointly decided, with Commander Wendt’s permission, to hold the hearing in the chapel hall. It was elegant and comfortable but also private. The plaintiff and defendant would sit on the platform to answer questions from the members of the jury seated in comfortable chairs before them. Each chair was afforded its own companion writing table, equipped with paper, quill and ink. Each of the ten jurors would also be given complete copies of Eneide’s and Efran’s testimony. From their own table to the side, Ryal and Shaffer would jointly monitor the proceedings, with Viglian and

Soames taking notes. (Shaffer was offered a place for his own scribe, which remained empty throughout the proceedings.)

At nine of the day candle on March 4th, the members of the jury filed into the hall. From Westford were the banker Rensselaer, the tax assessor Arcuri, the builder Handslip, the clothier Agostini, and the wine merchant DeHooges (all men). Representing the Lands were the construction supervisor Lemmerz, the shopkeeper Schmolck (whose shop no longer shifted), the eatery owner Firmin, the miller Kane, and Delano's wife Madgwick. She was the only woman on the jury. Coincidentally, Efran wanted her there.

Behind the jury in the audience were seats for a few observers: Minka, Marguerite, Captains Towner and Rigdon from the Lands, and Lords Baroffio, McElfresh, and Colquhoun from Westford. Others, such as DeWitt, Estes, Wendt, Gabriel, and Abbey army personnel were allowed to slip in and out quietly as their duties permitted. Justinian and Eryk watched from the loft, as usual, as the acoustics in the hall were such that everything said on or near the platform was audible clear to the second floor.

While the attendees were milling, Lord Baroffio said, "Has anyone in the Lands here seen my layabout footman Heuron?" When no one replied immediately, he added, "I'm offering a reward for the scoundrel."

At that time, Ryal mounted the steps to the dais to request, "Everyone be seated, please." When Shaffer, the jurors, and the observers had taken their seats, Eneide and Efran walked up the aisle to their stools on the platform—the traditional seating for witnesses at a trial. Eneide absolutely refused to sit for hours on a stool, so was allowed an upholstered armchair. Efran, in his dress uniform of undyed linen edged in gold, chose the stool. He had intended to wear his regular work clothes today, but Minka overruled him.

When all were seated, Ryal stood between the plaintiff and defendant facing the jury. He said, "Members of the jury, Lord Shaffer and I thank you for volunteering your time today to settle this question." He paused to nod to Shaffer at the judges' table, then continued, "First, you all should have before you the testimony under oath of both parties. Would anyone like any of this read aloud? Or does anyone need time to read it?"

He paused to scan the jury, but the only response was the shaking of a few heads. "Very good," Ryal said. "Now, I will sit over here to begin questioning the plaintiff. Any of you may ask questions at any time during the hearing. Are our scribes set then?" he asked, looking to where Viglian and Soames raised their quills.

Returning to his seat beside Shaffer at the table, Ryal said, "We will begin by administering oaths. Lord Efran and Lady Eneide, do you swear on your souls to speak the truth in this hearing?"

Both answered in the affirmative, so Ryal said, "Thank you. Lady Eneide, I note that in Captain Efran's letter, you took special pains to instruct him to mention your 'beast' of a husband. May I ask why you referred to him that way?"

"Because that's what he was, a beast," she snapped. "He drank and beat me and spent everything we had on ale."

"And where is he now?" Ryal asked.

"Dead," she said crisply. "He stumbled coming home one night and hit his head on a rock."

"I see. And when did that happen?" Ryal asked.

She looked off. "About—a week ago? The day before I came to the Lands looking for Efran."

“So—he died February twenty-fifth?” Ryal asked.

“That must be it,” she said.

“What was his name?” Ryal asked.

“Falco,” she said.

“And, do you have a death certificate?” Ryal asked.

“A death certificate? In a small town? Good heavens, everyone knew,” she scowled.

“Who interred him?” Ryal asked.

She looked off, uncomprehending. “What do you mean?”

“Who buried him, madam, and where?” Ryal asked.

She wrinkled her nose. “Buried? Why would I have him buried? They hauled him off to the dump.”

A light gasp rose from the Abbey Lands’ side of the jury. Collecting himself, Ryal moved on. “Did you have children?”

“No,” she said firmly.

“Did he have any other relatives?” Ryal asked.

“None that would claim him,” she said.

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Chapter 9

Ryal continued examining Eneide: “May I ask, as your husband was so abusive, why you did not divorce him or simply leave?”

“I had no way to support myself!” she said angrily.

“I see,” Ryal exhaled. Choosing to pass over the question of how she acquired her elegant dress and carriage, he said, “So, let us move on to September the third of eighty-one forty-eight. Your testimony as to witnessing the Captain stumble into the bog is quite clear. But I am curious as to why you did not mention the man with the rope.”

“What man with the rope?” she asked. Efran, lips parted slightly, turned minimally to look at her.

“Captain Efran’s statement relates that a man, apparently a farmhand, came running up beside you to throw him a rope,” Ryal said, flipping through pages of testimony.

“There was no man with a rope,” she said scornfully.

“Strange. Captain Efran seemed quite clear about that. Efran, are you sure about the man with the rope?” Ryal asked, brows knotted.

“Yes, Lord Ryal,” Efran said, almost smiling.

There was a bit of rustling in the back of the hall, and several audience members turned to see Martyn walking to the front. Ryal bent for Martyn to whisper in his ear, then Ryal looked up to nod. As Martyn walked away again, Ryal said, “We are going to deviate from our questioning to entertain another witness. Bring him forward, please.”

Martyn advanced from the back of the hall again with his hand subtly at the side of a lean, grizzled man who looked sixty but was actually forty-five. Seeing him, Efran straightened with a slight breath of recognition, barely lifting a finger. Eneide began, “Oh, what are you doing here? He’s such a liar.”

“Bring him up to the platform, please,” Ryal said. As Martyn brought the man up the steps, Efran got up to loan him his stool.

Sitting, the man turned to nod at him. “Yep, that’s him, what landed in the bog,” he said of Efran.

Ryal said, “Allow me to put you under oath, sir. What is your name?”

“Melhuish, sir—”

“That’s not Melhuish, you liar; give him your real name!” Eneide snapped.

Standing beside the dais, Martyn waved to someone in the back, and Hartshough approached with another man. Bowing, Hartshough said, “Lord Ryal, I swear on my soul to tell the truth in this interview. This is Graveley, shopkeeper in Guerry. I have spoken with him several times in my quest for cheeses made there.”

Somewhat surprised, Ryal said, “Thank you, Hartshough.” The butler bowed again to step back, and Ryal said, “Graveley, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this interview?”

“Yes, sir, I sure do,” Graveley.

“And, what can you tell me, Graveley?” Ryal asked, slightly bemused.

“Yes sir, that there’s Melhuish; he’s been Eneide’s help for twenty years or more, both in Westford and Guerry,” Graveley said. “He told me about the Polonti soldier in blue what almost died in the bog behind their house.”

“I see. Thank you for your testimony; you may sit, sir. In a chair. Yes sir, with the other spectators,” Ryal instructed. Nodding, Graveley waved to the jury and audience members as though having just performed a musical number.

After he was seated, Ryal turned back to the third person on the dais. “Melhuish, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this interview?”

“Yes, sir, I do indeed,” Melhuish said. Eneide was silent.

“Thank you. So, Melhuish, you do recognize the officer on the dais behind you?” Ryal asked.

Melhuish made a point to turn around and study the smiling man who had given him his stool. Turning back to Ryal, he said, “Yes, sir, I do. That is the same man who was wearing a blue uniform when he jumped in the bog behind Mistress Eneide’s house, sir.”

“‘Jumped in’?” Ryal asked in surprise. “You mean it was deliberate?”

“No, sir, I believe he thought he was goin’ to land on solid ground in front of the man with the knife, sir, but he seemed to be unaware of the bog underneath his feet, and seemed downright surprised when he started sinking, sir,” Melhuish said. Behind him, Efran was laughing silently, nodding in concurrence. Melhuish added, “The other man, the bad ’un with the knife, danced out of the bog like he knew it right well.”

“I see. And what did you do, Melhuish?” Ryal asked, trying to ignore Efran’s amusement.

“Well sir, this happens often, whereas animals will range unawares over the bog, and so when Mistress Eneide calls, sir, I grab the rope and run,” Melhuish said.

“And did she call you that day, Melhuish?” Ryal asked.

“Yes sir, she saw him streaking toward it, and hollered at him, but he paid her no mind, so I knew it was the rope that was needed,” Melhuish said.

“How many animals have you pulled out of the bog with the rope, Melhuish?” Ryal asked a little dubiously.

“Oh, four or five, at least, sir. Problem with him, that day, sir, is that I allays have a square knot tied in that rope for catching the goats or sometimes the dogs that get into the bog, sir. The chickens is useless; if they flap into it, they’re goners, sir. But for goats and dogs, I have that rope with a square knot, so that it don’t choke ’em when I pull ’em out, sir.

“But that day, I’ll be danged if there weren’t a slip knot in that rope, sir, so that when I throwed it to him, and he didn’t catch it [Melhuish here glanced back at Efran in disappointment], but it go around his neck and arm, sir, I says, oh no, because it started closing up when it shouldn’t have, and I saw that there was a danged slip knot in that rope,” Melhuish disserted.

A number of his listeners were silently untangling the narrative when Ryal said, “That is, you left the rope knotted in such a way as to safely extract an animal, but when you grabbed it to extract the Captain, you found it tied in the wrong type of knot?”

“Yes, sir, that’s about the size of it,” Melhuish said.

“What did you observe, then, after you threw the rope that went around his neck and arm?” Ryal asked.

“Since it wasn’t working, I ran back to the shed to get another rope, and found the one with the square knot,” Melhuish said complacently. There were soft moans arising from the small audience over the fact that Efran had almost died because Melhuish had grabbed the wrong rope. At the same time, however, the years-old fiasco proved that Efran was telling the truth on this point and that Eneide had lied by omission in not mentioning it.

Ryal asked carefully, “And, what did you observe on your return to the bog, Melhuish?”

“At that time the soldier, the Captain, was hefting himself out onto the edge, sir, and didn’t need no rope,” Melhuish said.

Ryal asked, “What was Lady Eneide doing?”

“She was watching him, sir,” Melhuish said.

“She wasn’t pulling him out?” Ryal asked.

“Not that I saw, sir,” Melhuish replied.

“Very well,” Ryal said. “You may sit—”

“Ah, sir, do you mind if I ride along home? I got work to do,” Melhuish said.

Turning to Shaffer, Ryal asked, “Do you have any questions for him?” Shaffer waved, and several people in the audience experienced echoes from Minka’s hearing. Ryal told Melhuish, “You and Graveley may go.”

“Thank you, sir,” Melhuish said. Before stepping down from the platform, he turned to Efran to say, “Good luck there, Captain—I see you got a promotion.”

“In a way, thank you,” Efran said, reclaiming the stool, and Melhuish nodded as though vindicated.

As he and Graveley left the hall, Ryal asked the plaintiff, “Eneide, are there any corrections you wish to make in your testimony on the point of the rope?”

“It didn’t happen like that at all, but I’ll let it be,” she said as though making allowances just to get along.

Ryal paused, looking back to the other notary. “Lord Shaffer, do you care to interview her or Lord Efran on the means of his extraction from the bog?”

“No,” Shaffer said. The Landers in the audience looked at each other.

“Well, then. That brings us to the letter,” Ryal said. “Lord Efran, you testified that Eneide required you to remove your muddy clothes before entering her house. Is that correct, Eneide?”

“Why should I let him spread mud all through my house?” she demanded, outraged.

“But why was it necessary for him to come in at all?” Ryal asked.

She paused, open-mouthed, then said, “He . . . seemed to need attention.”

“Medical attention?” Ryal asked.

“No, just—a minute to pull himself together,” she said.

“So he was affected by his near-drowning, or lack of air,” Ryal suggested. She shrugged, refusing to comment, so Ryal asked, “Lord Efran, why did you go into her house rather than rejoin your men?”

Efran looked off, then shook his head. “I was in a fog, Lord Ryal.”

“I see,” Ryal said, glancing at the jury. “So, Eneide, you gave him refreshments?”

“Yes,” she said.

“What did you have to eat or drink, Lord Efran?” Ryal asked.

Again Efran shook his head. “I have no idea, Lord Ryal.”

“So at that time, Eneide, you pull out parchment and quill to demand that he write out a promise to marry you for saving his life,” Ryal said.

“Which he did willingly!” she insisted.

“Do you remember that, Lord Efran?” Ryal asked.

“Yes, Lord Ryal,” Efran said.

“Why did you write that, Efran?” Ryal asked.

“Because I did believe she saved my life,” Efran said.

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Chapter 10

At this admission, there was a stir among the jurors, then Madgwick raised her hand. “Lord Ryal, may I ask that Lord Efran read aloud the letter he wrote?”

“Yes, Madgwick,” Ryal said immediately. “Where is the original? Oh, you have it, Soames? Yes, please give it to Efran.”

Soames walked the letter to Efran on the stool. He took it to read, “Ah, ‘September the third of the year eighty-one forty-eight. To—Eneide. Ever grateful for your kindness to save me, I do swear to marry you when you are free of the beast you serve now. I am faithful, can you be. Captain Efran.’” He looked up to Ryal, and then Madgwick.

She said, “Efran, it looks as though you started writing a name beginning with ‘M,’ and then crossed it out. Why?”

Glancing down at the letter, he said, “Eneide corrected me.”

Madgwick persisted, “But there must have been a reason you began with an ‘M.’”

He shook his head vaguely. “I don’t know what it could have been. That was years before I met Minka.” A few people who glanced at her saw her eyes alight.

Madgwick continued, "Why did you close your letter with that line? Read it again, please."

Eneide objected, "What's the use of this?"

DeWitt muttered something at her, but Ryal said, "Do not interrupt, Eneide. Do as the juror asks, Lord Efran."

Efran said, "Yes. Ah, 'I am faithful, can you be.' I have no idea where that came from."

"Why would you ask Eneide to be faithful to you, then?" Madgwick persisted. He was shaking his head, but she said, "I believe you will remember if you think about it for just a minute, Efran."

Lowering his head in mild frustration, he looked down at the letter to repeat, "I am faithful, can you be."

Some Westfordian jurors were stirring in impatience while he sat thinking. After a moment, he raised up, looking off. "It's . . . a line in a song." Madgwick did not press him as he continued to think, scanning a vacant part of the hall. "A tavern song."

He fell silent again to allow the faint wisps of the song to return to him. Then he hesitantly sang, "I am bound in your beauty . . . I am wishing you to see . . . How I hope that you love me. I am faithful; can you be?"

Catching his breath, he looked down at Minka, who was smiling at him deviously. "You remember!" he joyfully accused her. She only smiled, but he went on, "I—I sang that to her, in the henhouse, that first day! She was afraid of me, and I didn't want her to be, so I just—sang her the first thing that popped into my head!" He was laughing at the absurdity of it.

Looking back down at the letter again, he told her, "This letter was to you! Somehow I knew that you were the one who would save my life, even though I didn't know you yet. This was my pledge to be faithful to you before you ever came into my life." Inevitably, his eyes were watering. Minka's eyes were wet, but she was not dropping tears; she sat secure in the strength of the ordained.

Wiping his face on his uniform sleeve, Efran waved the letter. "There it is. That's all I know, Ryal." He looked back at Madgwick in the belief that she knew, too, somehow.

Clearing his throat, Ryal said, "I believe I am through with my questions. Lord Shaffer, your turn."

Shaffer looked at Efran, then said, "A commendable performance, Lord Efran. I have no questions." Efran's face went blank. The Abbey jurors sat as stone.

After a moment, Ryal said, "The floor is open for questions from the jurors." The Landers continued to look straight ahead. The Westfordian builder Handslip shook his head and the banker Lord Rensselaer stifled a yawn.

In a gravelly voice, Ryal said, "I believe we shall have the jurors vote now. Soames, please hand out the prepared voting slips to all ten jurors."

Soames got up, slips in hand, and went down the long row of cushioned chairs to give a slip to each juror. As he did, Ryal said, "Our instructions for the voting are simple: your vote is anonymous; you will not put your name or any identifying mark on your slip. If you believe the plaintiff Eneide from Westford should prevail, you will write a 'W' on your slip. If you believe the defendant Efran from the Abbey Lands should prevail, you will write an 'A' on your slip. You will then fold your slips and pass them down the row to where Soames is standing in the

middle of your seats. He will collect the slips and bring them to Lord Shaffer and myself, where we will view them together. Whichever party collects a majority of the vote shall prevail.”

DeHooges of Westford then asked, “What happens if it’s a tie?”

Ryal almost sagged. “In the case of a tie, the representatives of Westford and the Abbey Lands may seek another hearing—”

Estes stood from the audience. “Lord Ryal, with all respect to you and Lord Shaffer, as Steward of the Abbey Lands, I present the united opinion of our leadership that we will not suffer another hearing on this absurd claim. As the Lord Sovereign declines to divorce the Lady Sovereign, we will end this matter decisively, today or in battle.”

When he sat, the question hung over the jurors like a pall: who, what or where in Westford would the Lands forces strike? There was no Surchatain, nor palace, nor army—only a loose-knit coalition of nobles trying to rebuild. Colquhoun leaned over to hiss at Baroffio, who shook his head. But a few of the Westfordian jurors were studying the placid Steward of the Lands. Efran’s face was blank. One thing was clear: he would not overrule his Steward.

Ryal drew a breath, then said, “Thank you for the clarification, Steward Estes. Jurors, please cast your votes now.” He returned to the table at which Shaffer still sat.

The ten bent to write briefly on their slips, which they folded and handed down to Soames as instructed. With the Abbey jurors’ slips in one hand and the Westford jurors’ slips in the other, Soames brought them to the table to deliver each handful to its respective notary.

Holding his handful closed, Shaffer looked over to watch Ryal open his slips one at a time. Shaffer sat back in mild disappointment as Ryal said, “The five Abbey jurors unanimously endorse Lord Efran’s position.”

Then he looked over as Shaffer began laying open the Westfordians’ slips. The first two appeared to vindicate Eneide’s testimony, but at the opening of the third, Ryal and Shaffer both looked to the jurors with a gasp. The Landers sat up as Shaffer was slapping open the remaining two slips.

Shaffer stood while Ryal anxiously collected all the ballots. He then looked up to say, “Lord Efran is vindicated by a vote of seven to three.”

Efran was exhaling an acknowledgment which was almost unheard for Shaffer’s shouting, “Who is voting against Westford’s interests?”

The Lands’ juror Lemmerz shouted back, “Who wants war, when your people are trying to rebuild? You won’t win fighting us, you’ll just invite ruin to your working class!”

Arcuri protested, “It doesn’t mean war, it’s simply—” but was interrupted by other voices.

During the turmoil, almost no one noticed Eneide slipping out of the hall. She ran to her carriage, where the men and horses had been waiting for hours. “Back to Guerry!” she shouted.

“Yes, Lady Eneide,” the driver sighed, slapping the reins to turn the carriage. In the cozy space behind the seat of the carriage the color of an eggplant, two monkeys cuddled up for the short ride north.

In the chapel hall, Justinian and Eryk were descending from the loft as Lord Baroffio stood to subdue the disorder with his booming voice: “It’s a travesty of the Law for a notary to browbeat jurors to vote as he orders. Shaffer, I am returning at once to Westford to file charges of corruption against you with the new notary.” He departed the hall with the lords McElfresh and Colquhoun behind him, all three of whom had placed their fortunes behind the rebuilding of Westford.

In rapid order, Shaffer, Rensselaer, Arcuri, and Agostini followed him out. But Handslip and DeHooges hung back to shake Efran’s hand. Handslip said, “Please remember we’re on your side, Captain. We can’t survive any fighting.”

DeHooges agreed wearily, and Efran said, “I’ll make it known. God speed.” And they also left.

The remaining jurors and witnesses looked at each other, then Efran focused on one soldier. “Martyn,” he said. “How did you find . . . ? Youshock. You’re from Guerry.”

Coming up to join the group, Youshock saluted. “Yes, Captain, and, in fact, Martyn and I have been making the rounds of my old stomping grounds to talk to everybody who knows Eneide, who’s not a lady by any means of measure there are.”

“I want to hear all about it,” Efran said, turning.

Hartshough materialized in front of him to bow. “Lord Efran, Lady Minka, if you and the other guests here will please be seated as you wish at the dining table, Lady Marguerite and Commander Wendt want to offer refreshments in congratulations for the decisive win.”

“I—we—accept gratefully,” Efran said, glancing at Wendt and Marguerite standing at the head of the table. As the Abbey jurors, witnesses and random onlookers came to the table, Efran added, “I’m grateful to everyone here, and a few who are not here, although, honestly, I was—looking forward to being a floor sweeper for a change.”

Amid the groans and laughs, Estes said abruptly, “‘A floor sweeper.’ I remember that. What made you think of that now?”

There was a sudden hush. The truth was, Efran was thinking of the fortress floor sweepers. But upon Estes’ outburst, Efran realized that he was remembering something else.

Estes went on, “That was Captain Ditchburn, of the Gold. I don’t know how old you were, but, you were smaller than me. You’d done something—you went up before Ditchburn and he sentenced you to *ten years* hard labor, saying you’d never be anything better than a floor sweeper. I didn’t see the end of it, only knew that you didn’t go to the labor camp after all. But—that sentence burned me for years! What did you do to get that?”

In the silence, Efran looked at him and said, “I killed Knutten.”

“Knutten,” Estes repeated. “He was drowned in the washtub. You did that?”

Efran nodded, and something dark crossed his face. “He caught me there; thought to make me his girl. I hit him in the face and pushed his head underwater. Others came in and found me standing over him like that. I tried to tell them what happened, but no one listened. At least they let me pull up my pants before dragging me out. They took me to Ditchburn, who sentenced me on the spot without a hearing. There was no excuse for killing a fellow soldier, he said, and he didn’t want me in his army because I’d never be anything better than a floor sweeper.”

The hall was still as Efran looked to the head of the table. “Commander Wendt came in about then. He said, ‘Captain, we don’t kill our wounded,’ and he sent me back to work. My father saved my life,” Efran ended on a whisper. As young as he was then, he would not have survived hard labor. Minka remembered him quoting that—*we don’t kill our wounded*--back to Wendt about Neale.

Connor said, “Knutten preyed on the new recruits, but none of them were willing to speak up, so Ditchburn said he had nothing to go on. I think the Commander was looking to get rid of both Knutten and Ditchburn.”

Stephanos said, “Ditchburn disappeared after that. What happened to him?”

All eyes turned to Wendt, who said easily, “He retired.”

A breath of comprehension went around the table. Efran turned to Minka beside him, who eyed him in vindication. Lifting his head, he said, “Everyone sit down. I want to hear from Youshock and Martyn.” His hearers complied.

Seated halfway down the table, Martyn gestured to Youshock, who grinned in his lopsided way. “Yes, Captain, thank you, sir. Well, Martyn and I were warding the Lady Minka when she came here to find Eneide presenting your letter to Lady Marguerite, sir. I recognized her right away, being from Guerry myself, as you know, Captain. Her husband Falco did beat her, as she was a shrew of the first order. Well, they might have gone on like that till the end of both their days, until we all heard months after the fact that a Polonti Captain of the army of Westford had been named Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

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Chapter 11

Youshock continued, “That a Polonti Captain of the army of Westford was now Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands was interesting, but not an earthquake, until, after the Goulven and the fires laid waste to Westford, my uncle the cheesemaker discovered that there were newly built shops on the Abbey Lands that were in need of cheeses, to his salvation and that of his family. So I began delivering cheeses here, and passed along word that it was Captain Efran who was Lord of the Abbey Lands.

“Well sir, after that had sunk into Eneide’s head, she comes out waving this letter to everybody’s eyeballs, and we all dismissed it, because everybody knew how desperate she was to get rid of her husband. But then this Lord Shaffer gets wind of it, and sends a couple of men to check out the crank.

“Then lo and behold, Falco suddenly dies of a broken head and his body disappears; Eneide is suddenly a lady with clothes and a fancy carriage and servants. Guerry as a whole paid no attention to this, so I and my sisters didn’t get word of it until she showed up here with the letter. So I told Martyn, ‘This stinks like week-old fish,’ which roused his curiosity, so we took off a few days to explore my old stomping grounds.

“We found Melhuish and Graveley right off, of course, then discovered that Mister Hartshough is renowned in Guerry for his culinary knowledge and open wallet. From there, it was like playing with loaded dice, sir; all we had to do was throw out what we had,” Youshock finished.

DeWitt said, “Commendable, soldier, but—are you telling me that Shaffer set her up to make the claim against Efran?”

Youshock said, “I think the term, which I have learned here, is ‘facilitated,’ sir.” Martyn snorted, nodding in confirmation.

DeWitt said, “But then Shaffer wouldn’t agree to the hearing!”

Estes suggested, “He wasn’t counting on having to go to all that trouble. He thought it would simply mean a clean deposal.”

Shaking his head, Efran said, “I want commendations for Youshock and Martyn, DeWitt.” He agreed. As Minka looked smug beside him, Efran added to her, “I told you he’d earn it righteously.”

“Due to his connection with cheese,” she murmured, and Efran looked to the ceiling in laughing wonder.

Then he turned to ask, “But—what happened to Shaffer, Ryal? You had such great respect for him. We knew that Cocci had gotten her claws into him, but after she dissolved on the street, Baroffio came back to life, so—why not Shaffer?”

The old notary sighed, “Honestly, I don’t know, Efran, but he’s definitely changed. Although he always had an appreciation for the finer things, I never saw it override his respect of the Law, until. . . .”

“Minka’s hearing for perjury,” Justinian murmured.

Ryal said, “He swears he doesn’t remember it.”

“That’s convenient,” Justinian noted.

And that’s where they left Shaffer when Hartshough’s troops appeared around the table to distribute tall, cool glasses garnished with lemon slices and mint sprigs. Efran locked eyes with Justinian opposite him as they picked up their glasses like duelists. Both sipped, and their faces signaled instant recognition.

But Efran, humbled by his most recent deliverance, lowered his eyes to say, “The apple juice makes a nice base. There’s another ingredient which I can’t . . . quite. . . .”

Not to be outdone in this show of humility, Justinian admitted, “Certainly woody and . . . twig-like.”

Both taking another sip, Efran nodded. “It’s quite a mystery.”

“Unfathomable,” Justinian admitted.

While the rest of the table sat in silence, unwilling to take a guess, Marguerite put her head in her hands. “Can we get past this, please?” she requested.

Picking up her glass to take a drink, Minka said, “That’s Kukicha twig tea.”

Justinian and Efran stared at her, so she said, “What? I tasted the sample I brewed for Efran, of course. It’s delicious, Hartshough.”

“Thank you, Lady Minka. We shall now serve baked salmon seasoned with celery seed, smoked paprika, garlic, and lemon zest,” Hartshough announced.

Ducking his head, Efran said, “Thank you, Hartshough. That would be excellent.”

“Yes, Hartshough,” Justinian said, sulking. Marguerite smiled and the rest of the table congratulated Hartshough, Minka, Martyn, and Youshock.

Gabriel said, “And congratulations, Lady Marguerite, for Verlice paying off his fine. I know you’re relieved.”

Wendt said, “Did he? Very good.”

But when he glanced at his wife, she had a tentative look on her face. “He did? I hadn’t heard,” she said thoughtfully. Gabriel winced.

There was a dangerous lull as Minka froze, head down. Marguerite glanced at her, but asked Ryal, “Is that right? Has Verlice paid off his fine?”

“Yes, Lady Marguerite,” he said, transparently reluctant.

“When was that?” she asked sweetly.

Ryal answered straightforwardly, “February twenty-first, Lady Marguerite. He paid the balance due of eight royals and ten pieces in one lump sum.”

“I see,” she said flatly, turning exasperated eyes to her innocent husband.

He provided a diversion. As conscripted soldiers came around with plates of salmon, bread and spring peas, Wendt said, “By the way, Efran, while you’ve been fending off women who want to marry you, Gabriel issued an invitation to ‘Lord Bickerstaffe’ to visit Rondi here. He accepted, and will be arriving on March sixth”—in two days.

Efran almost spewed his Kukicha tea bracer. “Excellent! Did Kaas tell you about my interviewing him—Rawlins—in his room at the Elegance?”

“Yes, which was a commendable performance,” Wendt said dryly to laughter. “But now that we know ‘Lord Bickerstaffe’ is coming for sure, we’ve had to hire and dress a social secretary for Lady Rondi,” he said leadingly.

“Who?” Efran asked warily.

“A newcomer to the social scene, by the name of Mister Finn,” Wendt said.

“Finn?” Efran said, laughing. Gabriel grinned evilly. Finn was a soldier, an Honors Graduate of the Tourse School of Sarcasm. Efran said, “Oh, now that’s perfect. But Rawlins won’t actually talk to Rondi, will he?”

Wendt replied, “That depends on whether he’s actually seen Rondi and knows what she looks like. If he hasn’t, or is unsure, then, yes, we have a lady on standby who will enable him to return to the Council of Crescent Hollow with the report that he’s made contact with her.”

Efran turned immediately to Minka to say, “No.”

She looked offended, but Marguerite cleared her throat. Efran looked back at her, and she raised her brows at him authoritatively. “Oh. It’s Auntie. Well—if you’re sure,” he allowed.

“Thank you, Efran,” Wendt said dryly.

Efran said, “But now, the boy, Mattias, that I left at Featheringham a week ago—have you gotten any reports on him?” Efran had left him there to recuperate from a nasty abdominal injury due to a thrown adze.

Wendt looked down the table at Captain Towner to ask, “Didn’t you receive those?”

Towner said, “Yes, Commander. The Featheringham medic Cantu has been keeping an eye on him, reports that Mattias was up out of bed by the second day. The duty roster clerk Gervase says he’s a quick study, eager to learn everything, but Cantu is limiting his work hours, wants to make sure he doesn’t start bleeding internally. During his down time, they have a soldier by his bedside helping him with his reading and numbers, where he’s weak.”

“Oh, that’s good, good,” Efran breathed. “What, ah, did they do with the donkey? Qui?”

Towner looked mildly surprised. “The donkey? All they said about her was that she’s stuck to Mattias as his work partner.”

Efran leaned back in satisfaction. “That’s good, then. Two saves. Good.”

After a wonderful midday meal, they all resumed work that had been stalled far too long by Eneide’s drama. Efran and Minka returned to the hilltop, where he encouraged the children who were learning to shoot and she admired the others’ gardening. Then the grownups sat on the bench under the walnut tree to watch the younger boys—Joshua (2), Calo (almost 3), and Pim (5)—kick a large rubber ball to each other while the older children raced frogs in the pond or ran amok.

Late that afternoon, Windry had a finished dress delivered to Minka. She received it with expressions of joy, and had Doane pay the messenger for it. Holding up the dress to look at it, she didn’t notice that the tag on the inside read only, “Windry.” The “Minunni” tags had disappeared. Minka took the dress to her and Efran’s quarters to try it on.

Standing in front of the long mirror, Minka regarded her reflection in dismay. There was nothing wrong with the dress—it was made of woven cotton in pretty colors trimmed in black. But it was eye-catching, and all Minka could see was her newly rebellious curls, half of which were brown at the roots, while the ends were almost white. It looked ridiculous, but she couldn’t possibly cut off that much hair. So she sat at the table to cry.

Then she suddenly stopped to entertain an idea. She was faerie, as her beloved great-grandmother Marguerite was. Minka tended to forget this, because she was anxious to not unsettle Efran with displays of faerie power. But—why not use her ability to just make the white hair brown? That was easy, just a little thing. Why not?

She slumped at the table, knowing that any use of her ability on her hair, of all things, would disturb Efran. That was not an option. So she started crying again.

A minute later, there was a light knock on the door, and Sudie entered with a small bundle. “Lady Minka? Lady Ella has—Lady Minka! Whatever is the matter?” She closed the door quickly behind her.

Minka groaned, “Oh, Sudie. My hair. I’m going to die of embarrassment. I can’t cut the white off; I lost my cap and I can’t hide the brown. But I have to show my face in the dining hall and I’m just going to die.”

“No, now, you sit there; I’ll be right back,” Sudie said authoritatively. She left the bundle on the table and ran down the corridor to Lady Ella’s quarters. Minka eyed the bundle, then fingered through it in curiosity. It was a pile of undergarments. Since they were clean, and in good repair, Minka wondered what Ella told Sudie to do with them.

Shortly, Sudie returned with a bag full of hair accessories. Setting it on the table, she said, “Lady Ella doesn’t need all this anymore, with short hair, so we’re borrowing them. Here, you turn to the mirror and let me work on you.”

“I can’t cut it,” Minka said anxiously, looking back at the bag.

“We’re not going to cut it, just play with it a little. And if Lord Efran doesn’t like it, we’ll do something else,” Sudie promised.

“All right,” Minka said tentatively.

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Chapter 12

Sudie wet her fingers in the wash basin to tame the most rebellious curls, but used no pomade. Then she curled the hair sideways into a roll all along the back of Minka’s head, which hid most of the white. She loosened a few strands to curl around Minka’s face. As Sudie worked, she chatted, by which Minka discovered that she loved to play with hair, and had been itching to get her fingers into Minka’s.

When she was done, they were both silent as Minka studied her reflection showing the newly sleek—or at least, smoother—hair. “That looks so much better,” Minka breathed. “Only—” She lifted one of the curling strands by her face that was white on the ends. “Have you got shears?”

Sudie reached into her bag to hand her a pair of hair shears, and Minka herself cut off the white ends of the strands around her face. Then she sighed, “Thank you, Sudie; now I can show my face. I just need to put in more earrings.”

As Sudie began putting her styling tools back into her bag and Minka got out her box of earrings, she gestured at the underclothes. “What is all this?”

“Oh!” Sudie said. “Lady Ella doesn’t need them anymore, and thought you might want them, or know someone who would.”

“She doesn’t need *underwear* any more?” Minka asked painfully.

Sudie looked reticent. “Please don’t tell anyone, Lady Minka; I’m supposed to keep it quiet. She especially doesn’t want Lord Efran to know yet, but, she, um, had to get larger underwear because she looks to be pregnant.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! I’m so glad for her and Quennel. Yes, I’ll keep my mouth shut,” Minka said. “And thank you for helping me with my hair.”

“You’re welcome, Lady Minka. That was fun,” Sudie said in satisfaction, and departed. With hardly any self-pity at all, Minka put the underclothes away in her chest. She’d have to alter them to fit her, of course, but she’d let them sit there until she remembered to do that or until Ella needed them back.

Minka stayed in her quarters for a while, wondering if Efran would be waiting for her at the door of the dining hall, as she had no idea of the time. Since she was idle, she quickly got her tweezers out of hiding to hold up the small mirror and work on her eyebrows a little. Then she hid the tweezers again and sat, folding her hands. And sat.

Finally deciding to check, she opened the door to almost collide with Efran coming in. They both drew back in surprise.

She held her breath, waiting for a reaction. At her blank, slightly fearful expression, he lowered his face to ask, “Are you all right?”

“Are you all right with it?” she asked breathlessly.

“What, your hair?” Efran half laughed. “It looks very nice.” He came in around her to wash his hands and face. “Are you ready to go in for dinner? You look ready.” He shook his hands over the washbasin, reaching for the hand towel. Not only did he glance past her hair, he didn’t even look at her dress. Or her eyebrows.

She lowered her shoulders almost in exasperation. “You’re not the least little bit upset?”

Toweling his face, he looked vaguely confused. “Over your hair? No. Should I be? I thought that was bad.”

“Well, if you’re going to be all reasonable about it all of a sudden, at least give me some warning!” she cried.

Now he was almost swaying. “Isn’t that what our last crying session was about?” he asked plaintively. “I can’t keep up.”

“Our last—! You can’t—!” She fell on him to pound his chest, laughing indignantly.

“Now I’m confused,” he said, holding her. “Aren’t I doing everything right?”

“Yes, you beast,” she said, cuddling him.

“Well—can we go in to dinner now?” he asked.

“Yes, only don’t say anything to Ella about being pregnant,” Minka said, turning to the door.

Efran gasped, “Ella’s pregnant?”

She turned to him with a gasp at her own carelessness. “No, of course not, so don’t say anything to her about it!”

“All right,” he said, eyeing her, and she took his arm. But as soon as they left their quarters, she had to go back to quickly put in earrings.

When they arrived at the dining hall, they found Ella sitting red-faced while her exultant husband was receiving congratulations from every man in the hall, apparently. Joshua was sitting beside her, waiting for his bowl. Efran took him on his leg as he sat to her right. "Hello, Ella. How are you? Quennel looks pleased."

"Hello, Father," she said flatly. "I'm going to have a baby."

"Oh, that's nice. Congratulations," Efran said, kissing her head. He lifted his chin to Wardly to bring their plates.

She eyed her father suspiciously. "You're rather calm about it."

"Well, that kind of thing tends to happen when people get married. Even when they're not married, it happens. It has something to do with, ah, survival. Thank you, Wardly." Madea's son had brought over a cart with food and drink for the Captain's family. "Is the chicken all right for tonight?" Efran asked Minka, passing her plate to her on his right.

"Yes, thank you," she said. Efran put Joshua's bowl on the table in front of him, and he began wielding his own small fork.

Ella tentatively asked her father, "You didn't know about it, did you?"

Lifting his ale, Efran glanced over. "Yes, you just told me. Congratulations, Quennel," he said over her head, as Quennel was raising his arms over the hall in victory.

While Ella looked off, exhaling, Isreal worked his way in between his parents. He looked to Minka first, grimacing, and she said, "Oh, Isreal! You got your stitches out! Oh, it looks so much better!"

Efran turned for Isreal to show him his intact lip, and Efran smiled. "It looks good, Isreal. You did good."

Isreal said, "I can talk better."

"So I hear," Efran agreed.

Minka began eating warily, waiting for someone to comment on her hair or her dress. When no one seemed to notice, and Efran was talking to Krall across from him, she almost got offended. But then Rondi sat across from her and said, "Oh, Minka, you look lovely."

"Thank you," she said, glancing around for a contrary opinion. But Efran merely smiled at her while Rondi went on, "I heard that this Lord Bickerstaffe is coming to visit! Am I to meet with him?"

Efran said, "No, Rondi. We have a decoy ready to meet him."

"Oh, that's a relief," she admitted. Mathurin set her plate and lager in front of her, then nudged Krall to move down so that he could sit. Javier was following with Mathurin's plate and ale. After thanking Mathurin, Rondi told Efran, "I have to admit being curious about what he wants."

"We'll let you know," Efran promised. Then he turned to Koschat behind him, who had come up with a question about something else. Watching him talk to Koschat, Minka paused as she remembered just three weeks ago, when Efran had to endure dinner without being able to talk or understand anyone around him. But now, listening to someone else, he crinkled his eyes at her.

And the rest of the evening was wonderful.

When Efran woke early the following morning to find no one scrunched into his side, he raised up in alarm. Seeing the light from a second candle burning in the outer room, he climbed out of bed to stand in the doorway. From there, he saw Minka sitting before the large mirror, working earnestly with her hair. In a sleep-drugged voice, he asked, “What . . . what are you doing so early?”

“Trying to fix my hair,” she said with steely determination.

He pulled up the second chair to sit beside her. “Why? Have you got something special this morning, besides Law class?”

“No,” she said. “It’s just—oh, I can’t do it like Sudie did. Oh, the white hair, with the brown growing in, I look like a jester, but I need Sudie to help me hide the white.”

Efran lowered his head. “Why can’t you just cut it off?” When his hair was growing in black behind the white, she had let him cut it, although that left him with spikes.

“That would make it very short!” she cried.

“The great thing about hair is that it grows,” he observed.

“Really? You’ll really let me cut it?” she asked.

“Whenever you want,” he said.

“Oh!” she fell on him. “If you let me cut it this once, I’ll keep it long, and I won’t do anything stupid with it ever again.”

He magnanimously agreed, “That’s good.” While she cuddled him in gratitude, he smiled over her shoulder.

Since Sudie was up early today anyway, Minka was only a little late to Law class following a quick cut. But she got a lot of compliments on her short, bouncy, curly brown hair, and Efran sat in satisfaction at her knees to listen to Soames.

Meanwhile, the newly dubbed “Mister Finn” was undergoing intensive tutoring in etiquette and protocol from Justinian, as well as fittings for suits appropriate for the social secretary of Lady Rondi. Having endured all, he was ready for the performance.

In late afternoon of the next day, March 6th, Mister Finn was on hand to meet the elegant green carriage from Crescent Hollow as it pulled up the drive to the awning-covered entrance of The Lands’ Best Inn. When the footman pulled down the step for the purported Lord Bickerstaffe to emerge, Finn met him with a sweeping bow. “Welcome to the Abbey Lands, Lord Bickerstaffe. I am Lady Rondi’s social secretary Finn. These gentlemen here [gesturing to two soldiers] will escort you to your suite for you to freshen up, and, when you are ready, will escort you back down to the reception room for our interview.”

“Oh. I see. Will Lady Rondinelli be there?” Rawlins as Bickerstaffe asked. He was dressed in a sophisticated

Crescent Hollow suit of sky blue (to match his eyes) that fit him to perfection.

“Not right away, sir,” Finn deflected, then told the soldiers, “You may escort him and his footman up now.” The men stepped up in acknowledgment of the order. As Finn turned away, he was recognized by someone who stared at his new apparel.

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Chapter 13

Underneath four pieces of luggage, the footman appeared behind “Lord Bickerstaffe” and both were taken toward the yawning front doors of The Lands’ Best Inn. The driver took the carriage around back, leaving it in the care of the hostler. Four soldiers then dismantled it to search it thoroughly. They left the attaché case full of gold, but removed the three monkeys hiding in the storage compartment behind the driver’s seat.

Meanwhile, the lord and his footman passed two Polonti laborers who were turning the soil for new flowerbeds along the front of the inn. One worker raised up to scrutinize the young, sandy-haired lord, who never noticed him. Leaning on his shovel, the laborer told his fellow, “That’s him—Rawlins from number twelve.”

The second jammed his shovel blade into the ground and said, “I’ll take that to the Commander, Captain.” As the first continued digging, the second paused, “Are you—coming in, sir?”

“Let me finish this section,” the conscientious laborer said, so the second resumed shoveling dirt until the first condescended to put down his shovel and walk off. By that time, two passing women had seen and recognized him.

Minutes later, “Lord Bickerstaffe” was escorted down to a private receiving room, the Blue Room, on the first floor of the inn. There, Finn rose to meet him, and the door was closed upon the two. “Ah! You’re looking fresh, Lord Bickerstaffe. I’ve had the kitchen bring us a modest early dinner, to not let hunger pains incommode our getting acquainted. What will you have, sir? Or will you care to serve yourself?”

Rawlins gazed at an array of aromatic silver chafing dishes, then picked up a porcelain plate. “I’ll just—help myself, thank you,” he said while Finn opened a bottle of good wine.

“Excellent. I’ll pour,” Finn offered. He set two filled goblets on the linen-covered table, then noted, “You must try the ribeye with Parmesan roasted broccoli, Lord Bickerstaffe. Simply divine.”

“It certainly smells that way,” Rawlins said, trying to quash his growling stomach.

“What’s new in Crescent Hollow, then?” Finn asked.

“Revenues are up, for which we’re tremendously pleased,” Rawlins said absently as he sat to take a bite. “Oh, this is nicely done, though rather heavy on the cumin.”

“Oh, dear, I’ll be sure to tell the kitchen,” Finn said, although there was no cumin on the steak. “Then the monkeys are no longer an inconvenience?”

“Monkeys? Oh, no, they’re confined to the traveling circus,” Rawlins said.

“I’m very glad to hear that, for Lady Rondi has a morbid fear of them. She dreamt of their biting her,” Finn said heavily.

“Oh. No, no problem at all,” Rawlins said, eyes narrowed warily. They ate quietly for a few minutes, then he admitted, “I hadn’t expected to encounter such luxury on the Lands.”

“Yes, well, with the influx of nobility, we have no choice but to lay out the best,” Finn sniffed.

“And you certainly have,” Rawlins noted.

“I’m delighted to see you satisfied, sir. May I bring you a slice of lemon pie?” Finn asked, rising.

“You have lemons?” Rawlins asked, startled.

“Yes, from the fortress conservatory. But of course, they’re parceled out only to special guests.” Finn placed a chilled dessert plate before him with the crisply sliced piece.

“My, my,” Rawlins said.

When the pie was consumed, Finn set a digestif in a crystal glass before his guest. “There now, nothing like a nice cognac to get everything settled.” Finn sat opposite him to take a sip and ask, “Now, what would you like from our dear Lady Rondi?”

“Oh,” Rawlins said, slightly dazed. “I simply want to know that she’s well, you know. I was beginning to make inroads toward an introduction, you know, and a number of her Hollowan friends have been asking after her.”

From behind several peepholes in the observation room next door, Rondi rolled her eyes at Efran, and Marguerite smiled drolly at Gabriel. Minka was patiently waiting her turn to look. Efran whispered to Rondi, “Do you recognize him?” She shook her head.

In reply to Rawlins, Finn said with the briefest touch of condescension, “Yes, well, in the six months that we’ve had her, she’s made a number of new friends.”

“Oh, no doubt. Charming girl. But her, uh, her uncle wished to see her . . .” Rawlins floundered.

“The one who was executed for murder?” Finn asked, one brow arched.

Rawlins corrected himself, “No, I mean, her patron, Grand Councilor Zollicoffer—”

“Who was killed by trolls?” Finn asked, both brows uplifted in delicate horror.

Rawlins explained, “Before he was killed, he wished to have her duties expanded as Regent.” Behind the peephole, Efran stepped back to allow Minka to watch. In reality, Zollicoffer had been frank about his desire to see the Regent dead and the Landers blamed so that the Council could appoint whomever they wanted as Surchatain.

“Oh. We never knew that, what with the poisoned soup, and all,” Finn said of the oversight.

“No, no, the poisoned soup was a mistake,” Rawlins insisted. “An enemy of Zollicoffer’s had snuck into the kitchen and then attempted to burn everything down when his plan was thwarted.”

“Fascinating,” Finn observed dryly.

“Yes, and now—” Rawlins closed his eyes to get a grip on his narrative. “All that’s not why I’m here. I wish to marry the Lady Rondinelli.”

Those in the hidden room looked at each other, startled, while Finn said coldly, “I don’t believe she’s of age, sir.”

Rawlins began, “No, you see, there’s a provision in Continental Law—”

The door opened for the entrance of an unscripted actor. Lovely, spoiled 16-year-old Colletta came in, pouting to Finn, “Aren’t you a soldier? I saw you at Marguerite’s dinner. And now you’re all dressed up. Where is Efran? My mother said he was here putting in landscaping, and she wants him to do our house, but I can’t find him anywhere. He didn’t finish the front. Is that where he was working?”

Finn and Rawlins gaped at her. Finn inquired, “My dear girl, did you receive a blow to the head?”

Rawlins appeared to be unable to speak and unwilling to try. Colletta began, “Well, where . . . ?” With a screwed-up pout, she turned her lovely eyes on him. “Rawlins? What are you doing here?”

Frozen in consternation, eyes wide, he said in a strangled voice, “I believe you’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

So she merely came closer to peer at him, then proclaimed, “Rawlins, it is you! I got your letters. What are you doing here?” Finn watched the unveiling of the Bickerstaffe impersonator in interest, especially as it detracted from his own exposure.

Standing to take her arm, Rawlins said, “My dear, I apologize for the fake name. But right now I have important work—”

“You told me I was your world when you were trying to make love to me. And what happened with this big job of work you supposedly had with the Council? ‘The pay is huge’ you told me. ‘I’ll buy you all the dresses you want’ you said. You even promised my mother dresses!”

“Colletta,” he began, sweating.

“Oh, so you know my name after all!” she crowed. He stood there, lips flapping soundlessly, while she and Finn (and others) watched. So she grabbed him by his frilly shirt sleeve to begin hauling him after her. “I can hardly wait to hear you explain yourself to my mother!”

She dragged him out of the private reception room and through the lobby to the front doors. Finn turned to open his hands in defeat at the nearest peephole. Emerging from the attached observation room, Efran went to the front doors to watch Colletta drag Rawlins down the street toward the house she and her mother were leasing. Finn, Minka, Marguerite, Gabriel, and Rondi followed to look on likewise.

Efran said in resignation, “Well, we’re done for the day. He won’t escape for hours, if at all. Finn, let us know what you hear. Auntie and Gabriel can fill in the Commander. Minka and I will take you up hilltop, Rondi.”

"I'm a little disappointed not to hear more," Rondi admitted.

Minka pronounced, "There he was, wooing Colletta before going on this job to get Rondi to marry him, even though she can't. Men are so faithless."

"Let's not generalize," Efran said grumpily while waving for their horses. Gabriel, Finn and Marguerite hadn't left yet for listening.

Minka returned, "Oh, you'd better not wear work clothes around the Lands for the next week or so, or you'll get roped into doing Barrueta's landscaping."

"I'm afraid I believe you," he laughed.

The party finally broke up. Efran, Minka and Rondi went up hilltop; Marguerite returned to the chapel and Gabriel to Barracks A, *after* leaving an invitation at the inn for "Lord Bickerstaffe" to drop by the Blue Room again tomorrow. Meanwhile, Finn invited all the off-duty men standing around to come help him finish the excellent early dinner in the Inn's private receiving room.

All this time, Rawlins was captive of two angry women. After a half-hour of their haranguing, he was able to get control of the situation only by explaining, "This is the big job, Colletta! To make contact with Rondinelli! But there are complications that the Council didn't know about, that I have to work around. Here's a little something for your inconvenience." He emptied his pockets to give them five royals each.

"That's not enough," Barrueta said stiffly.

"It's all I've got on me, but I have more in my room. But I must stay to talk with Rondinelli," he said.

"Why? Does she know about the treasure in the smoky pits?" Colletta asked.

"What?" Rawlins blinked.

"We're hearing it whispered all over," Colletta whispered.

Her mother interrupted, "You may hear it being whispered, but I know for a fact that Efran goes out to these smoky pits north of Nicarber, where they've got some of the gold and jewelry from the Treasury hidden around these big rocks. We don't know what all's out there besides the golden necklace, earrings and bracelets which Minka wore to Crescent Hollow, but you know there's much more when he had his men come back and spread word that there are these great talking lizards out there, and dangerous pools, so everyone has to stay away from it." She raised her eyebrows at him meaningly.

"Really," he murmured. "That's interesting. How does one get out there?"

Barrueta said, "Easily. You go out the gates, over the old stone bridge, and turn left to go over the bridge spanning the Passage. Don't go into the barricaded complex; the trolls live there. Just follow the footpath into the woods to the left of it; the path has been traveled so much, it's practically a road. Follow that dirt path until you see the smoke rising, then follow it." Rawlins listened, spellbound. Incidentally, this shortcut through the woods was much quicker than the route Efran and his men had taken.

When Rawlins finally left the ladies' house, he had to just wander for a while. He walked blankly, crossing New North Road and ambling down Main into the western section, thinking. Buried treasure? It sounded fantastic, but

the ladies' arguments were compelling. What if . . . ? No, he couldn't go look for it himself; he was locked into this scheme to bring back Rondinelli. Or was he? "If only I had a sign," Rawlins murmured.

Then he looked around to see where he was, and right in front of him was #42, Hassler's Tool Shop, with a display of shovels and other digging tools in its window.

After Law class the following morning (March 7th) Efran received a message from Ryal, asking him to come down to his shop when it was convenient. Efran found it immediately convenient, as Minka was going with Rondi to her job at The Lands Clothing Shop, both to help and, hopefully, get a new flat cap.

So Efran took Kraken down to the notary shop on the corner of Main and Chapel Road. Again, Efran caught sight of the old man leaning heavily on his walking stick as he progressed east on Chapel Road in the distance. The stick was one of those sturdy ones that long-distance walkers use. It reminded Efran of Nakham's, but this definitely was not Nakham. Efran was just a little concerned that the old man seemed to be all alone. But Efran had to talk to Ryal right now.

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Chapter 14

After unloading his rider, Kraken happily ambled to the water trough behind the community well to play. Meanwhile, Efran entered the shop to the tinkling bell (which he never tired of hearing) and looked in mild aggravation at the number of customers lined up at the counter for Ryal and Giardi to wait on. Seeing him, Ryal said, "Go have a look at the last page I've translated of the booklet; it's on top."

"All right." Efran bypassed the line to go to the back room and sit at the little table. The fragile booklet was carefully weighted for its pages to lie flat. Beside it were papers covered with writing in Ryal's neat hand.

Picking up the last page of translation, Efran read, "The whole area encompassing Nicole's Harbor provided shelter to a great variety of wildlife, some {species?} never before seen. Giant {reptiles?} that remained from the {prehistoric?} era around the poisonous pools were eradicated by exploding {devices?} in the area, thus eliminating the noxious waters as well as the dangerous creatures." (The curly brackets indicated Ryal's guess at the correct word.)

Efran raised up in dismay. When did this happen? Or rather, when was it to happen, as it was obviously in the future? He didn't remember telling Ryal about Oldknow and his family of lizards, but, somehow he had to warn them. Would it do any good, when he couldn't give them a time frame? Then again, what did Time mean to a species that had been there for thousands of years?

Standing, he went out around the line of customers, telling Ryal, "I'll be back." Ryal nodded, handing a form to the merchant before him.

Outside the shop, Efran whistled, both for Kraken and any men. Three immediately ran up, and Efran told them, "If you're off-duty, go get you horses. I'll be waiting at the old stone bridge."

"Yes, Captain," Beardall said, then he, Elowen, and Fellowes took shortcuts to the lower stables behind the barracks.

Mounting Kraken, Efran walked him down Main. Before exiting the wall gates, he told one of the gatesmen, Heus, "I've got three men coming that are going to help me explore the woods north of Nicarber, where you see the smoke rising."

"Yes, Captain," Heus acknowledged. A passing courier heard that, then looked quickly to see what Lord Efran might be taking to bury there. Oblivious to the interest, Efran rode out around incoming traffic to wait just beyond the bridge.

Shortly, Beardall, Elowen, and Fellowes joined him. He led them across the new bridge over the Passage, past the troll's village and down the well-worn paths southwest to Nicarber. Along the way, Efran gave them a short description of the lizard family and the fact that he believed they were in danger of being wiped out at some undefined time. His men accepted the information without question.

At the intersection of the dirt road with the main road of Nicarber, Efran turned Kraken north, asking him, "Do you remember how to get to Oldknow's rocks?" Kraken nodded, entering the undergrowth at the same place where they had begun looking for the source of the smoke two weeks ago.

Kraken led reliably until Beardall asked, "What is that popping noise, Captain?"

"And the smell?" Fellowes added in disgust.

"It means we're getting close," Efran said.

A few minutes more, and they came into the clearing ringed with dead trees and rocks. Efran's men looked over the bubbling, steaming pools in wonder, some with colored rings and one that was midnight black. Efran waited a moment, looking around, then called, "Oldknow! Are you here?"

They heard nothing for a while, then a slight scrabbling noise at a grouping of rocks to their left. The men looked quickly as the large, ancient lizard climbed atop the grouping, his tongue flicking out. Three of the other large lizards appeared atop rocks around the pools. None of the younger lizards like Holer showed themselves.

"Oldknow," Efran began, "at some point in the future—I don't know when—the people of Nicarber are going to use something fiery to bring these rocks down and destroy the pools. Have you got someplace else to go?"

The old lizard opened his mouth as though laughing. "The men will bring these rocks down? They will simply go to the caverns below, great caverns underground."

"You have refuge underground," Efran repeated.

"Yes. Underground," Oldknow said, opening his mouth wide as though it were the entrance to a cave. "Underground."

And the other lizards opened their mouths to whisper, "Underground." "Underground." "Underground, underground." The great gaping mouths together with the repetition transfixed the men. *Underground, underground, underground* seemed to echo around the rocks while the open mouths became entrances to something awesome. Fellowes slipped down from his saddle and Elowen leaned forward.

But Kraken began stomping, snorting, and half rearing. Gripping with his knees to rebalance, Efran began, "What—? Why are you—? Fellowes, mount up! Everyone back up!" For the riders had been unconsciously

nudging their horses toward the rocks behind the deadly pools, to which Kraken objected.

As Fellowes clambered into his saddle and the four of them backed their horses away, Efran said angrily, “I came to warn you in good faith, Oldknow!”

With a swish of his great tail, the old one said, “I didn’t tell you everything we ate.” The lizards disappeared with an echo of laughter.

“We’re done here,” Efran said, irritated at himself for his own gullibility. And they rode as swiftly as possible back to Nicarber and northeast to the Lands.

Upon passing through the gates, Efran told Beardall, “See that Hawk and Krall are informed of the lizards’ new trick. And all three of you pass along word that the smoking pools north of Nicarber are off-limits.”

“Yes, Captain,” Beardall acknowledged, and the others saluted. This new information didn’t actually do much to chill the talk that had gotten Rawlins so excited. Regardless, he wasn’t around to hear it. Also, since Efran forgot that he told Minka about talking to Oldknow the first time, he didn’t think to update her about him now.

Riding back down Main toward Ryal’s shop at a walk, Efran mulled over the near-disaster. “Well, when we left last time, Oldknow did warn me that he told me *almost* everything.”

Good thing you were riding someone with more sense, Kraken snarked.

“I’ll grant you that,” Efran said, releasing him at the water trough behind the community well.

Entering Ryal’s shop, Efran found the customers had evaporated for the moment, so Giardi was sorting forms at the front counter. He paused to say, “Hello, Giardini.”

“Hello, Efran,” she said, smiling.

From the back room, Ryal said, “Leave her alone and get back here, Efran.”

Stepping to the back door, Efran said, “I could have made her laugh had you given me another minute.” Still at the front counter, she did laugh, and he said, “See?”

Ryal exhaled, “Commendable. Sit down. Did you see this last page I had translated?”

Efran scowled, “Yes, I saw that, so I went out there to warn them, and they showed their gratitude by threatening to eat us.” Ryal peered at him, so Efran explained, “Oldknow and the other lizards. The ‘dangerous creatures’ around the ‘poisonous pools.’ They’ll talk to you for a little while, then try to entrap you as dinner,” he said resentfully.

“Well, that is interesting, but did you see *this*?” Ryal laid the last page before him to point at something farther down from the “dangerous creatures.”

Efran read the translation out loud, “‘Also, our team of {diggers?} found evidence of Barthelemon’s successor with Mashhit at the Fortress.’” He looked pensively at Ryal. “. . . ‘Mashhit?’”

“That was the name of the Destroyer. I included it in the book I wrote on Barthelemon and your experiences with him—that is, with the Destroyer,” Ryal said.

“So they found—or will find—evidence of *my* . . .” Efran began.

“Keep reading,” Ryal said.

Efran looked down warily to pick up with the next translated sentence: “‘Moreover, they concluded that Mashhit was responsible for the destruction of Niça—’ Nicarber?” Efran gasped.

“I believe so, as the name ‘Niça’ is also in Barthelemon’s book, as is ‘Paillon River.’ But I don’t have conclusive proof that they correspond to Nicarber and the Passage,” Ryal said.

“But—Nicarber was washed away years before I freed the Destroyer. So, their diggers were wrong about that,” Efran said.

Ryal replied, “No, the hurricane could have been his doing, as Barthelemon briefly mentions an addendum to the agreement he had made with the Destroyer. In the book I compiled, Barthelemon says—”

Ryal broke off to find the page, then read, “‘Mashhit had already marked a heavily populated coastal area for destruction when he was placed in confinement, and demanded the right to execute judgment, whereas Barthelemon demanded a stay. Mashhit finally agreed for their destruction to be delayed until a certain level of corruption had been reached as determined by the recording angel Eitan.’ It is possible, but unknown, that this Eitan could have determined that level to have been reached before Mashhit was released. In that case, another unnamed angel would have stepped in to destroy it in Mashhit’s name.”

Having witnessed the devastation of both Prie Mer and Nicarber, Efran looked sick, but Ryal said, “Keep reading.”

With a faint groan, Efran looked down at the page again. “‘What was most astonishing was evidence of Mashhit’s third visit to the Southern Continental coast—’ No,” Efran breathed. “Ryal, that can’t mean that the Destroyer is coming a *third* time to kill us!”

“Not ‘us,’ Efran, but the evil unrepentant,” Ryal clarified.

“But how can you know?” Efran laughed in pain. “How can anyone know whether they’ve repented enough?”

“I would say that anyone who worried about it was safe,” Ryal observed.

Efran leaned back, not comforted at all. “What else?” he muttered, taking up the sheet again.

“That’s all I have translated so far. But consider this, Efran: *If* Nicarber and Prie Mer were the joint objects of delayed destruction, that would have been Mashhit’s first visit. The second was when you released him, and his third visit would have been at the insurrection. Therefore, you need not worry about another,” Ryal said.

Efran sat back to think about this. “That would be nice. Is there any way to know?”

“I’ll have to finish translating the booklet to see—I’m about three-quarters of the way through it now,” Ryal said.

“All right, then; I’ll let you work,” Efran said, standing. Then he grumbled, “Giant lizards that answer your questions while sizing you up for dinner are definitely evil.”

“Then the rest of us have nothing to worry about,” Ryal said, picking up his quill again.

Muttering under his breath, Efran left without disturbing Giardi, who was assisting a customer.

As he departed Ryal’s shop to head for the water trough which Kraken was emptying in play, he saw Gabriel loping up Main, hailing him. Efran stopped for Gabriel to lean down from the saddle and tell him, “‘Lord Bickerstaffe’ is on his way to meet Mister Finn in the Blue Room of the inn. Would you like to come watch, Captain?”

“Yes,” Efran said, turning.

“Here, take my horse,” Gabriel urged, preparing to dismount.

“No, you take it; I’ll beat you on the shortcuts,” Efran said. He lit out on foot behind Ryal’s shop and the chapel to arrive practically at the front doors of The Lands’ Best Inn an instant before Gabriel loped up. The doorman took Gabriel’s horse while he and Efran walked quickly to the observation room. They barely made it into the room before Rawlins was announced (as “Lord Bickerstaffe”) by a doorman at the door of the Blue Room.

Rawlins entered to look around pensively. Seeing only the secretary, he complained, “After being put off yesterday, I was certainly expecting to see Lady Rondinelli here today.”

Standing at the beverage table, Finn extended a drink to him. “My goodness, Lord Bickerstaffe, after seeing you abducted by Lady Colletta yesterday, I was dubious of ever seeing you again.”

“No, no—that was merely a misunderstanding which we settled amicably,” Rawlins protested, accepting the drink. He did not mention that the settlement involved a large payment to Colletta and her mother. “Where is Lady Rondinelli?”

The lady that he would meet—if he were allowed—was also in the observation room. Marguerite had altered her appearance not to look like Rondi, but simply a young teenage girl. Since the real Rondi was sure that she had never met Rawlins face to face, the Abbey leadership were equally sure that any attractive young girl would meet his expectations.

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Chapter 15

But Efran and Gabriel—who would jointly decide whether “Bickerstaffe” would meet Rondi’s stand-in—wanted to find out, first, the purpose of Rawlins’ charade, and second, who was behind it. Since the Abbey leadership had no expectations of a friendly alliance with Crescent Hollow anyway, they were still disappointed by the espionage Rawlins attempted. While incompetent, it obscured what they wanted to know.

At the moment, Finn and his guest were sitting in comfortable chairs with drinks in hand. Finn proposed, “Let’s just do it this way, Lord Bickerstaffe—you pretend I’m Lady Rondi. I’ve just sat down and said, ‘Good afternoon, Lord Bickerstaffe. I was intrigued and flattered by your letter. But now, what do you wish of me?’” He fluttered his eyelids for the proper effect.

This left Rawlins looking constipated. “Must we engage in this farce?”

“I’m afraid so. Lady Rondi’s surrogate father is unreasonably suspicious of strange men wanting to meet her,” Finn said sympathetically.

“Very well, then,” Rawlins exhaled. He produced a grimacing smile for Lady Finn. “Dearest Rondinelli, I must express my deepest admiration for your comportment during your too-brief tenure as Regent.”

“Why, thank you, kind sir,” Lady Finn said, forefinger at her stubbly chin. “Which of my decrees did you find most enthralling?”

Rawlins was ready for this. “The Revocation of Hardship Exemptions for Tax Delinquencies was masterfully crafted, if I may say so.”

Finn blinked. “The one where I raised everyone’s penalties?”

“Well, the title was certainly part of the craftsmanship,” Rawlins admitted.

Finn stifled a yawn. “Although I appreciate your blue eyes and your compliments, Councilor Fothergill wrote up that one, with an assist from Councilor Allnutt. I merely had to read it without stumbling over the long words.”

“And you did that masterfully,” Rawlins insisted.

“More brandy?” Finn asked, pouring himself another finger.

“Why not.” Rawlins extended his glass, which Finn refilled liberally. “May I be honest with you?” Rawlins asked, a firm grip on the glass.

“I’d appreciate it,” Finn said honestly.

“The whole Council wants you back as Regent,” Rawlins said.

“Why?” Finn asked, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees to accentuate his imaginary breasts.

“They don’t know what to do about the monkeys,” Rawlins said from his glass.

“Understandable,” Finn said, rising. He went to the door to open it a crack to whisper to the guard, Quoid: “He doesn’t know anything. This is a waste of time. I suggest they send her in so she can pummel him a little and send him off.”

“Right,” Quoid said, then took this message to the Captain and the Second next door.

Efran nodded at Marguerite, who had already been guided as to her part in this performance. She skipped out with Quoid to enter the reception room on Finn’s arm. He said, “Lady Rondi, may I present your admirer, Lord Bickerstaffe.”

Rawlins, who had been sprawled in the chair, sat up to gape. “Lady Rondinelli?”

“Lord Bickerstaffe?” she asked, tilting her head and fluttering her eyelashes. “You’ve lost a lot of weight since I saw you last. And, got blue eyes.”

His mouth dropped open in a helpless laugh. “Haha. How clever you are, my dear. But—we’ve never met.”

“I’ve never met *you*, that’s for sure. But that old gobbler Bickerstaffe tried to catch me behind the stables at Lord Malfatto’s estate. You wouldn’t ever forget that if it happened to you,” she assured him.

He issued a sick laugh, and she said, “Wait, you must be Rawlins. Are you Rawlins? Colletta told me all about you.”

He raised his eyes to the ceiling in pensive defeat. “I don’t know what to do now,” he said to himself.

A moment later, the door opened for Efran and Gabriel to come in. They pulled out chairs in front of Rawlins, but before sitting, Efran told Marguerite, “You may go now. Thank you, dear.”

“You’re welcome, Papa,” she said sweetly, and he smiled tightly at her playacting. She and Minka were closely related.

Marguerite skipped out, then paused to put her ear to the door Finn had just closed. She wanted to make sure that they didn’t need her again before returning to the observation room and dropping her disguise as a teenage girl.

But as she was listening at the door, someone in a cumin-colored suit approached. He paused to say, “Now, now, it’s naughty to eavesdrop. Come have a bite with me and I’ll let you in on something exciting.”

In shock, she turned to see her own son Verlice smiling roguishly. “What?” she said.

“Games after hours,” he whispered with a wink. “Come now; I won’t give you anything alcoholic.”

Stunned, she began walking away with him. But after absorbing his offer, she stopped. “Verlice! What do you mean, ‘games after hours’? You’re not gambling again, are you?”

He turned in displeased surprise. Scowling, he said, “You sound like my mother. Forget it.” He walked off, peeved, then tried to remember whether he had told her his name or not. He always avoided using his real name. Marguerite threw up her hands in disgust and went on to the observation room.

In the reception room, Efran sat facing Rawlins, who sat up in sudden umbrage. “You’re the undertaker!”

“Not today,” Efran said, smiling. “Today I’m Captain Efran. And if you’re really at a loss as to what to do, the Second Gabriel and I can help. If you do what we ask, you can go back to Crescent Hollow with all your royals and a report of success making contact with the Lady Rondi. If you don’t help us, I’m afraid I don’t know what tomorrow is going to look like for you. What do you say?”

Slack-faced, Rawlins nodded, and Efran laid out a whole new agenda for him, which mostly involved his bringing confidential Council matters back to the Lands’ administrators.

Meanwhile, Faciane was setting up Averno’s outdoor dining area for the midday rush when she glanced down the street to Croft’s front patio, where Vories was doing the same. Faciane paused, then briefly suspended her work to walk past Firmin’s eatery to Croft’s. When Vories looked over, she said, “Hello! I’m Faciane. I work at Averno’s.”

“Oh. Hello. Nice place, with the pond and all,” Vories noted.

“Yes, it is. I, er, saw you talking with Verlice,” Faciane said carefully.

Vories came alive with laughter. “Isn’t he adorable? He’s not as luscious as Efran, of course, but he does have his own charm. And he’s so adventurous!”

“Really?” Faciane asked, wincing. “How so?”

“Oh my goodness, the night life! He knows everything going on everywhere,” Vories laughed. Then she asked in teasing suspicion, “You’re not another girlfriend, are you? He’d better not spend on you any of the money I lent him!”

“No, I’m his wife,” Faciane said.

Face draining, Vories stared at her. “I lent him everything I had. He promised he’d repay it in a week, and it’s been two weeks.”

Grimly, Faciane said, “Let’s go across the street here. It will only take a moment.” Together, they went to the notary shop for Faciane to file for divorce from Verlice (again) and Vories to file a complaint against him for fraud.

Early the following morning, March 8th, Rawlins was packed into his carriage to Crescent Hollow. As they set out, he lay down on the rocking seat to think. He disliked the plan which this Captain Efran had offered him, and seriously doubted whether he could convince the Council that he had really met Rondinelli, who wanted to see the Council’s upcoming budget before agreeing to come back as Regent.

So as he rocked on the road, he thought, *Is this the out I was looking for?* The image of Hassler’s Tool Shop came to mind as in answer, and a brilliant idea sprang up before his eyes. He spent an hour in careful thought refining this plan, then he stretched out on the cushioned seat to sleep sweetly.

After Law class that morning, Efran took Minka out to the eastern Lands to visit some more of the new shops as he had promised. The continuing expansion of businesses out this way unsettled him a little. He was very glad for DeWitt’s and Estes’ administration, as well as the vacant meadowlands in the far east Lands, clear to the east branch of the Passage. Seeing the distant flags that marked the five-mile stretch he had promised to the wolves helped Efran breathe: the Lands would not get overcrowded.

As he and Minka rode up New North Road, he saw again the old man with the great staff, who had just reached one of the benches on the shore of Cavern Lake. He lowered himself to sit, laying the staff carefully at his feet out of the way.

“Here, we need to stop a minute,” Efran told Minka. She looked over as he turned Kraken off the road toward the old man.

Reining up before the bench, Efran dismounted to approach the old man amiably (or so he hoped). “Hello. I’m Captain Efran; this is Lady Minka.” She remained seated on the dun mare to nod in smiling interest. He continued, “I’ve noticed you walking out here a few times, and, just want to make sure you have everything you need.” As he spoke, he evaluated the man’s general appearance. His clothes were old but not ragged or filthy; he was obviously enfeebled by age, but otherwise seemed healthy.

“That is good of you, Captain Efran. My name is Eachus. I hope I am not trespassing.” He trembled slightly as the very old do, but spoke coherently.

“No, not at all. Where are you staying?” Efran asked.

“I brought a bit of coin to get a room in your Laborers’ Hall, which suits me,” Eachus said.

“Good. If you run out of coin, tell any soldier that I instructed your upkeep,” Efran said.

“Pardon, sir?” Eachus leaned his ear toward him.

Taking pains to speak clearly, Efran wet his lips and said, “If you have any needs, tell any soldier. We will see that you’re provided for.”

The old man’s great white brows gathered in surprise. “You are a generous man.”

“Not really; it’s the Law,” he said, turning back to remount Kraken. “Carry on, sir.”

“Thank you, Captain Efran,” Eachus said, studying him.

As Efran and Minka rode back up New North Road, she asked, “Can you believe how relevant our lessons are?”

He let down a little in surprise or chastisement. “I had *completely forgotten* that whole section on the obligation of citizens to care for their elderly or infirm relations, and that of the district to maintain those who have no family. That’s scary, to almost overlook something so basic.” He turned Kraken to whistle at a soldier in the distance.

Riding up, Ayling saluted. “Captain?”

“Yes, go tell DeWitt or Estes that an old man, Eachus, is a newcomer who may need support soon. He’s staying at the Laborers’ Hall for now,” Efran instructed.

“Yes, Captain. Lady Minka.” Ayling nodded to her and she smiled as he rode off with the message.

They set out north on the road again, and Minka pointed: “Oh, there’s the magic shop”—Wonders & Illusions. “I want to stop in there again.”

“All right, just a moment,” Efran said, looking at the chapel under construction nearby. It was almost finished, with the sign “East Lands Chapel” awaiting installation above the door. As there were people going inside—not workmen—Efran said, “Let’s just look in.”

Tethering their horses at one of the posts out front, they entered along with a few others. Because Efran was wearing his usual work clothes (presently clean but a little ragged) and Minka had on one of her favored work/riding dresses (ditto), they drew a few glances from others who were better dressed. There were rows of chairs set up to accommodate the dozen or so already here.

An elderly man came up to say, “Welcome, I am Pastor Benedetti. Would you like anything to eat or drink?” He gestured to a table set with bread, fruit, and a water jar.

“No, thank you,” Efran said, glancing around.

“Be seated, then; we are about to begin,” the pastor said.

Somewhat reluctantly, Efran sat with Minka beside him—he didn’t realize they were walking into a meeting. The others sat a little apart from them. Then the pastor opened a small book to begin, “The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi, describes himself as ‘not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ.’ This suggests that on the Damascus Road, he discovered his former quest of attaining righteousness by keeping rules to be inadequate.

“There were many disciples of Jesus in the early church who thought it quite possible—even desirable—to combine faith in Christ with keeping all the technical points of the law, such as circumcision and dietary restrictions, but Paul regarded this as an impossible compromise. No one had kept the law with greater devotion than Paul. Far from securing his righteousness before God, it actually led him into sin, making him a vicious persecutor of the church.”

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Chapter 16

Pastor Benedetti continued, “Therefore, Paul insists that God’s people, rather than knowing the law as an external code, know it as an inward principle through Christ. The difference lies in the fact that a new inward power is now imparted, enabling the believer to fulfill what he could not fulfill on his own. Doing the will of God is not a matter of conformity to outward rules, but of giving expression to inward love, imparted by the Spirit.

“‘Hence,’ says Paul, ‘the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life.’ The written code kills because it declares the will of God without imparting the power to do it, and pronounces the death sentence on those who break it. But the Spirit gives life, and with the life, He gives the inward power as well as the desire to do what God wishes.

“Therefore, the Spirit is holy both as being the Spirit of God and as creating holiness in man. This is nothing less than transformation into the likeness of Christ, who is the image of God, and this cannot be effected by external constraint, for ‘where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.’”

The pastor closed his remarks with a prayer while Efran sat gaping to get a glimpse into something that he never understood before. When the other listeners got up, the visitors did, too. Efran reached into his pocket for a handful of royals, which he placed in the astonished pastor’s hands. Without a word, he took Minka’s hand to walk out to the horses.

As he had promised, he took her around to all the shops that she had asked to see, though he didn’t have as much to spend as he’d had starting out. And when they returned to the fortress, he went up to the workroom to ask Estes to add Pastor Benedetti as a beneficiary of the Widow’s Fund.

Late that afternoon, Rawlins woke as his footman knocked on the door of the carriage to call, “We’re back at the Elegance, sir”—in Crescent Hollow.

“Oh. Good,” Rawlins said groggily, rolling out of the carriage and almost falling down the steps. “Here, then. Bring my baggage up to number twelve, then turn this carriage around to take me to Grand Councilor Squitieri’s house Blatchford in the nobles’ district.”

Blankly, the footman said, “That will cost you another five royals, sir. Our duties end with the transport of your luggage up to your room.”

“Oh. Dash it all. Well then, send a message to Grand Councilor Squitieri’s house Blatchford; tell them that I’ve returned from the Abbey Lands with an urgent report which I’ll deliver shortly,” Rawlins ordered.

“Yes, sir. That will cost you two royals, sir,” the footman said. Unobserved, the driver watched in amusement.

Exhaling his aggravation, Rawlins dug two royals from his pocket to slap them in the footman’s hand. “Go on, then.”

“Yes, sir,” the footman said. While Rawlins took his valise of royals up to his room himself, the footman pocketed one royal and gave the other to the stableboy Awtrey to relay the message to Blatchford. Then the driver and footman handed over the carriage and horses to the hostler, carried the lord’s luggage up to his room, and went down to the dining room for a very nice dinner.

Shortly, Rawlins emerged from his room smoothing the coat of his flawless suit with steady hands. He knew what to do now, and his new script far surpassed either the Council’s or the Captain’s, as this meant surer enrichment to himself. So he set out cheerfully on the short walk to Blatchford with his elegant top hat and walking stick.

Trotting up the broad front steps to the great house, he rapped smartly on the door with his cane, and presented his engraved calling card to the butler who answered. He was then whisked into the Grand Councilor’s study. With his butler standing by, Squitieri waved in the visitor. “So, you’re back quickly, Rawlins. Have a seat. Whatever you have to report you’ll have to tell me in person, for the stupid maid misplaced my spectacles and I can’t read a thing without them.”

Sitting in the great chair opposite the great man, Rawlins said, “No fear, Lord Grand Councilor, that will be quite convenient. Only, I’m terribly parched from the walk over, as my stupid driver and footman were lax to get my carriage ready when I needed it.” Rawlins looked pointedly toward the bar cart.

Squitieri waved at his butler. “A cognac for the visitor, Dankworth.”

“Yes, Lord Grand Councilor.” Moving with almost inhuman smoothness, the butler poured the visitor’s cognac and presented it to him with gloved hands.

Rawlins nodded to him and took a bracing sip. Steepling his fingers, Squitieri said, “Any time you’re ready to talk, Rawlins.”

“Yes, Lord Grand Councilor,” Rawlins said, demonstrating his cool by pausing to place his glass precisely on the side table. “I had to interview the whole of the first day with Lady Rondinelli’s social secretary, Mister Finn. He decided I was acceptable to meet her—as ‘Lord Bickerstaffe,’ of course—on the second day, yesterday.

“Well, Lord Grand Councilor, when the Lady was escorted in to meet me, she took one look and said, ‘Who are you?’ I blustered in response, and she expressed her conviction that I was *not* Bickerstaffe, who had accosted her behind Malfatto’s stables,” Rawlins said grimly.

“What?” Squitieri exploded. “He swears she’s never seen him!”

“For never having seen him, she described him perfectly, Lord Grand Councilor,” Rawlins said dryly. “However, all is not lost. I took the situation in hand to explain that the real Bickerstaffe is extremely shy and hard of hearing, but fabulously wealthy, and if she would entertain a few visits from the real man, it would prove highly profitable to her.”

“And what did she say to that?” Squitieri asked.

“I’m sorry to report that she was highly dubious, after having been deceived once already. However, I persevered in explaining the debacle, so that she promised to think about it. In fact, by the time I left, she had agreed to receive letters from the real Lord Bickerstaffe explaining his deceit and offering amends. She also agreed to allow me to return as messenger with his written apologies and, er, reparation,” Rawlins said.

“How much does she want?” Squitieri asked guardedly.

“Try as I might, I could not compel her to state a figure, Lord Grand Councilor. It will be up to you and Lord Bickerstaffe to send what you think is right,” Rawlins said with an admirably straight face.

“Very well, then,” Squitieri said cheerfully enough, as it wasn’t coming out of his pocket. “When are you to return?”

“In three days, March eleventh,” Rawlins said.

“Three days!” Squitieri exclaimed.

“Yes, so Lord Bickerstaffe had better get on it. The good thing is, she’s given me an afternoon appointment, so that I may travel on the eleventh. We just must make sure that Bickerstaffe gets his apologies written and monies packed in time for my departure early that morning,” Rawlins said.

Squitieri said, “Dankworth will have his letter and monies ready to give you by the end of day on the tenth.”

“Excellent, Lord Grand Councilor,” Rawlins said, standing. “I shan’t trouble you further, as I must go prepare for my next interview with Lady Rondinelli.”

“Very good,” Squitieri said, waving him away. After Dankworth had escorted Rawlins to the door and returned, Squitieri said through gritted teeth, “Summon Bickerstaffe.”

“Yes, Lord Grand Councilor,” the butler said, bowing.

Meanwhile, Rawlins practically danced back to his room at the Elegance. This was perfect—a neater plan he couldn’t imagine. For, of course he had no further interview with Lady Rondinelli, nor would he seek it. On the afternoon of the tenth, he would pack the carriage with his essentials and send the footman to Squitieri’s door to receive Bickerstaffe’s reparation monies and letter of apology. On the following morning, he would set out for the Abbey Lands and stay in an inn overnight.

On the morning of the 12th, he would send the carriage back to Crescent Hollow; meanwhile, he himself would lease a nice, out-of-the-way house on the Lands, where he would deposit Bickerstaffe’s apology money and burn his letter.

Rawlins was confident of not being recognized at the Lands, for he was already growing out his beard and this very afternoon would have the Elegance beautician darken his hair. After he had settled in to his new place on the Lands, he would hire a horse and take digging equipment out to Lord Efran's hiding place for purloined Treasury items, that was marked by constant smoke and colored pools. And there he would make himself fabulously wealthy.

While Grand Councilor Squitieri was roasting Bickerstaffe over fiery coals and Rawlins was having his hair dyed by a chatting beautician, Elvey and her staff were sitting in the quiet consultation room of her main headquarters in the Lands. The front portion of this complex had been one of the first buildings on the Lands, completed even before Ryal's notary shop across the street. That was almost three years ago. And for two and a half years following that meager beginning, Elvey's had reigned supreme in the burgeoning Lands as supplier of all manner of textiles, but especially dresses.

With little Minka as mannequin for Elvey's clothes, on the arm of the tall, sculpted Polonti with the beautiful smile, everything Elvey created turned to gold. Then . . . "What happened?" Ghislain whispered. "Where did we fall off the cliff?"

"I think it started with the competition," Elvey said, leaning back to sift through the past year or so. "Not everyone could wear what we made for Minka, so other dressmakers stepped in to supply their needs. That's when we began producing designs that would appeal to other women besides Minka. That lowered us from pacesetter to competitor. From there, I think we got desperate, producing more exotic styles some prominent women--including Minka—flatly rejected.

"That didn't hurt us at all, because we were also producing the Abbey army uniforms, which brought in hundreds of royals some months. Hence our expansion. But now that their army enrollment has leveled off, and their uniforms were made to last, of course we're not seeing as much business from the Fortress," Elvey thought out.

Regie said bitterly, "They're having Racheal's shop make uniforms for them now."

"The flat caps, yes, since we turned them down for that," Elvey said—a move that she regretted now.

"Not just the caps, but uniforms as well," Regie insisted. "I was watching when one of their men brought out a bundle of summer uniforms that he took to the barracks."

Ianna said, "Those might have been repairs. The Administrator is pretty chintzy about sewing up old uniforms as long as they'll hold together."

Regie countered, "Then why don't they bring them here to be repaired, since we made them in the first place?"

No one answered because everyone knew why: Elvey's shop was too exalted to do menial repair work, thank you. Besides Ianna, Ghislain, and Regie, the only other employee here right now was the accountant Dierksheide, who sat listening without comment. All other full-time employees had been let go, including models, line workers and supervisors, as well as the intrepid Humblecut, because Elvey could no longer afford to order meals in for clients after Cocci's demise.

Elvey murmured, "That was the killing blow—losing Cocci after investing so much in an outlet in Westford."

"Was it even begun?" Regie asked indignantly.

“Not that I saw,” Elvey said.

“Then where is the money?” Regie cried.

When Elvey shrugged, Ianna turned to Dierksheide to ask, “Can you go to Baroffio to ask him for a refund?”

Shifting, Dierksheide said, “I did speak with him. He asked me to produce a receipt signed by Cocci, in which case he would return our funds.”

“Well, then!” Regie said in victory, turning to Elvey.

“I don’t believe I ever asked her for a receipt,” she murmured, not knowing how she failed to do that. “At any rate, that was just a fraction of what we had been bringing in each month.”

After a depressed silence, Ianna asked, “Then who is making all these dresses we’re seeing?”

Ghislain said, “It differs from week to week, but Windry is the star of the moment, having teamed up with The Lands Clothing Shop. Apparently they’re providing labor for her designs, which are flying out the doors. Minka wore one to dinner just a few days ago. I wasn’t impressed.”

“We need to focus on something new,” Elvey said.

“Everything new in women’s clothing has been done at least once over the past year,” Ianna sulked.

Elvey said, “No, I mean something other than women’s clothes.”

“Men’s clothes,” Regie said immediately.

Elvey opened her mouth but Ghislain said, “We already produce upper-tier and avant-garde men’s clothing, but only a handful of men on the Lands buy them—Bozzelli, Lord Justinian, and Lady Marguerite’s son. The Lands Clothing Shop has got the rest of the men locked up, who prefer more subdued styles. Then there’s the new tailor Fernyhough. He’s had to hire two new assistants for his little shop.”

“Then, children’s clothes,” Regie persisted.

Ianna turned on her almost angrily. “Have you noticed that these people don’t buy clothes for boys? They all wear hand-me-downs that look exactly like Efran’s worn-out work clothes. It’s ridiculous.”

Elvey sighed, “Yes, and to sell girls’ clothes, we’d have to keep a large selection of ready-made or nearly finished on hand. But again, no one expects to find children’s clothes here, so they go to small, independent seamstresses.”

“Besiana’s Bath and Bed Supplies has started selling girls’ clothes and accessories—from Windry, again,” Ghislain noted.

Elvey said, “We need to get out of clothing altogether. What textiles are people having trouble finding here?”

“Bed clothes,” Regie suggested.

“Besiana’s,” Ianna countered tightly.

“Window coverings,” Regie said.

“The same,” Ianna said, bored.

“Rugs! Tapestries! Wall decorations!” Regie said irately.

“There are at least three shops in the new area that specialize in those. Everyone’s going east,” Ianna said.

“You’re not helping!” Regie cried.

“I’m being realistic,” Ianna replied calmly.

There was a long minute of deathlike silence, then Dierksheide muttered, “The Fortress horses are well-cared for, but the saddle blankets are uniformly tattered and old. Eavenson sells them, but I don’t know anyone on the Lands that produces them in number.”

The women stared at each other, then Elvey said, “Ghislain, go to the barracks stables down here—ask the stablemen what they want to see in their saddle blankets—materials, thickness, length and width—everything. Promise them free samples to try.”

“Right,” Ghislain said, standing. And the meeting broke up with a renewed sense of purpose.

While waiting for Rawlins to perform his part of the new plan in Crescent Hollow, Efran took Minka and all of the children down to play at Cavern Lake on the afternoon of the following day, March 9th. Arne drove them down in the large wagon, as usual, with Minka in the driver’s seat beside him. Two soldiers rode in the wagon, and four more rode alongside.

It was quite the expedition, with 15 children in all—Toby, Noah, Ivy, Isreal, Joshua, Calo, Alcmund, Chorro, Elwell, Hassie, Jera, Calix, Alson, Acy, and Pim. There was also a wide spread in their ages, with Noah the oldest at 12 and Joshua the youngest at 26 months. (Too young for this trip, three babies remained at the fortress. Also, this was probably the last outing Noah would make with the Abbey children. He was soon to be apprenticed to Wade’s Carriages for Hire here in the Lands, for which occupation Noah had chosen to train.)

Efran felt that Toby, somewhere around ten years old, was too important to the other children to be apprenticed off the hilltop. So, besides regular classes, he was occasionally tutored in mathematics by Koschat, in accounting by Goyne, and in the Law by Efran, who shared with him what he was learning in Law class himself.

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Chapter 17

For today’s expedition, the children had been warned that anyone who got into the lake would be taken back up hilltop. Upon hearing this injunction, a few soldiers glanced at Minka, but she was happily wearing a new black flat cap which she had no intention of losing in the water, as the cap looked cute over her short curls. And because there were families fishing off the pier, the Abbey children were also instructed to stay off it. Warning

them to stay off the singing tree turned out to be unnecessary, as it screamed at them itself.

That left plenty of room to run around and explore, with blankets for sitting, snacks for eating, and faeries in the great trees on either end of the lake for entertainment. The children greeted Escarra, sitting on Ashe's bench to rest from his gardening, and Eachus, the very old man whose walking stick appeared to be as old and gnarly as himself. Also, the harpist Arenivas was here playing on his lyre harp, which delighted everyone. So the children demanded coin for him. Efran gave Hassie the royal for the harpist, then ignored pleas from the other children who wanted to give him money likewise.

A few ducks, possibly escaped from Dufton's yard, had also taken up residence at the lake. The children were able to lure them to the shore with pieces of flatbread until the soldiers took it away from them. The children went crying to Efran, who told them, "Whoever feeds the ducks with your treats won't get any himself." So they grudgingly left the ducks alone.

But then roving vendors came around with a strange new fruit called "papaya" that the children wanted to try. So Efran had to buy enough for all them, the bodyguards, and him and Minka. When they tasted it, Efran sent one of the vendors up to the fortress to sell the rest of their papaya to the kitchen (which then had to order more).

When the children finally stopped harassing Efran with demands, he stretched out on a blanket with his head in Minka's lap to watch them through half-closed lids. In the brightness of the afternoon, the small figures were rendered crisp shadows flitting here and there. Eyeing these silhouettes, Efran suddenly realized how much they had grown in the few years (or months) that they had been here.

And with the rapid passage of time, he remembered that he would soon turn 30 (tomorrow, March 10th). Because of his race and his youth, he had been fighting for credibility all his life, so now it was hard to accept that he finally had it—as long as he didn't get careless with it.

He reached up to cover Minka's hand on his chest. "No pets with teeth coming out of the water," he noted. "Do you miss them?"

"Not when I have you to play with," she murmured, curling a longish strand of black hair which stubbornly sprang back flat.

"Here I am." He closed his eyes in satisfaction while the shadows chased each other for one more day.

In the late afternoon of March 11th, a decent but not luxurious hired carriage arrived at the wall gates of the Abbey Lands. One of the gatesmen immediately climbed up on the carriage roof to inspect the storage area under the driver's seat. The driver and footman turned to watch him in displeasure, but he called down to his fellow gatesman, "It's clear."

The gatesman on the ground looked in the carriage window at the sole occupant, a dark-haired man in a decent but not elegant suit. "What're you here for?"

"I'm Scovil, here to pick up my order," Rawlins said, handing him a forged receipt from Hassler's Tool Shop for various hand tools.

The gatesman looked it over, then said, "That's good, then." He returned Scovil's receipt and stepped away to wave the driver through. Rawlins lifted a hand in acknowledgment as the carriage passed through the gates.

“Where to, sir?” the driver called down to his passenger.

Rawlins stuck his head out the window. “Ah, let’s try Croft’s here, first; see if they have a room.”

“Will do,” the driver said.

He pulled the carriage up to the curb, and the footman hopped down to check at the desk. Shortly, he returned to tell his passenger, “Yessir, they have a few rooms available at present. The clerk said The Lands’ Best Inn has taken a load off them.”

“Well, I like the simplicity of the Lands’ second-best inn,” Rawlins said, emerging from the carriage to dig into his pocket. “Here’s your hire, and a tip for dinner. I won’t be needing you further.”

“Very good, sir.” The footman took the royals, then asked, “Shall I help you with your bags, sir?”

“Thank you, no; I only have the two,” Rawlins said. One of these was quite heavy, being filled with royals from Bickerstaffe to Rondinelli as part of his apology. He would never know that she never received it. Rawlins took his luggage into Croft’s to get a room on the first floor. Then he went directly back out to walk to Hassler’s Tool Shop, where he purchased a long-handled shovel and a few other implements.

As Rawlins paid the shop owner, the man asked, “You’re not going to dig for treasure at the smoke pits, are you?”

Rawlins started, then collected himself to laugh, “Actually, I’m going to put in a lovely garden.”

“Good, because they’re warning everyone that there are dangerous lizards out there,” Hassler said. “Here’s your change, sir.”

“Thank you. I’ll remember that.” Rawlins pocketed his change and collected his tools. Yes, he’d already heard this lame excuse to keep treasure seekers away. But after hearing Barrueta’s description of what was buried out there and where, Rawlins had no doubt of the veracity of her information. She was the kind of woman who knew things.

Before leaving the shop, he asked, “Have you got a carrier for some of these tools? I don’t have my cart yet.”

“Sure, let me get you something,” Hassler said, going to the back. Shortly, he reemerged with a large canvas sack. “This is about the best I can do.”

“That’ll work, thank you.” Rawlins shook out the sack to put the long-handled shovel in first, blade down. Then he dropped in the rest of the tools before gathering the neck of the sack around the shovel handle. “There we go,” he said.

Hassler nodded vaguely, seeing that this was not a man who used tools much, if at all. Also, Hassler couldn’t help but notice that his customer’s hair seemed to be leaking. That is, a few small dark drops rolled out of his hair down the back of his neck. True, the day was warm for mid-March, enough to make a man sweat. Having no knowledge of hair dyes, however, Hassler was confused by the tint. All he knew was that something was not right. He watched out the front window as his customer carried his awkward bundle away.

Rawlins managed to lug his sack of tools almost to Croft’s before anyone took particular notice of him. Only, on the sidewalk in front of the outdoor dining area, he did almost collide with a young woman who was running

toward Elvey's in great excitement. "Watch where you're going!" he chided, juggling his burden.

She wheeled back to shout, "We're going to make the most beautiful saddle blankets you've ever seen!"

"I've never seen a beautiful saddle blanket!" he bellowed back at her. She laughed at him. Upon her cheeky laughter, Rawlins suddenly saw a kink in his plan.

Two women crossing the street glanced darkly at his abruptly stopping in their path, but arrived unhindered at the notary shop, where Ryal was waiting for them. Seating them in the back room, he said, "I apologize for the delay in your hearing, Vories, but I've only now been able to locate Verlice"—five days after she had presented her complaint against him for fraud. Ryal continued, "He's due here any minute. Meanwhile, Faciane, here is his copy of the divorce decree that you'll present to him."

"Thank you, Lord Ryal," she said, patting it like a pet.

He paused to see that Soames was ready to take notes, then asked, "Now, Vories, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?"

"Yes," she said.

"Now then," Ryal began, "has Verlice paid anything on his debt to you?"

"Not a copper," she said darkly.

"We shall amend that today," Ryal said. "And he owes you—eight royals and ten pieces?"

Vories' eyes grew wide in objection. "No! Ten royals even! That's what I gave him!"

Ryal squinted aside thoughtfully. "Now that you mention it, I do remember giving him change when he paid the remainder of his fine with nine royals."

There was a violent tinkling above the front door, which slammed open to show Verlice squirming in the grip of Leneghan and Mumme on either side of him. They transported him to the back room, then stood at the door to await further orders.

Ryal said, "Thank you, gentlemen. Have a seat, Verlice." The one summoned paused, turning green at the sight of the two women at the table. Warily, he took the fourth chair, whereupon Faciane placed the folded document in front of him without a word. He knew what it was, having seen one before.

Then Ryal asked, "Verlice, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?"

"Yes," he muttered grumpily.

Then Ryal asked, "Verlice, did you borrow ten royals from Vories on or about February twenty-first of this year?"

"Ten? It can't have been that much. I was only a few royals short on my fine," he said, not looking at her.

Ryal corrected him, "You owed eight and ten, for which you paid nine royals and received change."

Exhaling, Verlice dug in his pocket, then pulled out a smattering of coinage which he plopped in front of Vories. “There. That’s all I’ve got.” She returned a look of burning coals to him.

“So you admit to the debt?” Ryal asked him.

Raising his shoulders, Verlice said, “There’s all my worldly wealth, and you can’t squeeze blood from a turnip.” Soames laughed silently at this hackneyed line.

“Very good. One moment,” Ryal said. He scooped the coins into his hand and left the room. While he was at the front counter, the only sound in the back room was Soames’ quill scratching across the paper. The women eyed Verlice darkly while he studied the wall.

A few minutes later, Ryal returned to the back table. He placed ten royals in front of Vories, telling her, “Here is your reimbursement. Please sign this receipt for our records.”

“Thank you, Lord Ryal,” she said, eagerly pocketing the royals and signing the receipt.

“Yes, that’s good of you, Ryal,” Verlice said, smiling.

Ryal glanced at him before taking the receipt back to Giardi at the front counter. He then returned with a few more papers. Placing one before Verlice, he said, “And here is your receipt for two royals, fifteen pieces.”

Verlice took it, sensing more to come, which Ryal delivered. “My judgment is that you owe her ten royals. In addition, you owe this office two royals for our costs to administer your debt, for a total liability of twelve royals. Subtracting the two fifteen you just paid leaves a debt to this office of nine royals and fifteen pieces. Therefore, I sentence you to work and pay boarding until this debt is paid in full.”

Verlice fell forward onto the table to sob, “I can’t! I can’t dig anymore! It’s too—”

Interrupting his histrionics, Ryal said, “You’re safe there, as the aqueduct supervisors earnestly requested that you not resume work under them. Instead, you are assigned to The Wash House, where your pay will depend on the amount of washing you get done. If you refuse or fail to do the work, you will be evicted from the Lands. You will report to me weekly with a payment. And as before, you will lodge in Laborers’ Hall. Any deviation from this arrangement may result in your expulsion from the Lands.”

Slack-faced, Verlice regarded him to silently mouth, *The Wash House*. Ryal nodded to the soldiers, “You may escort him to his work place.”

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Chapter 18

When Leneghan and Mumme came over to raise Verlice by his arms, Faciane said, “Wait.” They paused, and Verlice looked over in painful hope as she came around the table to him. Placing the divorce document in his inner pocket, she patted his chest. “Good luck, Verlice.” Then she stepped back for the soldiers to half-carry him out.

Faciane turned to say, “Thank you, Lord Ryal.” He nodded, and the two women left arm in arm to return to work.

Rawlins stood deep in thought on the sidewalk. He had just realized that the first thing he needed to do was to pinpoint exactly where this treasure spot was, how to reach it on foot, and how long that would take. Pensively, he took his sack of tools to his room, where he emptied it. Sack in hand, he stood thinking. The day was already mostly spent. Shouldn't he wait till tomorrow to go look? *I don't want to wait*, he objected. So he exited again with the sack and walked to the gates.

They were standing open to allow late afternoon traffic in and out. But the gatesman glanced at him and his sack to ask, “You're not thinking to go out to the treasure spot, are you?”

Shocked, Rawlins held up his sack. “I'm—gathering mushrooms for the eateries!”

A weary look passed over the gatesman's face. “It'll be checked when you get back.”

“That would be helpful, thank you,” Rawlins said, setting out with his sack. The gatesman shook his head in disgust. Privately, Rawlins thought he looked a little too jaunty in a flat cap. Apparently, the Lands had never seen what proper uniform hats looked like.

Rawlins followed Barrueta's directions across the Passage, then paused at the great wooden gates that stood high above him. Presently they creaked open, and he jumped at the appearance of a wiry-haired creature with a great, flabby nose. Pointing a gnarly finger to the side, he said, “Nah, treasure dere! Dat way!”

“Oh.” Rawlins looked where he pointed to a rough wooden sign stuck in the ground. He went over to see that it was awkwardly lettered: “tRÆSerr DIS.” Behind it ran a well-worn footpath. Then he remembered, “Lady Barrueta told me about the trolls, as well!”

Draping the sack over his shoulder, Rawlins began following the path. It led practically straight through the woods, across a shallow gully, and then through more woods. After following it for not quite an hour, he began to see columns of smoke and steam through the trees, and smell rotten eggs. This alarmed him, for the woods were also getting dark.

He finally stopped at the edge of a clearing in which were large standing rocks and smoking pools. He gazed around the alien landscape that bubbled, frothed and stank. Then he thought, *Could I be wrong? For all the traffic that's been out here, why has there been no digging?*

While he stood gazing at this unearthly scene, a giant lizard appeared atop the largest grouping of rocks. Flicking its tongue, it hissed, “If you've come for the treasure, there's only a little left. You must dig to the right of me here.” He turned his massive head down to the foot of the rocks. There, Rawlins saw that the soil had been disturbed. But reaching the area required navigating around several of the pools.

He began trembling in fear. Clutching his empty sack, he said, “I don't have everything I need with me today.”

The lizard said, “Yes, the gold is heavy. You will need help to carry it.”

“Yes,” Rawlins agreed, then backed up to stumble over whatever was behind him. So he turned to run as the lizard's light laughter followed him.

When Rawlins had gotten well away, he slowed to a walk, thinking. Could Barrueta have been wrong? Were the lizards dangerous, as he kept hearing? That one was certainly big. “But he didn’t stop me from leaving. Good heavens, a creature that big could certainly have stopped me. And the ground was definitely disturbed there. What if he is telling the truth, and there is only a little left? What if they want to see it all gone, to restore peace to the area? That was certainly inconsiderate of Efran to use their home grounds to hide his gold. So they’re encouraging people to clean it all out. Yes, I can see that. Lady Barrueta was too sure to be wrong.”

His knees were a little steadier now. Approaching the back side of the trolls’ enclosure, he realized, “I *will* need help. But, gracious, I don’t know anyone here. Whoever I get to help me will try to take my gold for himself.”

Glancing toward the new bridge over the Passage ahead, he had more immediate concerns. “I told the guard that I was gathering mushrooms. So I need to find mushrooms. And it’s beginning to get dark. I need to hurry.”

As he started off, he stepped on something large and round which almost sent him sprawling. Looking around the base of the huge old tree at which he stood, he said, “Those are the biggest nuts I’ve ever seen. Maybe I should take those, instead. But—what if they’re poisonous? No, I told him I was gathering mushrooms, so that’s what I need to find.”

He walked around looking, careful to not get out of sight of the bridge, and then spotted a nice large patch of mushrooms with golden brown crowns. “There we are.” He pulled up several clusters of these lovely fungi for his sack. Progressing past the trolls’ sign to the bridge, he murmured, “Now I only need a safe helper.”

He trudged back over the bridge to the wall gates, where the same guard looked at him wearily. “Let me check your sack.”

“Yes, certainly. You’ll find fresh mushrooms for your fine eateries. Just in time for dinner, too!” Rawlins agreeably handed him the light sack.

The guard opened it to peer inside, then took the sack by a bottom corner to fling away the deadly fungi. Handing him the empty sack, he said, “Don’t gather any more mushrooms; you’ll kill us all.”

“Oh. Sorry about that,” Rawlins said complacently. Groaning, the guard waved him on through.

Ambling down Main Street in the early twilight, Rawlins mused, “Now I need a reliable helper who won’t overpower me.” Scanning the people he passed, he caught sight of the young messenger Jian, who was trotting up Main with a payment for the butcher Lowry from the Fortress. This was his last job for the day. (After finding Jian to be dependable, the fortress administrators stopped using soldiers for menial errands.)

“Here we go,” Rawlins said in satisfaction.

He intercepted the boy, who looked up at him sharply. Rawlins said, “Hello, there. You look like a reliable young man, and I need help. I need a helper to help me gather flora and fauna of the area for study.” He held out a royal from his pocket. “My name is Scovil, and I’m a researcher.”

Evaluating the royal, which was genuine, Jian then evaluated the researcher, who looked sketchy. “I’m Jian. You’re not thinking of going out now, are you? It’ll be dark soon.”

“Oh?” Rawlins asked, looking up at the dusky sky. “How about tomorrow, then? Can you meet me in front of Croft’s tomorrow morning, early?” Rawlins asked.

“I think so. You’ll pay me a royal?” Jian asked, which was far more than he usually received for running errands.

“Take it now,” Rawlins urged, holding it out.

“No, I’ll wait to see that I can make it,” Jian said dubiously.

“Good. See you tomorrow morning!” Rawlins stepped back, and Jian proceeded to Lowry’s with his payment.

By that time, Elvey’s skeleton crew had begun working on custom-made saddle blankets using the very best woolsens, cottons, and padding they had on hand. Elvey herself stitched, and even Dierksheide was drafted as a cutter, since he had no accounting work to do right now.

As dusk progressed to early evening, Ryal finished translating the rest of the booklet that Efran had somehow brought from the future Nicarber. Giardi came to the back room as he sat glumly at the table. “What more have you found?” she asked in concern.

“Not much,” he grunted. “And what I have found, I don’t want to tell Efran.”

“Why?” she asked.

He grumbled, “I’m almost certain now that—if I’ve translated this correctly—we will see a third visit from the Destroyer. I have no way of knowing when, but my bones tell me it will be soon.”

“Oh, dear,” she murmured.

He looked up, as she had a paper in her hand. “What do you have there?” he asked.

She exhaled, “Another missing person report.”

“Another missing person?” Ryal demanded. “How many does that make in the last week?”

Giardi replied, “Six in the last week, fifteen in all, and all of them men. The wife of Offley, the last one missing, said he was going to look for the hidden treasure at the smoke pits.”

Ryal held his head. “What to do, when we’ve warned them so sternly about it?”

Blessed at birth with the gift of helping, Giardi said, “I am reaching out as best I can; haven’t found them yet. But I am fairly sure they’re all still alive.”

“I suppose we’ll have to tell Efran about this,” Ryal sighed. Giardi nodded.

With the hilltop still in full daylight, Efran was on the archery lines supervising Isreal, Toby, Chorro and Hassie in their *aiké* shooting lessons—that is, the Polonti method of aiming by instinct. Isreal, who had caught the method the first time Efran had demonstrated it, was improving daily just by getting stronger. The others were shooting well enough, but were increasingly frustrated by their failure to consistently hit the targets.

Chorro, being Polonti himself, was especially vexed by his inability to grasp the method. Finally, he threw down the bow. “I can’t do it!”

Efran said, “You look just like me when I was trying to learn it. My shots were going so far afield, I was afraid

of hitting someone on the back steps”—far across the grounds behind them.

The children laughed. Chorro reluctantly picked up his bow again, and kept missing.

With the children’s continued failure, even Toby was looking discouraged. Ten paces behind them, Alcmund and Elwell were watching. They were interested in learning *aike* shooting, but if even Toby couldn’t do it, they had no hope of getting it themselves.

Isreal paused, then, to look intently at his fellow shooters one by one. Efran watched him, wondering. Mountain trolls (such as those who had cared for Isreal since his infancy) often communicated mentally. Efran was beginning to suspect that Isreal had this ability, even though he hadn’t been sufficiently equipped in the Southern Continental language to use it.

But when the children resumed shooting, Hassie suddenly screamed. Her arrow had tentatively landed in the center of the target. She nocked again and fired wildly, only to hit the center again. “I’m doing it and I don’t know how!” she cried. Soldiers began looking over.

In renewed hope, Toby and Chorro began firing again, and Chorro leapt up, whooping. “Look!” he cried. His arrow had landed dead center. Carelessly nocking, he sent the arrow into the center circle again. Isreal watched without shooting.

Several men came over to observe, but Toby was almost in tears at his continued humiliation. Finally, Efran came to kneel beside him. “Nock your arrow,” he instructed. Toby did. “Look at the target,” Efran said. Toby stared it down fiercely. “Now close your eyes and shoot.”

Toby looked horrified. “I’ll hit someone!”

“You have to trust your gut. Close your eyes and shoot,” Efran repeated.

Grimacing in fear, Toby squeezed his eyes shut, raised the bow, and let the arrow fly. At the cries around him, his eyes sprang open to see the arrow snug in the target’s center. “I don’t understand,” he whispered.

“Some things you can’t overthink,” Efran said wryly. Toby nodded and lifted his bow again to shoot happily and accurately. With that, Elwell and Alcmund decided they’d like to try it, too.

While the men clustered nearby to watch the young prodigies, Efran squinted at Isreal. He looked back to his father to smile slyly. This his healed lip, scarred but whole, enabled him to do.

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Chapter 19

Early the following morning, Rawlins (as “Scovil”) was sitting on the front steps of Croft’s with his sack of tools when Jian approached hesitantly. Rawlins sprang up. “You made it! Excellent. Let’s go see what we find. Here, I’ll carry the shovel; you take the sack with the small tools.”

“Will do,” Jian said, accepting ownership of the sack. He added, “I’ve told my boss I’m helping you this morning.”

“Good,” Rawlins said, then began wondering what name he had given the boy. He had told him “Scovil,” hadn’t he? He was sure he did. It would have been stupid and unfortunate had he said “Rawlins”—or worse, “Bickerstaffe.” He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry now, because he couldn’t remember. Oh, well, he just wouldn’t say his name again until the boy used it. Whose name was. . . .

“What’s your name again?” Rawlins asked him.

“Jian,” he replied, glancing up.

“And do you remember my name?” Rawlins asked as though testing him.

“Scovil,” Jian said.

“Correct!” Rawlins said victoriously. Jian rolled his eyes, thinking that a royal would be the least he’d accept for his help today.

As they went out the wall gates, Jian told one of the gatesmen, “I’m going with Scovil here to the woods to help him collect flora and fauna for his research.”

“All right, Jian,” the guard Tiras said with an appraising look at Rawlins. Discomfited, Rawlins smiled and nodded, holding up his shovel. He wished the boy would stop flapping his mouth to everyone about who he was with and where they were going.

Noting the shovel, Tiras asked darkly, “You’re not going to dig treasure, are you?”

“Only the treasure of growing things, my good man!” Rawlins said with what he intended to be an engaging smile.

Now the Polonti guard looked suspicious, so that Jian told him, “I’m getting paid a royal for my help.”

With a stony glare at the researcher, Tiras uttered to Jian, “Check with us when you get back, and we’ll make sure of it.”

“Sure,” Jian said happily. Rawlins quietly ground his teeth, imagining the question, *What have you got in the sack, there?* But the two of them progressed up the main road to turn west past the old stone bridge. Jian shifted the sack every now and then, as it was probably heavier than the shovel.

They crossed the new bridge over the Passage, then Rawlins headed directly for the path beyond the trolls’ sign. Jian looked at him in mild alarm. “You’re not going to the smoky pits, are you?”

“What? Smoky pits? What’s that?” Rawlins asked.

“Where everybody was saying that treasure’s buried. But there’s no treasure, just big lizards that eat people. We’re not headed out that way, are we?” Jian asked, studying him.

“What? Of course not. There are many life forms in these woods that I wish to study,” Rawlins protested. “Now, we’re going to skip these pretty brown mushrooms here. I have it on good authority that they’re deadly.”

Jian squinted at him. “Yeah, eating the skullcap will pretty much ruin your day.”

“That’s correct,” Rawlins said crisply. “Oh, and take care for those big round nuts. Stepping on those will ruin your day, too.”

Kneeling, Jian grimaced at him. “These hickory nuts are the best eatin’ ever. You don’t even have to cook ’em first.” He emptied the sack of tools preparatory to making room in it for nuts. Then he paused over the assortment on the ground. “You’ve got a—fillet knife, and fishing pliers, a hammer, and axe—” He looked up at the researcher in bewilderment. “Why do you need all these to gather flora and fauna in the woods?”

“No, those are for later,” Rawlins said impatiently. “Go ahead and leave them by the tree here; we’ll pick them up on the way back.”

“Right,” Jian said. By this time, he was doubting the wisdom of coming with this fraud, but a sackful of shagbark hickory nuts would help make up for the effort. So he left all the useless tools on the ground and loaded up the sack with nuts. He’d take these for pay in case the royal wasn’t forthcoming, which he was beginning to doubt as well. And since he saw no reason to carry a sack full of nuts deeper into the woods, he left it at the tree with the tools, and Scovil didn’t even notice.

At this time, while Efran and Minka were in Law class, the courtyard alarm bell began ringing. Efran sprang up, but told the others, “Stay; let me see what it is before we yank you out of class.”

The class waited in silence until he reappeared with his bow and double quiver slung over his shoulder. “Gear up; the men we chased out of the eastern Lands have come calling at the northeastern gates.”

While the soldiers surged up around Minka, he told her, “The Commander is leading us.”

“Then I’ll go down to Auntie’s,” she said, rising. He crinkled his eyes at her, then turned to stalk out.

Increasingly impatient, Jian walked with Rawlins down a dirt path. Not having walked this path before, Jian was not certain where it led; he only knew that the “researcher” was paying no attention to the flora and fauna around him. Come to think of it, how had Scovil thought to carry any fauna—animal life—in a canvas sack? Which neither of them was still carrying.

After they had walked about a half hour down the path, Jian said, “We’re going to the smoky pits, aren’t we?”

“Perhaps; I don’t know,” Rawlins said.

“You’re not even looking at anything we pass; you’re just keeping to this path here,” Jian observed.

“I’ll pay you well,” Rawlins said distractedly, watching for smoke ahead.

“With what, if there’s no treasure?” Jian asked.

“Oh, I have a great deal of gold already,” Rawlins said, suddenly alert at movement ahead. He then wondered why he didn’t take the knife from the sack. It was sensible to have protection, especially if there were others digging around the pools as well.

“You have gold? From where?” Jian asked in flat skepticism.

Aggravated, Rawlins turned to him, and Jian saw him frankly thinking, *How much do I need this nuisance?* The boy stilled, bracing to run if he had to. But Rawlins thrust his hand into his pocket to withdraw three royals and hold them out. Jian took them, ascertaining that they were real, then studied the researcher. Rawlins said, “There’s your pay; just come along and keep quiet for a minute.”

Jian pocketed the royals and kept quiet for the rest of the way.

Shortly, they heard the popping of the mud pools, and smelled the odor of rotten eggs. Jian was shaking by now, on high alert as they passed through the gloomy trees. While he watched the path ahead, he kept his distance from the researcher as well.

The living trees gradually played out until the pair came into a ring of dead trees. Here, Rawlins and Jian looked around silently in the morning light at the random, lifeless pools—a few ringed in red, orange or yellow, one deep black, and another beyond issuing lazy drifts of smoke. Then Jian’s blood curdled at the sight of a very large lizard, the size of a grown man, that climbed atop a tall standing rock on the other side of the pools. “I see you’ve come prepared for the treasure,” it said.

“Yes, I have,” Rawlins said, wielding the shovel. Jian glanced at other lizards appearing over rocks or from behind dead trees. They also were large, but none as big as the first.

“And you have brought a helper,” the big lizard said, turning his cold eyes on the boy. Not liking the effect of his gaze, Jian tore his eyes away to watch their bodies instead. The great one added, “He may not be big enough to carry all that is here, if you want to take it all.”

“If I have to pick and choose, I’m prepared to do that,” Rawlins said. Jian looked at him, now—he was sweating, with dark drops rolling out of his hair down the side of his face. Having worked in a beauty shop, Jian recognized sage hair dye.

“Then come get what’s left. It won’t remain for long,” the big one said. None of the others had spoken yet; they all just watched. Feeling the pull of their eyes, Jian kept his focus off them.

He startled as Rawlins took two steps forward, then wavered. “I’m—I’m afraid of falling into the pools.”

“Keep your eyes on me, and I will guide you safely around them,” the big one said.

Rawlins blurted, “Who are you?”

“I am Oldknow, who has lived since ages past, and will live ages more. I know of secret treasures everywhere, to share with those who follow me,” the lizard said.

“Where are these treasures?” Rawlins gasped, weaving his way around one pool and then another. Jian had the strong urge to run up and take his arm to pull him away. But the man was now beyond the second pool, where Jian could not bring himself to follow.

“They are underground,” Oldknow said, opening his mouth wide. “Underground. Underground.”

In near terror, Jian looked at the other lizards opening their mouths to echo, “Underground.” “Underground.” “Underground.” Rawlins went forward as though in a dream, and Oldknow slithered down from the rock to rise up before him with great mouth wide open.

Jian had seen enough. He turned to run back up the path as hard as he could.

Balancing on Kraken bareback, Efran kept right at Commander Wendt's side as they drew up to the mass of men streaming through the open northeastern gates. He saw at a glance that the gatesmen were down, and the defenders were momentarily frozen at the sight of the invaders.

They were screaming, naked, painted men with white hair standing up in spikes. With nothing but swords and shields, they threw themselves onto the uniformed and armored Landers almost before they could react. It was paralyzing, especially in the stark shadows of early light, before the night gatesmen had been changed out with fresh men.

Efran whipped his bow off his shoulder and began firing. He took out a dozen or more while his men came to themselves to begin fighting effectively against this frenzied mob. Wendt had ridden into the midst of them, wielding his sword.

But then, with no regard for being trampled, the invaders charged the horses. Even battle-trained mounts panicked at the surge of brightly colored creatures. Kraken reared, hooves slashing—but threw Efran. He hit the ground and rolled. Still down, he barely drew his sword in time to parry the strike from the shrieking lunatic above him.

When Efran kicked him in an unprotected spot, it hardly slowed him. But it was enough for Efran to scramble up and drive his sword home under the savage's shield. Having lost his own, Efran grabbed the shield from the sagging man, then wheeled to meet the next wild-haired, wild-eyed attacker. Efran quickly learned to not look in their insane faces, but focus on the wave of brightly colored bodies one by one.

From out of nowhere came the crack of a whip, the braid of which wrapped around Efran's right arm to yank the sword from his hand. He jerked his arm free, glimpsing the knife plunging toward his midsection. He fell aside to grab the hand wielding it and break the man's wrist, then punch him in the throat. Retrieving the sword and shield, he spun to meet the next howling, painted figure bearing down on him.

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Chapter 20

A few Abbey men had the presence of mind to close the gates again, which helped the Landers control the flow of invaders. Also, the new Laborers' Hall was right here along the New North Road. When the lodgers awoke to the fighting right outside their door, they emerged in a fury armed with stakes, tools, or just their fists. Even a few women came out with pots and pans. A glimpse of the chaos at their doorstep told them that they were fighting for their lives. And after the first shock of the naked painted bodies, the defenders were in no danger of hitting one of their own by mistake.

While Efran beat back one slobbering madman after another, his subconscious mind was working. Obviously, these men were not the unauthorized settlers that Tourse's unit had evicted—they were newcomers from farther north—possibly from beyond the Fastnesses, even, because he had never seen nor heard of any group that fought like this. And although there were not thousands of them *yet*, they clearly intended conquest of the Lands—not just the eastern portion, or the fields, or the livestock, or the Treasury, but all of it. So the battle raged throughout the morning.

At the banging on the chapel doors, Marguerite and Minka looked over quickly from the seating area. Hartshough calmly opened the doors to admit Jian, panting and teary-eyed. “Hartshough,” he gasped. “Lady Marguerite—the—the lizards have got Scovil, who thought to go out there and dig up the treasure. But he lied to me, and told me that he was a researcher looking for flora and fauna, and he gave me three royals to carry his tools, which he didn’t need, but we got there and the big lizard lured him over, and I ran so they wouldn’t eat me!”

Coaxing him to the divan, Marguerite said, “That was very smart of you, Jian. Hartshough, get him a mild bracer, please.”

“Yes, Lady Marguerite,” Hartshough said, moving to the kitchen.

Minka watched as Marguerite sat beside Jian on the divan with an arm around his shoulders. She asked no questions, only let him catch his breath while Hartshough brought over a tall glass of orange juice mixed with lager. Jian accepted this to drink half of it in one gulp, then held it on his lap as he took a deep breath.

Marguerite asked quietly, “What happened to this Scovil, Jian?”

“I didn’t see,” Jian exhaled. “They were all calling him over, chanting, ‘underground, underground,’ and it was so strong I had to keep my eyes down so I wouldn’t be drawn in, too.”

“Did he go underground?” Marguerite asked.

“Not that I saw. He was just standing there when I ran. Can you call the Captain, Lady Minka?” Jian asked, wracked.

She said pensively, “No, I’m afraid all the men got called to a break in the northeastern gates, even Justinian and Eryk. But, I don’t see why we can’t help you, Jian.”

Both Marguerite and Jian looked at her dubiously, but Minka said, “Efran told me about talking to the lizards, and he didn’t seem concerned about their hurting him, but they definitely had some kind of mental power. If they’ve ensnared a man for a plaything, don’t you think this is something faeries can take care of?”

Marguerite hesitated, but others in the hall evidently agreed strongly, so that Sirs Ditson and Nutbin took it as permission to assist. Jian twisted in surprise when they appeared atop the back seat of the divan at his right and left shoulders. Now, to clarify, Minka was thinking of herself and Auntie, not of their faerie friends. Nor was she thinking of the sprites who were now observing from the loft railing. Although others considered sprites the rats of the faerie realm, they thought themselves perfectly capable of rendering assistance, as they had helped Lord Efran with the dark altior Cocci (so they believed).

On Jian’s left, Sir Ditson bowed, sweeping off his hat. Given that spring was imminent, he wore a pale green suit and top hat with a bright floral vest. “You are so correct, Lady Minka, and we are thrilled to hear your vote of confidence for our assistance while the men of the Lands are repelling these obnoxious barbarians. Is that not the case, dear Nutbin?”

Jian spun to his right to see the squirrel in a pink and green vest clean his monocle fiercely. “Indeed it is, dear Ditson, and I am highly anxious to teach these lizards a thing or two about taking advantage of dense humans!”

The women started laughing, but Ditson stiffened in horror. “Not that we consider humans dense, dear Lady Marguerite and Lady Minka, since you are both married to eminent humans. And young Jian here was certainly smart enough to not get ensnared in their chants.”

The sprites on the railing sniggered at Nutbin’s faux pas, but Minka asked Marguerite, “Can you sense anything of them, Auntie?”

Marguerite looked off, then shook her head. “They’re too far away, out of the Lands. But if this is the group that produced Heroux, I would approach them with caution.”

Jian said anxiously, “Since everybody thinks there’s treasure out there, the word that the Commander put out was that they’re dangerous, and to leave them alone.”

“Yes, the pools are definitely dangerous,” Minka admitted. “But if this Scovil has gotten himself in trouble, I think we should go see what we can do to help him. Hartshough, what do you know about them?” she asked, turning to him.

He replied, “My kin have had no contact with them, but I suspect that they are shape-shifters, Lady Minka, which as a class are dangerous.”

She sat back. “I see. So, we’re going to leave this poor, stupid outsider in their grasp because we’re helpless without the men?”

Marguerite laughed and Jian sat up to offer, “I can guide you. And I already know not to look in their eyes.”

Marguerite sighed, “Looks like we’re off, then. Yes, Sirs Ditson and Nutbin, we appreciate all the help we can get. Hartshough, I’ll ask you to stay here in case Wendt or Efran return while we’re gone.”

“Yes, Lady Marguerite,” he said with a bow.

On the loft railing, Carryon, Passthetime, Benext, and Getaway winked at each other while Pullaway whispered, “The lady appreciates *all the help they can get*. We’re off then as well, goodfellows!” They disappeared and Hartshough glanced up to the railing with a sigh of resignation.

Since almost all of the horses as well as the men were at the northeastern gates fighting, the rescuers walked up Main for the boys Javier and Dirkes to open the gates to them. Though young, Javier was bold enough to ask, “Should you be out, Lady Minka?” They all knew how protective the Captain was toward his wife.

She smiled. “Yes, Javier, it’s quite all right. We’re just going to the woods to look for flora and fauna—and other silly creatures.”

“And I’m with them,” Jian said swiftly.

“Very well, then,” Javier said dubiously. Detler or Stephanos could bully the lady into staying put while the soldiers were fighting at the very gates of the Lands, but Javier felt incapable of doing the same until he at least grew taller than she. He was one of maybe three soldiers (Dirkes being another) who hadn’t caught up with her yet.

As soon as the women and Jian had passed out of the gate guards’ view onto the north coastal highway going west, Ditson and Nutbin appeared in the air alongside them. Jian started briefly, but began walking with greater

confidence to have the help of faeries here. (No, he didn't know that the ladies with him were also faerie, which was probably for the best.)

They walked on past the trolls' compound, then Jian showed them the sack of hickory nuts leaning up against the tree. "Remind me to pick that up on the way back, please. But don't trip over the tools here," he said as tour guide.

Minka frowned down at the tools with an unasked question, but Marguerite assured him that they'd remember the nuts. In fact, Minka said, "I didn't realize there were so many hickory trees out here. And the nuts are everywhere! I'll have to bring the children down here to collect bagfuls myself." This is one of those statements that would have made Efran reel in exasperation, had he heard it. The fortress kitchen had so many bushels of shelled hickory nuts, they had to find another storage closet for them all.

Right now, however, Efran was ramming his sword into another naked body. He glanced up at Justinian in a second-floor window of the Laborers' Hall. From the women who swarmed around him, he was courteously accepting all heavy household objects—irons, kettles, fireplace tongs, door stops, brick warmers, and the like. These he carefully aimed before dropping on the white, unprotected heads of the savages below. From the glimpses Efran caught, it appeared that Justinian was highly effective without working up a disagreeable sweat. Eryk, however, was fighting with pent-up Polonti rage against the invaders, and acquitting himself well.

Breathing heavily, Efran then blinked at the gap around him. Seeing no one else to strike, he finally paused to wipe a stream of blood gushing from his nose. "Wha—?" He had no idea how that had happened.

Quennel ran up to give him a fairly clean kerchief. Accepting it, Efran pressed it to his nose. "Where . . . ?"

Quennel said, "They're hopping back over the wall toward the ridge, Captain."

Efran focused on the hundred or so bare bodies in retreat. "Huh. Who's down?" he asked, muffled.

"We've got a fair number of wounded, but no dead yet," Quennel said.

Readjusting the kerchief at his nose, Efran looked to his left where a group of men had gathered around someone covered in blood. "Commander!" he gasped.

When Minka's group arrived at the stinking, smoking pools, they surveyed the area silently a moment. Ditson and Nutbin disappeared to maintain the advantage of surprise when it was time to act. Then Minka called, "Hello! Where are you?"

Jian whispered shakily, "The lizard boss calls himself Oldknow."

"Really?" she said. Then she shouted, "Oldknow! I am Lady Minka of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, and I wish to talk to you."

With surprising quickness, the great lizard appeared atop his usual rock. "Lady Minka. I am Oldknow, and I am delighted to talk with you and your friends."

"We are looking for the researcher Scovil, who got himself lost out this way. Produce him, if you will," Minka instructed.

“Scovil,” Oldknow repeated. “I am not sure that I know this one.”

Outraged, Jian said, “I came out here with him only an hour ago, and you tricked him underground!”

“Bring him back up, please,” Minka said firmly. Marguerite had not spoken yet, as she was looking, listening, and reaching out to feel.

“Perhaps you would care to come down and get him underground,” Oldknow said. “Underground. Underground. Underground,” he repeated, opening his mouth wide.

Before Minka could respond, there were bright flashes sailing through the air to land with a loud *pop pop pop* on the lizard’s head and back. Writhing, he quickly disappeared behind his rock.

Minka and Jian startled, looking around in confusion while Ditson and Nutbin appeared in high dungeon. Shaking his fist, Ditson cried, “You worms of the alley, you interfering slugs, who invited you to throw your cheap little bursts into a sensitive and delicate extraction?”

There were fits of high-pitched giggling, and five little men in variously colored tweed suits with big red buttons and flat caps appeared sitting on the tall rocks around the deadly pools. Pullaway crowed, “The Lady Marguerite expressed her appreciation for all the help she can get, and sprites are nothing if not obliging.”

Minka and Marguerite glanced at each other, wide-eyed, then Minka decided to go with the flow. “While we do appreciate your help very much, dear Pullaway, we would like to present a united front against these naughty lizards. First, can either you or our faithful faerie friends go underground and extract Jian’s friend?”

Sprites and faeries instantly disappeared. Marguerite, Minka and Jian waited breathlessly at the edge of the smoky pools. For a while, there was no sound but the plopping of the mud and the hiss of steam.

Then all at once, Pullaway and Benext appeared on either side of a bedraggled man, dragging him forward by the arms (and prompting him with tiny shocks on his buttocks, because he outweighed both of them together). They successfully got him to the far side of the pools, where the three were waiting.

As they gaped at the paunchy, fiftyish man in his underwear, he came to himself sufficiently to see that two women were regarding his dishabille. Gurgling in his throat, he covered his private parts with his hands and made as if to run, but Pullaway and Benext held him firmly in place.

“Is that the gratitude you show Lady Minka for ordering your extraction, you lump?” Pullaway cried. He levitated to reach the poor man’s head, which he pounded a few times with an enormous mallet that appeared out of nowhere.

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Chapter 21

Around the pools, several voices were then raised. Minka said, “There now, let’s have no unnecessary violence, please, especially on our poor man.”

Jian said, “That’s not Scovil. I mean, this one needed help, and clothes, but, Scovil must be still down there.”

Marguerite said, “I believe that’s a lamplighter and street cleaner. . . . Eggington. Isn’t that right?”

Because her voice was soft and kind, Eggington admitted, “It’s me, Lady Marguerite. But, if you were me, wouldn’t you chance getting a treasure?”

“How many have they got trapped down there?” Minka asked in alarm.

Marguerite was peering at Eggington’s backside. “Dear man, what is that protruding from your underwear?”

“Nothing! Nothing!” Eggington cried in panic, trying to cover his buttocks now.

Meanwhile, the sultry air around the pools was full of shrill sprite laughter and enraged faerie threats, along with various pops, zaps, and streaks of light that indicated competing streams of magic that got tangled up or misdirected due to interference.

Shortly, however, Ditson and Nutbin appeared in the air, levitating another poor man over the pools. He was in worse straits than the first, having the tail and hind legs of a lizard. Also, he was completely hairless. As they set him on the ground before the ladies, Minka cried, “Who is turning you into a lizard?”

Jian said, “I know you! You’re the refuse hauler Gushken.”

“How can you tell?” Minka asked in pity. The identified Gushken sagged in discomfort, only shrugging what little shoulders he had left.

“So we seem to have a pattern,” Marguerite murmured. “But the crucial question indeed is: who is doing this?” She raised her eyes in extreme wariness.

With thirty or forty men, Efran and Wendt rode back silently to the chapel. Efran kept the blood-soaked kerchief to his nose while Wendt, pale, held his hastily bandaged left arm close to his side. They dismounted to trudge up the steps to the open door at which Hartshough stood. “Come in, Commander, Lord Efran, so that I may tend you.”

“Thank you, Har’shough,” Efran said through a clogged nose. Lightly whacking Kraken, he told him, “Take the Cobander’s horse around back.” Head drooping, Kraken obeyed. Wendt dismissed the rest of the men, none of whom were injured, to the barracks.

Entering, Efran glanced around at the upholstered furniture, then lay on the marble floor to try to stem the blood trickling from his nose. Wendt sat in a chair for Hartshough to strip off his torn, bloody shirt and begin cleaning a deep cut on his upper arm. Wendt briefly closed his eyes.

“You’re not riding out again,” Efran said from the floor.

Wendt barely glanced over. “This is nothing.”

“We can’t risk it. You’re too valuable. None of the ben can replace you,” Efran stated from flat on his back.

“If I have to stay out of battle, then you certainly do.” Wendt knew he was being contentious, but he wouldn’t allow any suggestion of coddling. While Efran attempted to argue, he continued, “Gabriel’s checking the men for whoever’s in the best shape to scout out who they are, where they came from, and how many are collecting where.” Hartshough had now bandaged the arm sufficiently until one of the Lands’ physicians could look at it. But they had many other men to tend right now.

“They’re not frob anywhere near here. I’ve never seen anything like theb. Thank you,” Efran said as Hartshough gave him a clean damp cloth for his face.

“You are welcome, Lord Efran. Allow me to get you and the Commander a bracer,” Hartshough said.

“That would be wonderful,” Efran murmured, eyes closed.

Krall entered at this time with a parchment in hand. He saluted, “Commander. Captain.”

Wendt said, “Is that a list of casualties?” Efran looked over from the floor.

“Yes, sir,” Krall said. “Coghill and Wallace are treating the worst cases in Laborers’ Hall, and Tolliver is overseeing the transport of the rest to the infirmary.”

“How bany dead?” Efran asked.

“None dead yet, Captain,” Krall said.

Efran sat up. “None? No one dead?”

“Against a bunch of naked men? No, Captain; we’re covered,” Krall said with a touch of sarcasm.

As Efran was laughing and crying both, Wendt told Krall, “Put it on my desk; go rest up.”

“Yes, Commander. Oh, and, according to your orders, the injured invaders are being taken to the infirmary as well,” Krall said.

“Yes, we’ll want to talk to them,” Wendt said. “Dismissed.” With a salute, Krall left.

Hartshough entered from the kitchen to place a tall glass of his specially fortified bracer on the floor beside Efran, then hand another to the Commander in his chair. Despite a clogged nose, Efran drained his glass. Sipping his, Wendt looked around to ask, “Where is Marguerite?”

Hartshough replied, “Commander, she and Lady Minka accompanied young Jian to the smoky pits, where he had apparently lost a companion—” Efran lunged up to run out the back door, whistling. Shortly, Wendt and Hartshough listened to Kraken lope up Main Street with a rider on his bare back.

“They’ll be here imminently,” Wendt said, sipping his bracer.

At the pools, a fourth rescuee was sitting on the ground at Marguerite's feet, looking abject and confused. The researcher Scovil was not among them. Minka asked the latest, "How many are down there?"

He hardly seemed to comprehend her question, as his human ears had shrunk to nothing. He also had the complete hindquarters of a lizard. Meanwhile, the five sprites were locked in a fierce competition with Sirs Ditson and Nutbin as to who could rescue the most prisoners.

Shaking her head, Marguerite took Minka in one hand and Jian in the other. "We need help; there is more at work here than faeries or sprites can handle."

As they began to move off, Oldknow suddenly scabbled to the top of his rock. "No, no. Please don't leave."

Marguerite paused, trying to ascertain where the power was gathering that she felt. No, not gathering—Emerging? Was it emerging from underground? She couldn't tell; she only knew that it was something beyond her. Nonetheless, she stood between it and the two young ones beside her. As the daughter of the last Faerie Queene over the whole Southern Continent, she would exercise what power she had in contention with something she knew she couldn't match.

They were all startled by the crashing of a large body through the dead trees behind them, and Efran brought Kraken to an abrupt, veering halt at the edge of the infertile ground. (Yes, he had found the shortcut.) Drenched in sweat and blood, he threw himself down to his feet to draw the knife from its sheath at his hip, flip it and throw it hard at Oldknow.

The tip of the blade hit his throat, but bounced off his hide to fall into a steaming hot pool at the foot of the rock. Oldknow laughed, "Your weapons are useless here, Captain."

Efran breathed in rage, "As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I order you back to hell where you came from."

Oldknow opened his mouth wide to laugh. "You are out of your Lands, Lord Sovereign! You cannot order me anywhere!"

Efran spread like a cobra. "Wherever my people are threatened, I have the authority to protect them. I claim this land as *mine*, and I demand—"

He broke off at the sudden darkening overhead, and they all looked over at a very old man with a large staff in his hand. He stood at the edge of the barren ground an equal distance between Efran and Oldknow. Minka whispered, "That's Eachus"—the old man on the bench by Cavern Lake.

He looked between the two combatants, then said: "You claim this land because your people wandered onto it, Lord Efran?"

Efran studied him a moment before replying, "This is so close to my Lands that whatever is here affects us. I cannot ignore evil on our western border when I am fighting evil on our east as well. If I let them all surround us unchallenged, then we become prisoners in our own Lands. I will not leave us confined by fear."

"And on those grounds, you claim this land," Eachus said.

The sky continued to darken above them, and Minka pressed closer to Efran's back. Jian was firmly wedged between them. Marguerite stood back from the power rippling from Eachus. Efran turned fully toward him.

“Yes, I claim authority on this land. Who are you?”

“My name is Oldknow,” he replied. To the great lizard, he added, “And I resent your appropriating my name to give yourself stature.”

The lizard laughed at him as well. “Let the name belong to whoever it fits best!”

“Well, then,” the new Oldknow said. He inhaled deeply, then blew a light breath toward the great lizard.

His breath seemed to condense into something bright and solid which encased the lizard and squeezed. With the pressure, it raised its head and opened its mouth wide. Only a little more squeezing was required for it to eject something dark and oily, a slimy, fetid thing that shot out with a shriek to plunge into a poisonous pool below.

Then in place of the great lizard sat a befuddled-looking man with thinning gray hair and tightly fitting spectacles. He sat looking around as though wondering how he got up here and how to get down. Peering at him, Efran said dubiously, “Hosmer?” At least he was fully dressed.

Weaving slightly, he looked up. “Yes, Captain. I’ve got to get back to work.” For Hosmer was the premiere garderobe cleaner in the fortress, having earned enough to buy his own house.

Meanwhile, Marguerite, Minka and Jian were staring at twenty or more men who had suddenly appeared sitting around them. All looked disoriented, and all were completely human, wearing clothes, including the first four that had been brought up from underground. At this time, Hosmer was finding his way down from the rock.

“That there’s Scovil,” Jian said, pointing.

They all looked, and Marguerite said, “Rawlins.”

He got to his feet, though slanting. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. My name is—ah, Bickerstaffe. Yes, that’s my name.”

The other erstwhile lizards were standing on their human feet. Finding themselves whole, they began almost sneaking out of the clearing, apparently to go home. Rawlins slipped in among them to leave as well.

One, however, stopped before Efran to say, “I want my part of the treasure. I was the first here to look for it, almost.”

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Chapter 22

Efran leaned down to tell the treasure hunter, “I took it all back to the fortress. There’s none left here.”

“Oh.” The man sagged in disappointment. “Not any?” he pleaded of the bloodied, exhausted soldier.

While Efran was firmly shaking his head, Jian dug a royal out of his pocket to hand to the disconsolate seeker. “That’s the last of it. You can have it.”

The old boy took the royal, nodding. “So, then. That’s the last of it.”

“Yes,” Efran laughed lightly, finding no clean spot on a sleeve to wipe his face. Meanwhile, Ditson, Nutbin, Pullaway, Carryon, Passthetime, Benext, and Getaway were perched on the rocks around the pools, watching.

(On the way back to the Lands, Rawlins separated from the other dupes. Leaving the sack of nuts at the foot of tree where Jian had dumped his hand tools, Rawlins retrieved these to pass through the open gates unchallenged, and returned to his room at Croft’s in despondence. There was no treasure. Who could have known? But, he still had a lot of money from Bickerstaffe, and there was no returning to Crescent Hollow. But surely there were other opportunities here in the Abbey Lands for a sharp operator. . . .)

With all the captives having slipped away, Kraken came up to nudge Efran’s shoulder. But the sky above was still dark. A little disconcerted, Efran looked back to the old man. “Thank you—Oldknow. But, why—why the name ‘Eachus’?”

Oldknow said, “My task at the time was to see how you regarded each of us on your Lands—whether we were your flock or your subjects. You answered that question.”

Minka nodded earnestly, fingers at her lips. Efran put his cleanest arm around her. “But then, what is your real name?” he asked, trying to stay upright and focused.

The old man inclined his head. “I have many names. I will tell you the one you know in a moment. But I am empowered to grant your claim.”

Efran murmured blankly, “My claim.” His nose had finally stopped bleeding.

“Your desire for Nicarber and your claim on this area north of it, adjacent to the Lands. You have been desiring to see Nicarber itself cleaned up and resettled as a fishing village, and you have just now claimed these northern woods. Both are granted you. As you have desired and claimed, your sovereignty is now recognized here,” Oldknow said.

Minka gasped in wondering laughter. “Oh, Efran! That’s why you kept wanting to come out here! It all belongs to you!”

Efran also laughed, but with tears in his eyes. “I have terrible timing. We have a new enemy that’s bent on wiping us out to take the Lands, and, I don’t know how—”

“Now let me tell you my other name,” Oldknow said, growing. As he grew taller, he became cloaked. In alarm, Efran nudged the other three behind him. “You also know me as Mashhit, the Destroyer. Today, for you, I am the Restorer. The band of savages who attacked you today are given to you as well.”

As he lifted skyward to meld with the ever-darkening clouds, he added, “You may want to get to shelter soon. Oh, hello, Ino.”

Oldknow disappeared, and a cold gust whipped through the trees. At a sudden plop behind them, they looked back at the pools, one of which had ejected something shiny that lay on the ground. Jian ran over to pick it up. “It’s your knife, Cap’n,” he said, bringing it back to him.

Efran took the clean knife to replace it in its sheath on his belt, then said, “Let’s go.”

He caught up Jian to put him on Kraken's back, then scooped up Minka to sit behind him. "No!" she cried. "There's nothing to hold onto!"

"Hold on to me. I can stay on," Jian told her. But she reached around him to clench her hands in Kraken's mane. Jian was fine with that. The sprites and faeries disappeared to follow invisibly.

With Efran trotting on Kraken's left and Marguerite on his right, they began hurrying down the path out of the dark woods. On the edge of the trees, Jian hauled back on the reins, crying, "Stop!" They all did stop, and he pointed: "There's my sack of hickory nuts."

While Efran ran over to get the sack, they looked at the dark, greenish clouds and the sturdy trees whipped by the fitful wind. Efran plopped the sack in front of Jian, who held it between his legs as Kraken resumed trotting. Efran and Marguerite began running alongside him again, and they shortly crossed the new bridge over the Passage. Immediately upon their turning south on the old stone bridge, the windows of heaven opened to pour down a heavy rain.

Javier and Dirkes were still at the gates to open them for the party, but as soon as they were through and the gates closed again, Efran shouted at them: "Go inside now!" They saluted and ran for Barracks A while the wind roared around them.

Main Street was deserted but for the river that flowed down the pavement in between the sidewalks on either side. Marguerite abandoned Kraken to run down the eastern sidewalk, but she did not attempt the shortcut, as the yards were all underwater now.

Turning Kraken east on Chapel Road, Jian passed the notary shop before pulling him to a stop at the front walk of the chapel. He slid down with his sack of nuts, then followed Marguerite at a run to the front doors, where Hartshough was waiting with blankets. They all waved back to Efran and Minka as he leapt up on Kraken behind her to lope up the old switchback through the pounding rain.

Arriving through gates held open by two men in cloaks, Efran slid down for Minka to fall onto him, then he slapped Kraken's haunches to send him off to the stables. As they ran up the fortress steps, the gatesman Lund behind them called, "Captain!"

The two stopped on the steps to look back where Lund was pointing. The elevation of the fortress hill enabled them to watch a wide funnel descend from the dark clouds and rip up a large swath of trees on the ridge north of the Lands—the area which looked to be where the savages were camping. From there, the tornado traveled erratically over the whole ridge. If this did not destroy the invaders' camp, it still resulted in acres of hidden ground now being completely visible to the Lands.

Many people were watching the sky, praying that the twister would not cross the walls into the Lands. The Lord and Lady Sovereigns remained on the fortress steps, mostly shielded from the rain, to see the tornado bounce its way north until disappearing from view. So they went on in.

As it was midafternoon, the kitchen was still working on dinner, but Efran had a sentry bring plates for him and Minka to their quarters. After shedding their wet clothes, he ate ravenously and she nibbled. Then he passed out on the bed, having been washed well enough in the rain. Minka went into dinner a few hours later to tell everyone that he was back whole, sound asleep. But she took Estes aside to tell him about Oldknow—the real one.

The following day, March 13th, Efran was still bleary-eyed but present in Law class, which he would attend for the rest of his life. He was keenly aware that, had he not been reminded about the provision in the Law for the district to care for indigents who had no family, he would have passed Eachus by, and possibly lost—everything.

Efran was then summoned down to Barracks A to hear reports on the aftermath of the battle, so he made Minka come, too. Besides Commander Wendt, the Second Gabriel, Viglian, and the Captains, there were also Ryal and DeWitt. Before anything else, Efran faced Wendt to demand, “Who has treated your arm, sir?”

“Coghill, Captain,” Wendt said.

“Let me see it, sir,” Efran said.

Exhaling mildly, Wendt rolled up the sleeve on his left arm to show the bandage. “I’ve been stitched and everything.”

“I want to see it,” Efran said, preparing to remove the bandage.

“Later, Captain,” Wendt said in his Commander’s voice, at which Efran sullenly desisted.

The first item covered was an updated casualty report, which listed 32 injured—still none dead. Efran put his head in his hands in gratitude, then remembered Oldknow’s saying that the savages had been given to him as well as the land.

While he was thinking about this, Wendt nodded to him. “Marguerite told us about the Destroyer’s visit, but we’d like to hear from you on that.”

Ryal looked in alarm at Efran, who looked to Minka. “I’m not clear about all the men that were there.”

Since he so obviously didn’t want to talk about it, she said, “I’ll tell them.” And she began with Jian’s researcher Scovil, who turned out to be Rawlins, who had come back to the Lands to try to get the treasure that was supposedly buried around the rocks of the smoky pools. She told them about the sprites and the faeries coming along to bring the half-lizard men out from underground, then Efran riding up to take matters in hand.

From there, she explained that the old man on the bench was actually the Destroyer, who gave Efran authority over Nicarber and the lands north of it, as he had claimed for the protection of his people. “The Destroyer caused the storm that took out most of the ridge, although Ino was apparently in there, as well,” she ended.

With a long glance at Wendt’s bandaged arm, Efran asked him, “Have scouts been able to get up to the ridge to look around yet?”

“Yes, and they found the remains of what must have been a large camp. There are probably more of them on their way down, so we’re continuing to watch the area—which is considerably easier now,” Wendt said.

After a brief silence, Ryal said, “I finished translating the booklet, Efran, and came across passages that made me sure the Destroyer would visit again. I never imagined it to be in the rôle of a Restorer. And now you want to see Nicarber rebuilt?”

“More than see it, I want to do it, however much DeWitt and Estes will give me for it,” Efran said.

DeWitt asked, "Does it appear that sea life has returned to the coast there?"

"Yes," Efran said, straightening. "The tide pools are full and healthy. There's even coral growing back."

"Then fishing would help pay toward renovations. But now I'm concerned about the waste from Weber's tannery, which is so close to the mouth of the Passage, there," DeWitt added.

Captain Stites said, "Administrator, I have one of Weber's sons, Fischer, in my regiment. Would you like to talk to him?"

"Yes," DeWitt said instantly. Viglian rose to convey Captain Stites' summons as the talk at the long conference table turned to the prospects for making Nicarber profitable.

In a few minutes, Viglian reentered with a young soldier who had a deep bruise along the side of his face. He saluted Wendt with, "Fischer reporting as summoned, Commander. Captain."

He was looking around the table in mild anxiety when DeWitt said, "At ease, soldier. I'm Administrator DeWitt, who asked to talk to you. You're Weber's son?"

"Yes, sir, one of them," Fischer answered.

DeWitt leaned forward, arms on the table. "We're talking about rebuilding Nicarber's fishing industry, but that brings up concerns about the waste from the tannery."

Fischer shook his head wryly. "There's been very little for the last year, sir, when my father changed over to vegetable tanning. He was considering it because of the complaints we got in Westford, which led to the committee trying to take our house, and then burning it down. When we moved down here, he saw no reason to change until Carl and I told him we were done rubbing dung and brains into hides all day long every day. Tarrant was the only one willing to keep at it, but I was set on the army from the very first.

"Anyway, Pa made the switch, though it was hard. Carl may or may not stay, but the process is a great deal cleaner than the old method. I'm sure he'll be glad to show you around, if you wanted a look-see," Fischer ended.

"I may do that. Thank you, Fischer. Does anyone have any questions for him? Efran?" DeWitt asked.

"No, that explains why the tide pools are thriving," Efran said as the young man turned to him. "Have you been cleared to return to duty?" he asked, eyeing the large bruise.

"Yes sir, I's just knocked out for most of the fighting," Fischer said in disappointment, fingering the side of his head.

"Very good. Dismissed," Efran said. Fischer saluted and left.

"I suppose that's it for today," DeWitt said, looking down at his notes. "Oh—two points that I forgot to tell you all. First, we've started construction on a long-overdue cell barracks up hilltop. It's going to be a nice facility, like an inn except with bars." That evoked laughter, and he went on: "The second point is that Hosmer is back on garderobe duty. He's vague about where he's been these past few weeks, but we're all so glad to see him, no one's pressing him about it."

“That’s . . . good,” Efran said, stealing a glance at Minka, who carefully said nothing.

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Chapter 23

The meeting broke up shortly afterward. On their way out, Ryal caught Efran. “Well, that answered the two main questions I had from my translation of the booklet—whether the Destroyer was really coming for a third time, and whether it was feasible to ever rebuild Nicarber. Well done, Efran.”

Efran issued a short, sardonic laugh. “Save your praise for Minka. She’s the one who went out there to deal with some lizards.”

He put an arm around her but she pushed him away in mock offense. “Jian was upset and you weren’t there to deal with them for us.”

“I came as soon as I could,” he protested.

“We were all very glad to see you,” she admitted, allowing him to hold her.

Ryal nodded to them. “Now I have to go catch up Giardi. By the way, all of the men that were reported missing over the last several weeks have been accounted for—except, strangely, Lord Baroffio’s footman Heuron. I haven’t heard that he’s been found.”

“Heuron?” Efran murmured.

“Yes. Let me know if you hear anything of him,” Ryal said, departing to walk back toward his shop.

Efran and Minka waited silently in front of the barracks for their horses to be brought around. When Eymor appeared from the stables with Kraken and the dun mare, Minka noticed their new saddle blankets immediately. “Oh, aren’t these lovely!” Kraken’s blanket was a bold striped pattern in blue and yellow, and the mare wore one of soft dusky rose. Minka then noted the embroidered signature in the corner: “Elvey’s!” she laughed.

Eymor said, “Yes, they’re nice and clean, Lady Minka, but most of the men are flippin’ ’em wrong side up. The stabler has asked ’er to use black or our uniform red, but they’ve been approved as is, so we’ll be buying whatever she makes.”

“Your horses should be the ones well-dressed, for a change,” she said, so delighted by the new accessory that she allowed Eymor to help her up without protest. Efran was alternately rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

As he and she began riding at a walk up Main, she was enjoying the peaceful busyness of a regular workday—and the studied glances at the bright new saddle blankets. Efran looked toward Cavern Lake, but was unable to see what he wanted from here. So he said, “Let’s just—ride out to the lake.”

“I’d love to,” she said, prompting the mare to an easy lope. They turned east on Chapel Road to ride past Ryal’s shop, the chapel, and The Lands’ Best Inn to the New North Road. With a sharp breath, Minka said, “Oldknow—the real one—is sitting on the bench again.”

“That’s what I wondered,” Efran murmured, nudging Kraken off the road toward the lake.

Efran again dismounted before approaching the old man on the bench, then lowered himself on a knee to speak to him. “I didn’t expect to ever see you sitting here again.”

Oldknow glanced at him. “You had something you wanted to ask me.”

With difficulty, Efran began, “I don’t understand about Oldknow—the lizard who took your name, who was really Hosmer, but wasn’t anything like Hosmer, who seems to not remember being a lizard. What was that—that black thing that you forced out of him?” Minka slipped down from her horse to listen.

Oldknow replied, “A black thing that thought to take advantage of some gullible people from your Lands without the danger of crossing you—so he assumed.” He looked out over the Lands with deep, searching eyes.

Efran sat at his feet. “I don’t understand. The first time I spoke to the big lizard, he was—wise and friendly. He told me about Heroux, how he was a halfling whom Cocci had empowered to move the sun forward and backward, until he got caught between forward and backward himself, where he still hangs. He—the big lizard—said that Heroux’s desire to exceed his nature with forbidden power caused his downfall.”

He paused, but Oldknow just listened, so Efran said, “All that sounded wise; it sounded right. How was it wrong?”

“It was factual, as far as it went, for he thought that telling you all this was a great opportunity to lure the Lord of the Abbey Lands into his realm. He left out one small point: that he himself enticed Heuron to listen to Cocci, thus setting his downfall in motion,” Oldknow said.

“He? You mean the black thing?” Efran asked. When Oldknow nodded, he asked, “What is his name?”

“No, you shall not address him by name,” Oldknow winced, and Efran suddenly remembered the Sandgolem, which name he would never utter again.

“No, I won’t,” Efran corrected himself. “Are you going to stay with us, then?”

“No, I’m merely stepping in for Nakham while he deals with the remainder of the band that attacked you. Now he is returning as guardian of the hill, and I go . . . to resume my calling,” Oldknow ended in a distant voice, lifting the hood over his head once more. Then Efran experienced a glance of that searching gaze that judged his thoughts and peered into his heart. He crumpled onto the grass.

When Minka had fallen to her knees beside him a moment later, he looked up, dazed, to see the bench empty. “Yes, I like Nakham. He’s not so scary—at least, not to me,” he exhaled.

Helping him up, Minka said, “Let’s ride out to Nicarber.”

Still queasy, he glanced around. “No men to go with us right now.”

“Who does the Lord Sovereign need to protect him on his own Lands?” she asked in a murmur.

He looked momentarily surprised. “Then, let’s go.”

Shortly, they two were riding down the dirt roads that led to Nicarber—not to the bubbling, boiling pools, but the entrance to the main road of the demolished village. They sat on their horses for a moment, just surveying the quiet desolation. Then Efran prompted Kraken forward at a walk, and Minka followed.

They walked their horses to the end of the road, where the harbor had once welcomed many vessels—fishing boats, trawlers, small barges and even merchant ships that brought goods from Prie Mer, which ships then returned with raw supplies. He and she dismounted to walk along the shore. “The western breakwater was destroyed,” Efran murmured, “as were all the docks, and all the boats in the berths. All of that will have to be redesigned and rebuilt.”

“If only you had competent people to do that,” she said ironically, cuddling his arm.

“And while you’re out here dreaming on the beach, a horde of painted savages are about to storm your northeastern wall,” a voice said to their side, and they both turned quickly to see Nakham sitting on a pile of debris. “What are you doing here? Go get your men to the wall!”

After the first instant of shock, Efran turned to leap back up on Kraken. As Minka ran for the mare, she cried, “Don’t wait on me!”

“Never. I need you,” he said, holding Kraken to dance in place as she clambered up into her saddle. Then they turned to lope back up the dirt roads the way they had come.

As they entered the wall gates, he told her, “Ride up hilltop; tell them we need all the archers mounted at the northeastern wall.” She turned the mare to run up Main while he leaned over to clang the alarm bell at the gates.

Shortly, the order to arm up flashed through the barracks, training fields and work stations so that the armories were mobbed. Still on Kraken, Efran slipped on a breastplate while a bow and four quivers were handed up to him. The lower armory assistant Nettleship told him, “There are thousands more arrows up hilltop that they’ll bring down, Captain.”

“Good,” Efran said. He turned Kraken’s head to lope through the barrack yards, whistling a summons. Arriving at the northeastern gates, he watched a team of men roll the spiked metal plates up to the gates and anchor them there, which effectively discouraged climbing them. The rest of the eight-foot wall—over a mile eastward until turning to encompass the eastern Lands—had spikes embedded atop them. Efran honestly couldn’t imagine naked men getting over those.

The mounted Abbey defenders—archers and slingers—that converged on the wall were comfortably situated to see and fire over it, when it came time. Right now, they settled into position while the young foot soldiers ran great quantities of arrows and clay balls to the firing line. Riders were sent to warn Choules’ group in the eastern Lands, but Efran didn’t believe their attackers would go so far afield as to the livestock pens.

The Landers didn’t have long to wait before a line of screeching, wailing metallic animal heads appeared over the ridge. The defenders winced, watching as the heads advanced down from the ridge to gradually expose the bodies of trumpets, about five feet long. The length enabled the animal-head bells to be held aloft while the trumpeters blew in the mouthpieces to produce the nerve-wracking sound.

As the trumpeters began streaming down the south side of the ridge, the screaming warriors followed them. While their faces and arms were painted, and their thick, white hair stood straight up, they wore tunics with belts and carried javelins. And as yesterday, they were charging the walls.

Before the wild men could come within range of the walls to throw their spears, Efran called right and left: “Arrows aloft!” He nocked and lifted his bow at a seventy-degree angle, which allowed for a far greater range than shooting straight on. Hundreds of archers along the wall did likewise, releasing a deadly hail on the thronged attackers that followed the trumpeters down the ridge.

When the unprotected trumpeters came within range, they were quickly shot down. Then the enemy’s javelin throwers pressed forward to fling their spears. The Abbey archers close to the wall bent down on their horses while the men farther back covered themselves with their shields, and no one was hit. But the Landers picked up the javelins to throw them back with acute accuracy. Even deprived of their trumpets and their javelins, the screamers ran recklessly forward, to be cut down by the fusillade of arrows from the Landers’ bows.

When they drew close enough, the wild men sent a second round of javelins soaring over the wall. Two Abbey men a good fifty yards away were hit. But only wounded.

The savages spread along the wall, seeking a way over, which made them all the easier to cut down. Those who did make it over were stopped at once. There were just not enough of them to sustain a serious assault on the Lands. Loosing arrow after arrow, Efran remembered, *When I claimed the land north of Nicarber, Oldknow said that these were given to me as well. How, then? Just to kill all of them?*

After another two hours of carnage, the surviving shriekers—at least two-thirds of the original number--ran back over the ridge. Watching, Efran thought, *Nakham warning me and Minka in Nicarber gave us time to get set up so that we could turn them away easily.* The breathless Abbey defenders waited, watching, until Efran dismounted with the command, “Open the gates.”

As this was done, he turned to call, “Volunteers to retrieve arrows.” A number of men were willing to do this. But then he called, “Stretchers!”

The men around him paused. One man asked, “Captain?”

Efran glanced at him, but whistled loudly toward the barracks infirmary. “STRETCHERS!” he called again.

As a few men ran up with the required stretchers to carry the wounded, he glanced at the dubious men around him. Polonti warriors did not tend wounded enemies. Efran said, “Of course we’re taking them in. We need to find out what they want.” Two attacks by a roving band in two days indicated some urgency. Efran wanted to know what that was, to prevent the off-chance that another attack would kill one or two of his men.

So infirmary volunteers went out to collect the wounded, the weapons, and the strange trumpets that they had produced from nowhere. Efran left the field to confer with the Commander, then dragged himself back up hilltop to eat, rest, and . . . pray.

The more he thought about this last skirmish, the less he felt it a victory. With the number of them that remained, they could regroup and strike again. And had more joined them since yesterday? They must have, else where had the trumpets come from?

Given all that, he was disturbed by the inaction of both Nakham and Oldknow. If the Fortress ever needed a guardian angel, now seemed like a good time. And why did the Destroyer have to fly off to find candidates for correction when they were right here at the Lands’ walls? The savages hadn’t been given to him at all.

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Chapter 24

Then Efran thought, *Perhaps I have to take the initiative here.* So after he had cleaned up and got something to eat, he rode back down to view the captives in the lower infirmary. Milo walked him through, telling him, “We’ve got close to forty here now, Captain, though a good number of those won’t survive the night.”

Efran walked up and down the rows, looking. Having been washed and bandaged, the men lay quietly. Those who were awake were receiving water or gruel, and all who were awake watched the Captain walk through their midst. “Any idea where they’re from?” he asked Milo.

“No, Captain, no idea. We’re not seeing the organization of an army,” Milo said.

Efran grunted in agreement. They were not part of an army; their ages varied too widely, from young teens to gray-haired men. They were also not in the best condition. He paused to pick up the foot of one half-conscious man to study his sole, which was heavily calloused with old scars. Then he lifted his hand to look at white scars encircling his wrist. There were similar scars on his other wrist and his neck.

Turning to scan the large room, Efran said, “Can anyone understand me? I want to talk to you. I want to know where you’re from and what you want.”

He paused, but no one answered. Still, a few of them looked at him with intelligence. “I’ll ask again later,” he said, returning the gaze of one man.

From there, Efran stopped by Barracks A to catch the Commander on his way home. “How are you, sir?” Efran asked, looking at his bandaged arm. “Is it still bleeding?” he asked in alarm.

Wendt replied, “Only a little, from the stitches. It will take a while to regain function.” He was obviously in some discomfort. Efran evaluated him, thinking that the injury was worse than he was making it out to be. Wendt added, “Before you ask, yes, I’ve sent scouts out obliquely, to approach any camp from the east and west, since the cover on the ridge was destroyed.” He looked thoughtful for a moment here.

Efran asked, “Do we know if they’ve hit Westford?”

“As of late yesterday, no, they hadn’t. But there’s another question—Westford is wide open right now, in the middle of reconstruction. If these savages couldn’t make any headway there, why do they think our stone walls will be easier?” Wendt posed.

“Which is why I’m picking up survivors, to see what we can find out. I’m seeing the scars of what may have been fetters on them,” Efran said.

“So are they criminals?” Wendt asked.

“Could be, in which case I want to know what they’ve done, besides run around naked. All right, Commander, ah, you know that Gabriel and Towner can take care of the paperwork while you heal up,” Efran said uneasily.

“Noted, Captain,” Wendt said wryly.

“Yes, sir,” Efran said. He went out to haul himself onto Kraken and ride back up hilltop.

He didn’t remember anything of dinner until Minka took his fingers to lead him back to their quarters, where she undressed him and put him to bed. He fell into a deep sleep, then sat straight up hours later. “Where are they from?” he demanded.

Minka coaxed him back down to the pillow, and he groaned, “Why, God? What is Your purpose here? Where is Your hand in this?” Minka snuggled into his side, and he dropped off again.

Before sunrise the following morning, the courtyard alarm rang, echoing the wall gates’ alarm. Efran shot straight up out of bed to run out to the courtyard in yesterday’s clothes that he had slept in. By the fading lamplights on Main, he watched hundreds of savages climbing over the wall gates to flood the street. The faerie trees at the gates were holding their branches up to avoid getting them lopped off. For this group carried long swords.

“As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I deny you entrance. Leave!” Efran said intently. And he watched as they surged on south, trying to break down doors that they passed. His command had no effect at all. While he had claimed useless ground north of Nicarber, he was powerless to repel invaders from the heart of the Abbey Lands.

But his troops were not. Numerous men, including the hilltop captains, came to the courtyard fence to watch with Efran as a mounted unit from the lower barracks rode out with swords sweeping to confront the screeching mob. That effectively halted their southern advance. Then more Abbey men, also from the lower barracks, climbed up on Main Street rooftops to throw weighted nets over large swaths of the crowd. Archers accompanied them to take out those on the fringes. It was safe shooting, because no Landers were fighting the invaders on foot. Efran saw Wendt’s hand in these tactics, which allowed for containment without loss of life.

At his side, Captain Rigdon asked, “Should we ride down, Captain?”

“Wait, they’re acting according to plan. Let’s not interfere unless they start falling apart,” Efran said.

“Yes, Captain,” Rigdon said unhappily. They all watched as more Landers on horseback intercepted stragglers who attempted to take side streets deeper into the Lands. One large man in the center of the group with a bare, painted chest raised a staff to bellow a command, thus drawing the attention of several Abbey archers, who brought him down with four arrows.

While the sun rose, Efran told Rigdon, “All right, ride on down to assist the disarming”--which was all that was needed now.

Standing back from the open gates, Efran watched quietly as his men corralled the invaders on Main Street, so that none of them was able to run back to a hiding place on the ridge in order to attack again. Captain Stites shouted orders for the vanquished to lie down-- “Down!” he shouted, motioning with a hand.

Most of them understood, and complied. The ones who refused to submit were shot.

Efran watched all this with detachment, as though it no longer mattered to him. In a way, it didn’t, because his commands as Lord Sovereign no longer carried weight. Minka came up to scrunch into his side, and he observed, “I’ve been deposed. Disqualified.”

She looked up at him in shock, as did the men standing around. He looked over at Nakham leaning on the gate nearby. "I've been disqualified as Lord Sovereign, and I don't know why. I don't know what I did wrong," Efran told him. The others looked at Nakham, whom they could all see and hear.

Nakham considered that, then straightened off the gate. "You've always been careful to distinguish between 'Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands' and 'Sovereign Lord of Heaven and Earth.' So, what would happen if you, as Lord Sovereign, gave an order which contradicted the purpose of the Sovereign Lord?"

It took Efran a little while to think through that. Then he said, "My . . . ordering the invaders off the Lands was . . . contrary to God's purpose?"

"That's the only explanation I can think of," Nakham said.

Efran's eyes went glassy. "Then, what do I do?"

Nakham shrugged, suggesting, "Find out why He might let them in?"

Efran thought about that for a little while, then whistled for Kraken, who trotted up bareback. At his side, Captain Chee said, "Permission to bring a unit down with you, Captain."

As Efran jumped up on Kraken, he said, "Granted."

"Thank you, Captain," Chee said, gesturing to riders impatiently standing by.

Minka stepped back in disappointment, so Efran told her, "I'll be back up shortly." Then he rode down the switchback to Main, where soldiers were separating out the surviving invaders from the dead. Glancing over them, Efran said, "Bring them all to the infirmary. I want to speak to them, so I need them all in one room."

"Yes, Captain," Stites said, then began directing his men in the transport of the prisoners to the large infirmary off Barracks B, in between it and Barracks C.

Efran rode ahead, then left Kraken playing in the water trough while he stepped into Barracks A. Seeing only Viglian, he said, "When the Commander returns, please tell him I'm trying to talk to our visitors in the infirmary."

"Yes, Captain," Viglian said. "Ah, good luck."

"Thank you." Efran backed out to oversee the transfer of the wounded to the large room. There, he watched while the newly injured were brought in to be treated. The room was fairly full, with about 70 men lying on cots or pallets. Surveying them, Efran turned to ask Milo, "What about the captured? Where are they?"

"Crammed into cells in Barracks C, Captain," Milo said.

"How many?" Efran asked.

"About thirty, sir," Milo replied.

"Bring them here," Efran instructed.

With the addition of these men, and the Abbey guards attending them, the room was crammed full, so that all the

windows were open for ventilation. Standing inside the doorway, Efran looked from one prisoner to another, who returned hard, wary, or blank gazes to him.

Then he told them, “I am Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Whether you live or die depends on what I order. But because I answer to the Sovereign Lord of Heaven and Earth, I cannot kill you without His leave. So I must find out what to do with you.

“That means I have to talk with you. Someone among you must speak our language to talk to me, so I can understand who you are and what you want. If you won’t talk to me, you will die one way or another. One of you answer me now.” Efran went silent to look from one face to the next, searching for an expression of comprehension.

An older man standing against the wall said, “I understand you.”

Swiveling to him, Efran saw a grizzled, beaten man who nonetheless regarded him with clarity. “What is your name?” Efran asked.

“I am Riom,” he said.

“Who are you? Where have you come from?” Efran asked.

Riom told Efran, “We are Picti. Our elders come to this coast many years ago, where they won for themselves to stay on the Sea, to live on its life. But they are taken in battle, and marched many paces north, past the mountains, to Corona, where we are slaves for many years. We are gladiator slaves, who are bought to fight and die to amuse our owners.

“Many months ago a terrible band of men with claw hands and sharp teeth come out of the mountains to kill and eat the people of our city. When they come to us, where we are chained, we fight and kill so many that they leave, so we free ourselves.

“We travel long to return to our claim on the Sea where our elders live. This place is ours, to live free again,” Riom finished. The others, most of whom appeared to understand, looked quickly at Efran.

He knew right away what he was supposed to do. Glancing off, Efran told him, “*This* land is not on the Sea, so that we can live on its life. But I have lands nearby that are, and I will let you live there. But the Sea that gives life also takes it, and the lands I give you have been wrecked by the Sea, and must be rebuilt. So you must rebuild it, but we will help you.”

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Chapter 25

Riom looked quickly at several men in the gathering. Efran added, “Choose two to go with us, and I will show you the lands.”

Riom selected two others—one older than himself, one so much younger that he could have been a son. Then Efran instructed them to be given clothes and horses, plus five soldiers, for him to take them out to Nicarber.

Hours later, Efran arrived at the dining hall of the fortress just as everyone was sitting down to eat. There was a stir throughout the hall as he slid onto the bench beside Minka. She turned with a gasp, "There you are! I couldn't find you anywhere! Where have you been?"

Lifting his chin to Wardly for his plate and ale, Efran said, "I'll tell you all in just a moment. I see DeWitt and Estes are trying to get free to come listen."

He looked down on his right as Isreal slipped onto the bench beside him, smiling in victory. "I write a paper today. Toby help me." And he showed Efran a parchment filled with large charcoal letters that were somewhat grouped into words. Isreal read it to him: "I am Isreal. Efran is my father. Minka is my mother. I have many brothers and sisters. I shoot arrows. I help Tourjee garden. I am Isreal."

Efran looked down at him in surprise. "You're writing already? That's very good!" With his arm around Isreal, Efran looked back at Toby, standing behind the bench with several other children. "Thank you, Toby," Efran said, thinking, *Yes, he has a better heart to be Lord of the Fortress than I do.*

Toby smiled as Efran handed the sheet to Minka for her admiration. Then Alcmund lurched into the dining-hall door from the corridor to say, "The Gers have got loose in the gardens and Tourjee needs our help to catch them before they eat everything!"

With cries of dismay, the children ran to follow him out. Isreal also bounded up from the bench without a glance back. And Efran realized, *He feels right at home now.* Everyone needed a home, which the Sovereign Lord knew.

He turned back as Wardly set his plate and ale before him. Minka was handing Isreal's declaration to Ella to admire, telling her, "Quennel will be a wonderful father. He's so much like Efran."

Ella smiled, "I know. That's why Efran chose him for me." Quennel nodded in vindication.

Meanwhile, DeWitt and Estes had paused behind Rondi and Mathurin on the opposite side of the table. DeWitt told Efran, "Last I heard, you were taking a few of our wild men out to view Nicarber because that's where their ancestors landed. Is that right?"

"Yes," Efran said. "They're Picti, originally of the coast, who were taken as gladiator slaves to Corona many years ago. Most of those who've been trying to take the Lands over the last few days were born slaves. But the trolls wiped out their owners while finding the slaves too much trouble to eat, so the Picti decided to return to their ancestral home on the coast. As far as I can tell, they've been traveling for the better part of two years."

Efran paused to take a quick bite, then resumed, "They have their families—women and children—with them, along with wagons of supplies and a few stock animals that travel well--ah, goats, I think. I didn't see them. But Riom had his brother Brive and nephew Caen ride out to look over Nicarber with us. I explained that we'll give them all the necessities—clothes, tools, food, tents—to get them started cleaning up, rebuilding, and fishing. I made clear that part of the bargain was their hauling out and burying the waste, although they seemed to think a lot of the wood debris was useable. But I'll let them work out details with you," he added, nodding to DeWitt.

Estes asked, "Where did they get the weapons, and the trumpets?"

"From their owner's house," Efran said wryly, glancing up. "Once everyone was dead, the slaves were able to pilfer their trophy rooms of valuables taken from their ancestors. The slaves didn't take money, only their own

people's possessions from those rooms. But they also took food, clothing, tools—all that they'd need for a long trek that none of them had made the first time. Then they started south through the Fastnesses.

"It was actually interesting to hear all about it. I wish they had just explained all this at the gates without trying to attack us, which was going to end badly for them. But they didn't know any better. They only knew that, historically, that was how it was done, with the nakedness and the screaming and the body paints. Oh, and, a lime wash to make their hair stand up."

Patting Mathurin's shoulder, DeWitt said, "All right, there's your clean-up crew for Nicarber. I'll get Riom up to the workroom tomorrow to get started on terms."

"Thank you, DeWitt, Estes," Efran said. As they turned away, he said, "Oh! Wait." They looked back, and he said, "Mattias, the injured boy I left at Featheringham—it's been at least a week and a half since I heard the last report. What have you heard?"

Estes looked at DeWitt to ask, "Didn't Viglian mention a letter about him?"

"Yes," DeWitt said, "the gist of it being that he's practically taken over Featheringham, for the work he's doing. Commander Barr said they're going to have to give him a title and start paying him, or something."

"Good. Thank you," Efran exhaled, and his administrators returned to their families at the front tables.

On his arm, Minka murmured, "So you have him, and the people who were given to you, after all. But--" She raised up. "Why did Oldknow wipe out their camp on the ridge, then?"

He almost fell off the bench, trying to lean back. "I haven't asked Oldknow about it, but that wasn't their camp that got destroyed, only their trash dump."

"Oh," she said, with a mildly troubled face, and he laughed again.

That evening, she was almost asleep on his chest when he opened his eyes to slits. Then he asked, "Have you had fun?"

"Not much today, waiting for you. But tonight has been better," she murmured.

Looking down at her with a smile, he said, "It's been a long time since we checked in with Nibor. We need to see how much of our story she's got written up now."

"As long as I don't hear anything more from our bedroom, that's fine," she said sleepily.

Glancing up again, he said, "But, you don't object when Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin pay us a call standing on the footboard."

"Shh!" she said urgently. But when the faeries did not appear, she relaxed. "They help us," she excused them.

"So does Nibor. It's important to get all the stories down," he argued.

"No one would read all that," she muttered.

“Well, that’s why she needs to throw in bedroom scenes, to keep people reading,” he observed.

“Efran!” she protested.

Laughing, he looked up again, then shifted her to lie fully on top of him. “I like your hair even better now,” he said, brushing back the lengthening curls so that he could see past all of it.

“I’m glad,” she breathed, kissing his neck, and he casually pushed aside the sheet to lay his hands on her bare back.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on March 14th of the year 8156 from the creation of the world.

“Wait, I’m not done,” he said.

“Who’s stopping you?” she asked. Then she looked over her shoulder to see where he was looking. “Efran!”

THE AUTHOR LEFT BEHIND SOME NOTES:

Pastor Benedetti’s remarks in Chapters 15 and 16 are paraphrased from Chapter 18 of *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* by F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 188-89, 200. The Scriptures he quotes are [Phil. 3:8-9](#), [2 Cor. 3:5-6](#), and [2 Cor. 3:17](#).

“The Irish, like all the Celts, stripped before battle and rushed their enemy naked, carrying sword and shield but wearing only sandals and torc—a twisted, golden neck ornament. . . . The Romans, in their first encounters with these exposed, insane warriors, were shocked and frightened. Not only were the men naked, they were howling and, it seemed, possessed by demons, so outrageous were their strength and verve.” . . .

“In Patrick’s time, the island of Britain was peopled by Romanized Celts, whom we call Britons, and, in its northern reaches, by the un-Romanized and ferocious Picts, who painted pictures all over their bodies, horrifying the Romans, who called them *Picti* (Painted People).”

Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Random House, 1995), 82, 158 note.

[The Carnyx](#): “For there were among them such innumerable horns and trumpets, which were being blown at the same time from all parts of their army, and their cries were so loud and piercing, that the noise seemed to come not from human voices and trumpets, but from the whole countryside at once.” (Polybius, *Histories*, II, 29) . . .

“[U]ndoubtedly the most unique and distinct of ‘barbarian’ musical instruments of this period is the Celtic carnyx – a type of elongated war trumpet which was usually (but not exclusively) shaped as a boar’s head. . . . The instruments themselves were of bronze and played upright, as illustrated by their depiction on the Gundestrup cauldron. . . .

“[A]rchaeological evidence of the carnyx has been found at Celtic sites throughout Europe, stretching from the British Isles to the Balkans, illustrating that it was common to the pan-Celtic tribes across the continent.” (The page contains GREAT photos.)

A modern reconstruction of the carnyx can be heard [here](#).

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and Oldknow* (Book 32)

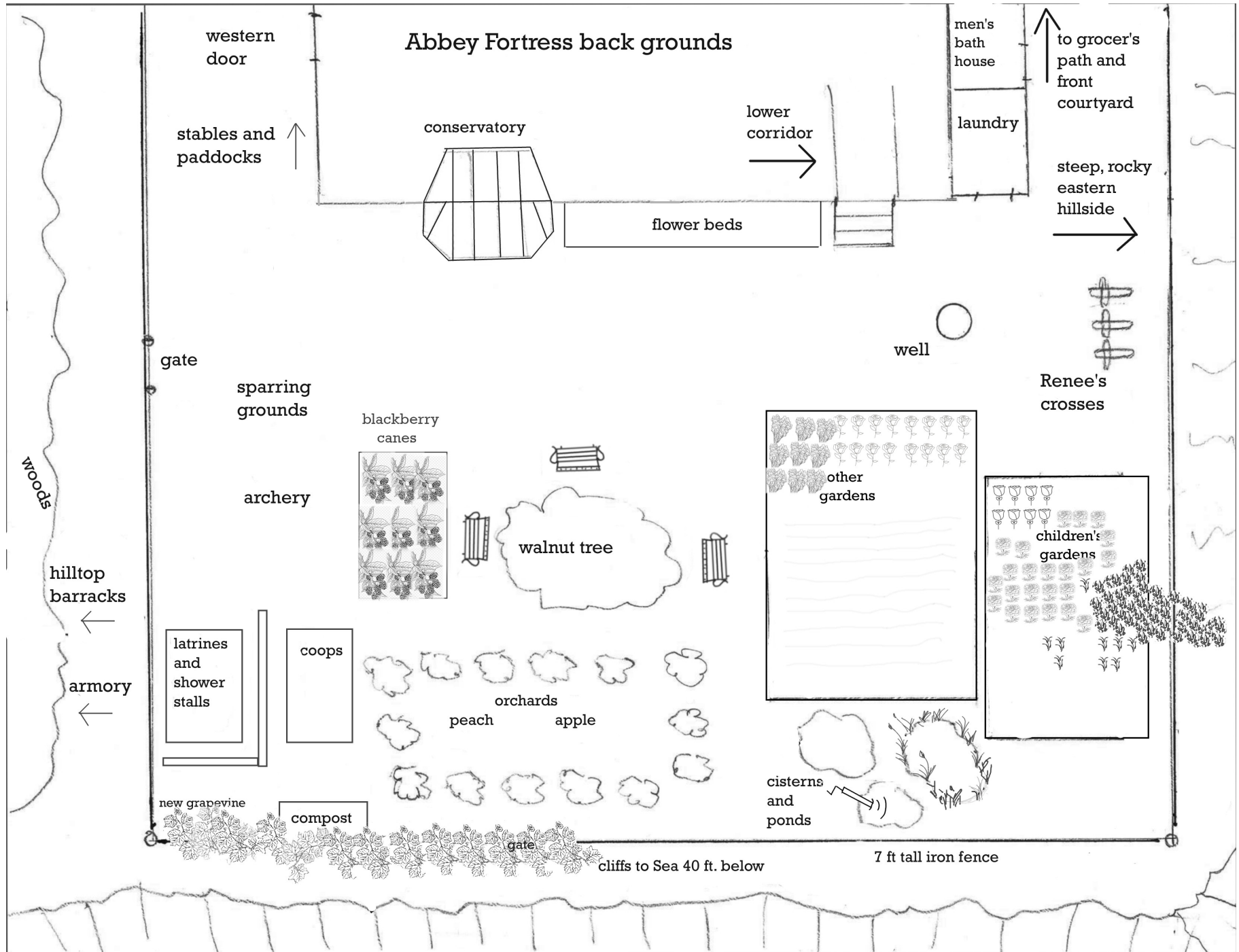
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Agostini—a gus TEE nee	Gevorgyan—geh VOR geh yan (hard g's)
<i>aike</i> —AY kay	Ghislain—gis LANE (hard g)
Allyr—AL er	Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
altior—ALL tee or	Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
amanuensis—uh man you EN sis (plural: -ses, -seez)	Goss—gahs
Arcuri—ar CURE ee	Goulven—GOHL vin (hard g)
Arenivas—air en EEV us	Goyne—goyn (hard g)
Arne—arn	Graeme—GRAY em
Averne—ah VURN	Greenhalgh—GREEN holsh
Baroffio—bar OFF ee oh	Guerry—GEHR ee
Barrueta—bare ooh ET ah	Hartshough—HART soh
Barthelemon—BAR thuh luh mon	Heroux—heh ROW
Beardall—BARE duhl	Heus—rhymes with the noun <i>use</i>
Benedetti—ben eh DET ee	hors d'oeuvres—awr durvz
Besiana—BES ee an ah	Ianna—ee AN ah
Borgnino—born YEEN oh	Ino—EE no
Bozzelli—bo ZELL ee	Javier—JAY vee er
Busi—busy	Jian—JEE un
Caen—kahn	Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
Calix—KAY lix	Justinian—jus TIN ee un
Calo—KAY low	Kaas—kahs
Camacho—kah MAH cho	Kelsey—KELL see
Cantu—kan TOO	Knutzen—NUT en
Cataldi—kah TAL dee	Koschat—KOS chat
Chaudoin—sha DOE en	Kraken—KRAY ken
Cocci—COH chee	Kukicha—koo KEE ka
cognac—KOWN yak	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
Colquhoun—CALL kwan	Leneghan—LEN eh gan
Corona—cor OH nah	Lietes—lie EE teez
DeHooges—deh HOOGS	Lowry—LAHW ree
Delano—deh LAN oh	Madea—mah DAY ah
Dierksheide—DEARK shide (long <i>i</i>)	Marguerite—mar ger EET
digestif—die JES tuhff	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Dihle—deal	Mattias—mah TIE us
dishabille—DIS uh beel	McElfresh—mac EL frish
Doane—rhymes with <i>own</i>	Melchior—MEL key or
Efran—EFF run	Melhuish—MEL whoish
Eitan—EYE tan	Melott—meh LOT
Elowen—EL oh win	Milo—ME low
Elvey—ELL vee	Minka—MINK ah
Eneide—eh NEED	Minunni—meh NEW nee
Escarra—ess CARE ah	<i>moekolohe</i> —moh ee koh LO ee
Estes—ESS tis	Mumme—mum
Eymor—EE more	Nares—NAIR es
Faciane—fah see ANN	Nibor—NEE bor
faux pas—foh pah (a social blunder)	Niça—NEE kah
Fernyhough—FUR nee hoff	Nicarber—neh CAR bur
garderobe—GAR de robe	Nierling—NEAR ling
Gers—gares (hard g)	Paillon—PAY yan
Gervase—JER vuhs	Pia—PEE ah

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and Oldknow* (Book 32)

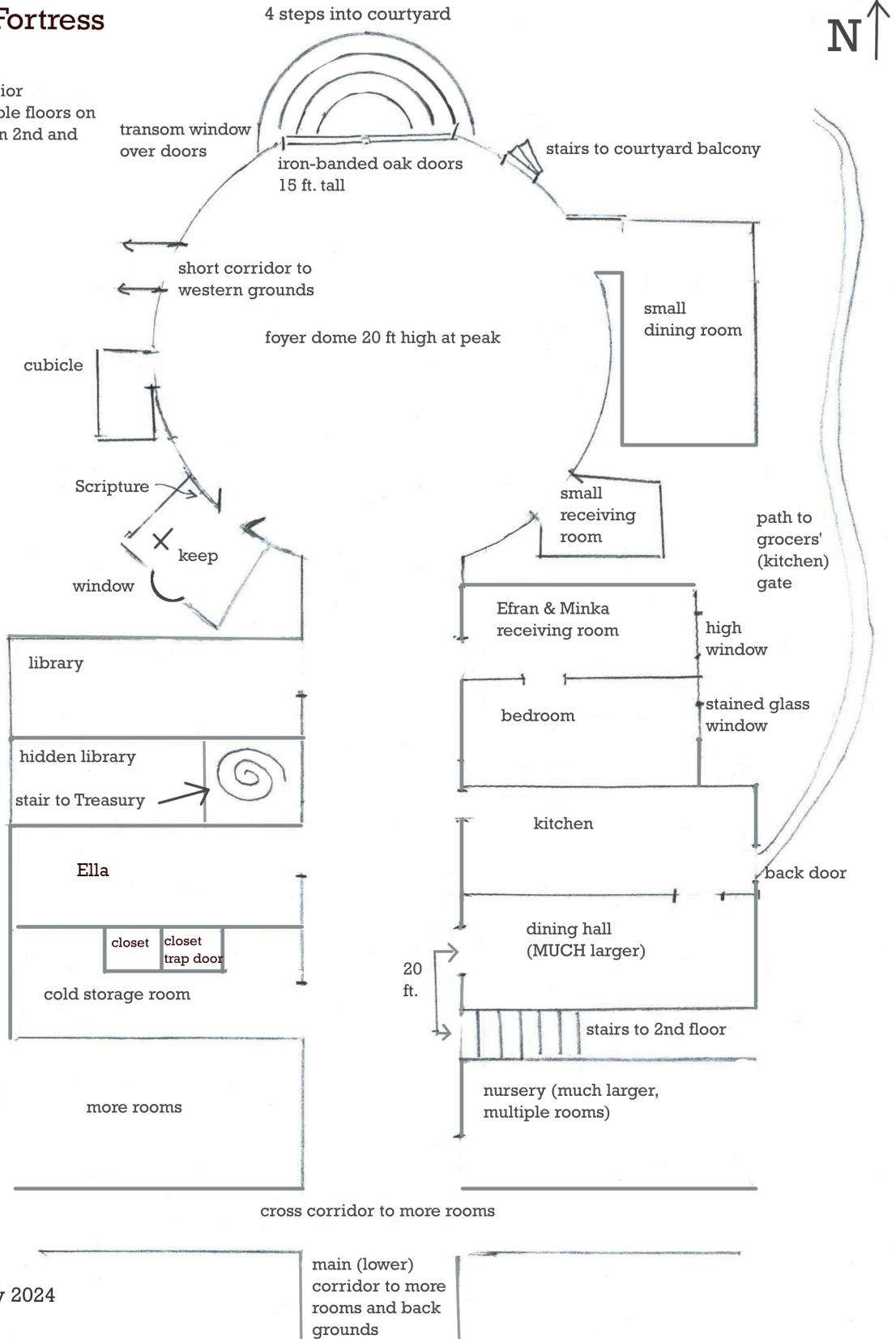
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Picti—PICK tee
Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Prie Mer—pre MARE
Qui—key
Regie—REH jee
Rensselaer—ren seh LAIR
Riom—roam
Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee
Seger—SEE gur
Squitieri—squeh tee AIR ee
Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Stites—stights
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Svizzi—SVEH zee
Teschner—TESH nur
Tiras—TEER us
trough—troff
Verlice—ver LEESE
Verrin—VAIR en
Viglian—VIG lee en
Vories—VORE eez
Weber—WE bur
Zollicoffer—ZOLL ee cof er



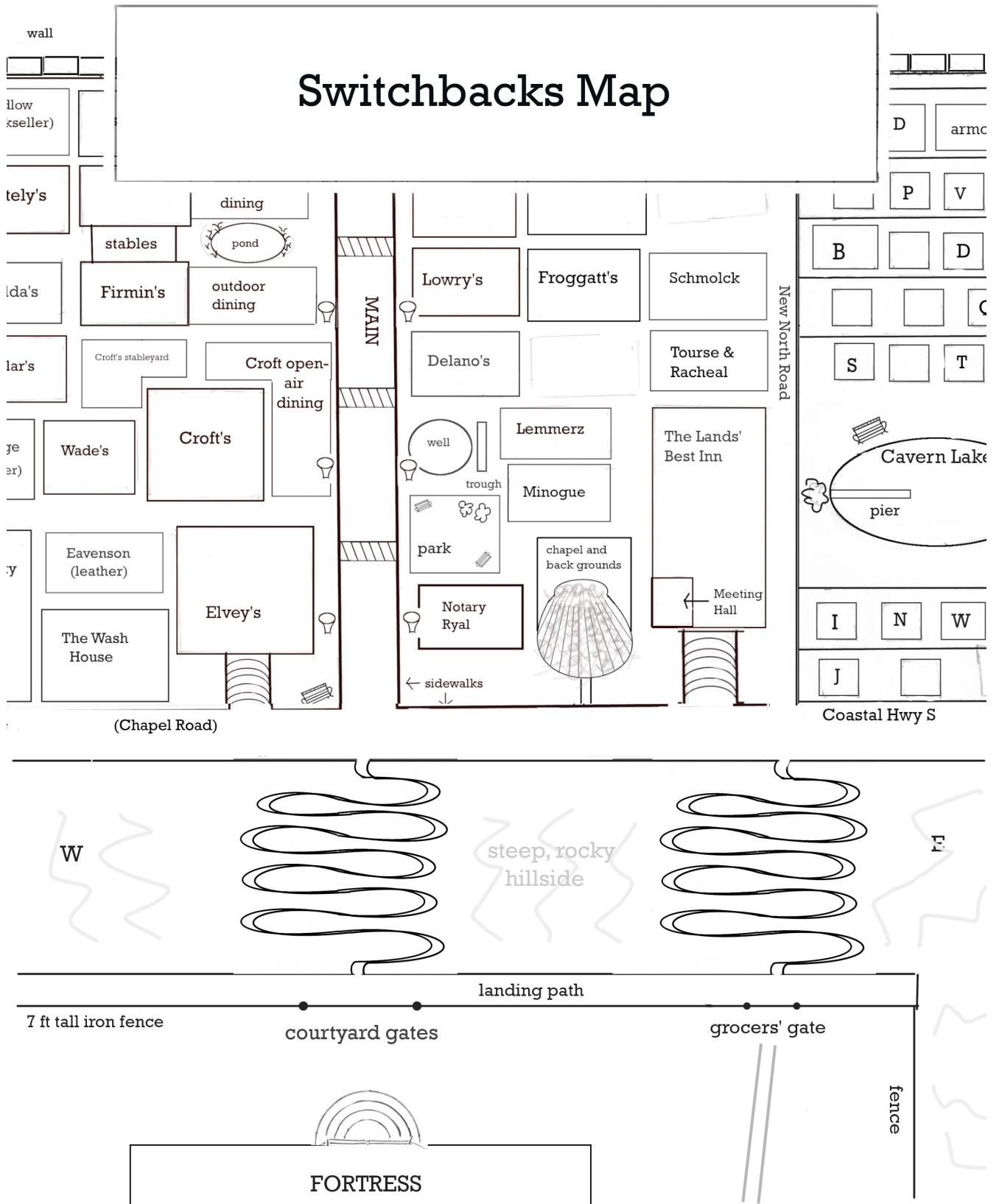
Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



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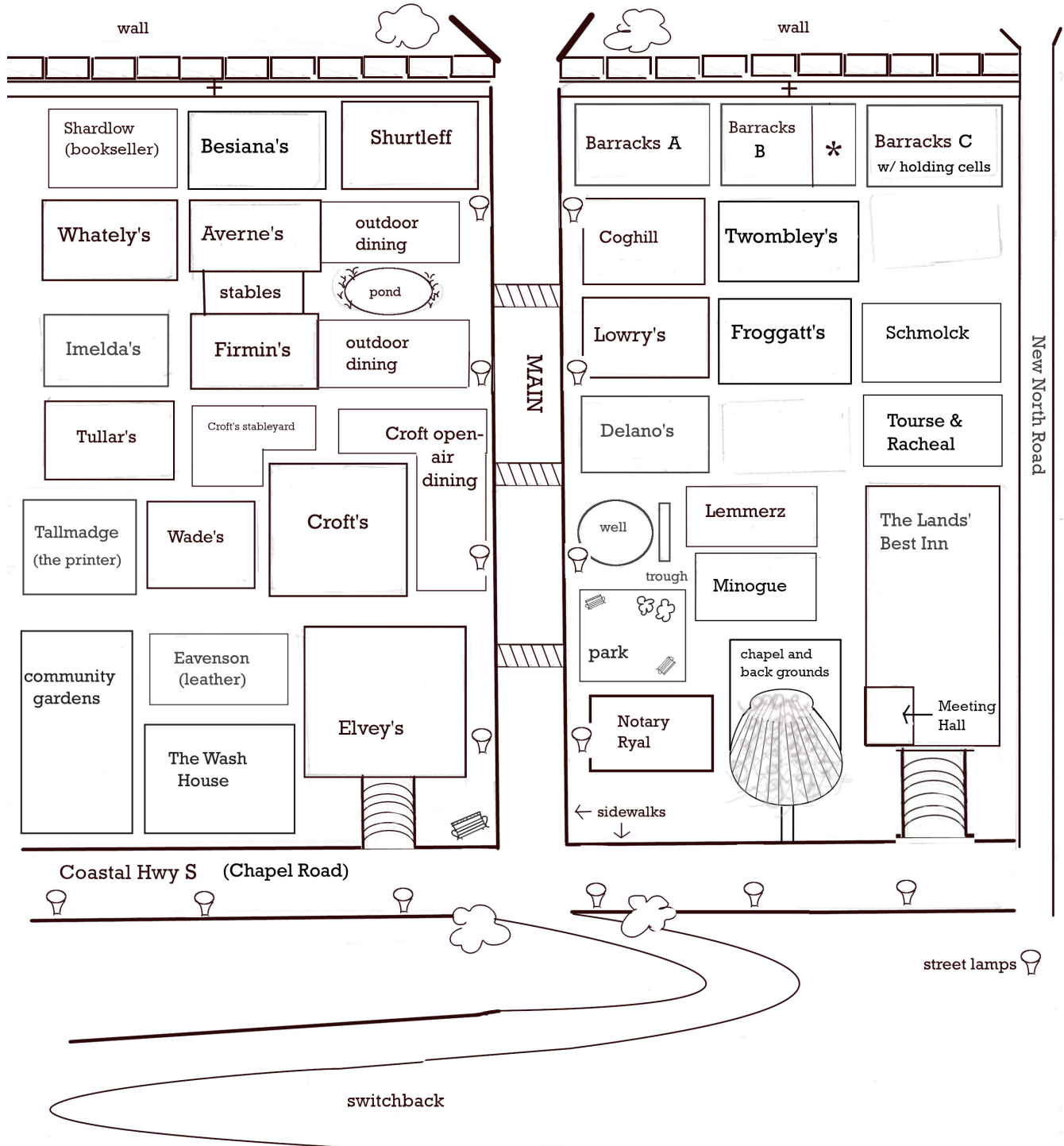
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Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements



Coastal Hwy S (Chapel Road)

New North Road

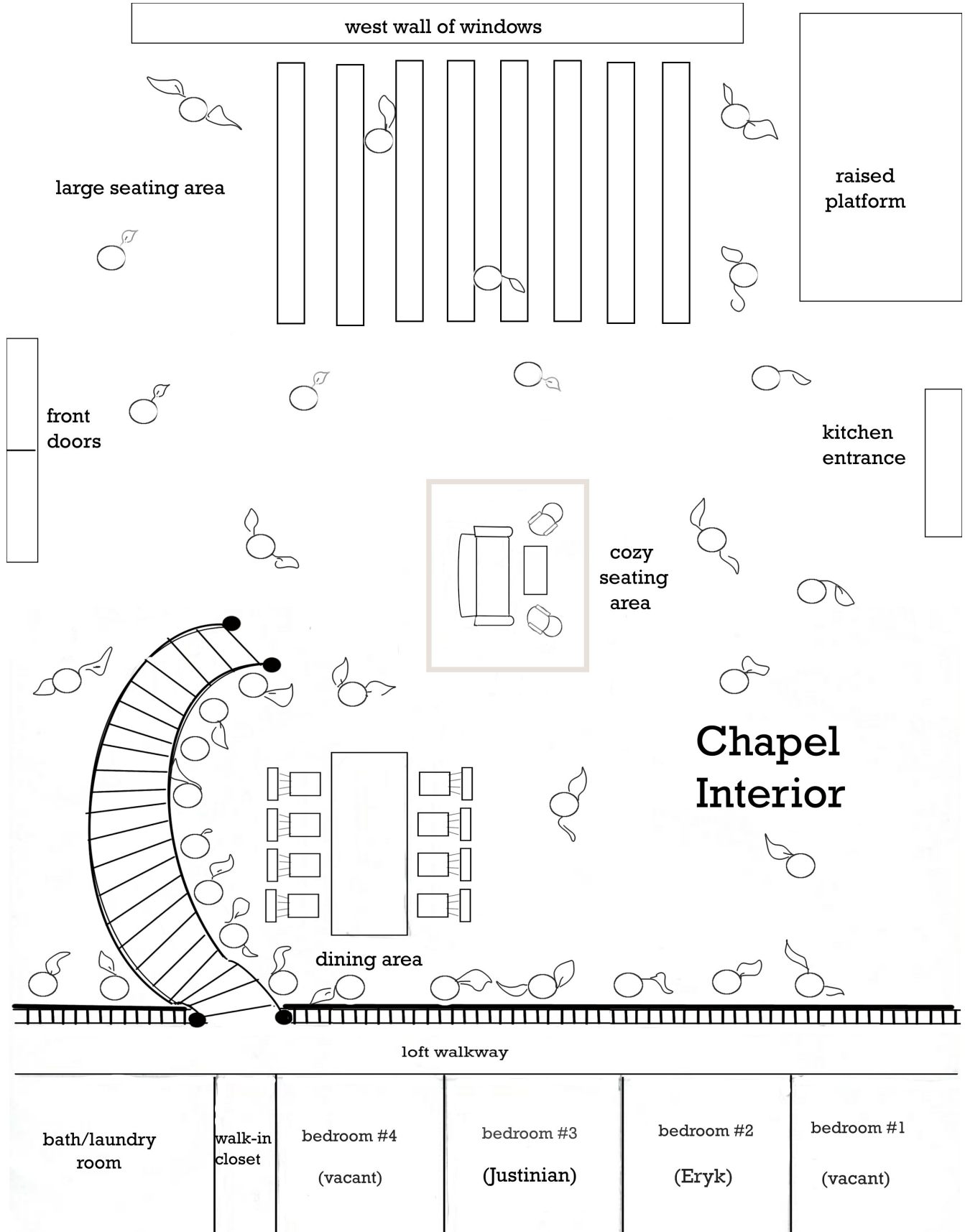
MAIN

street lamps

switchback

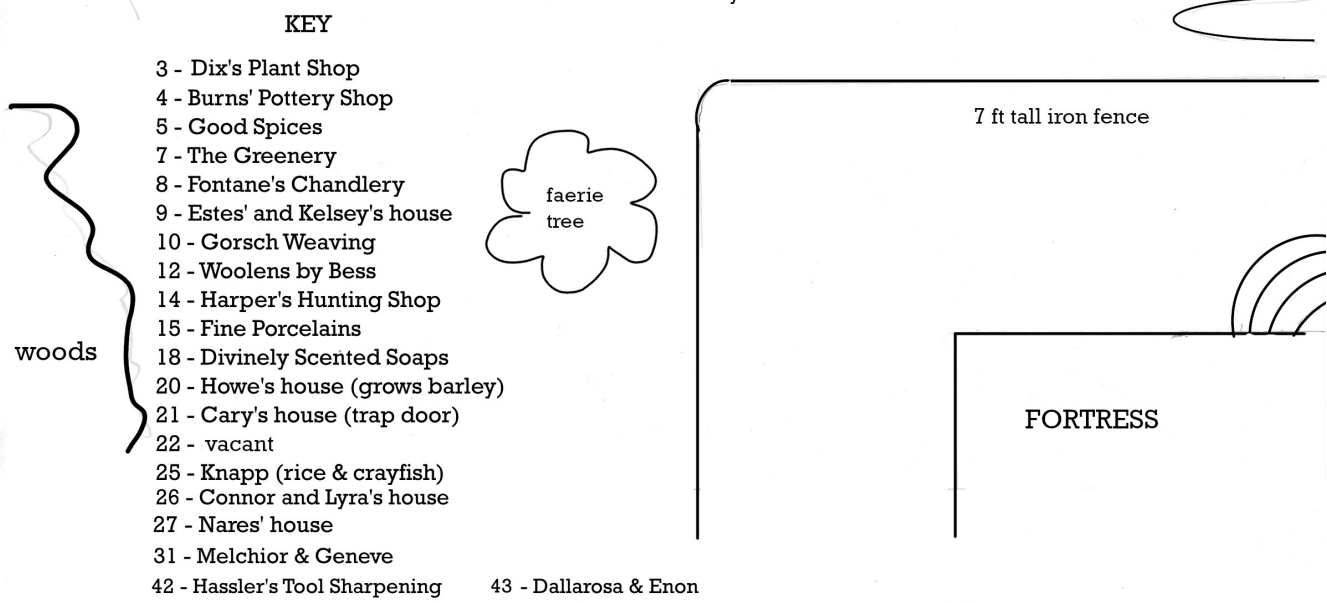
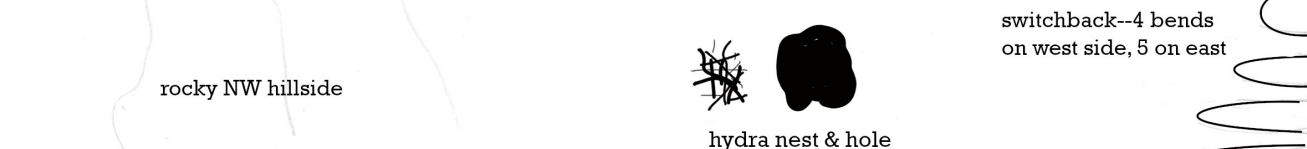
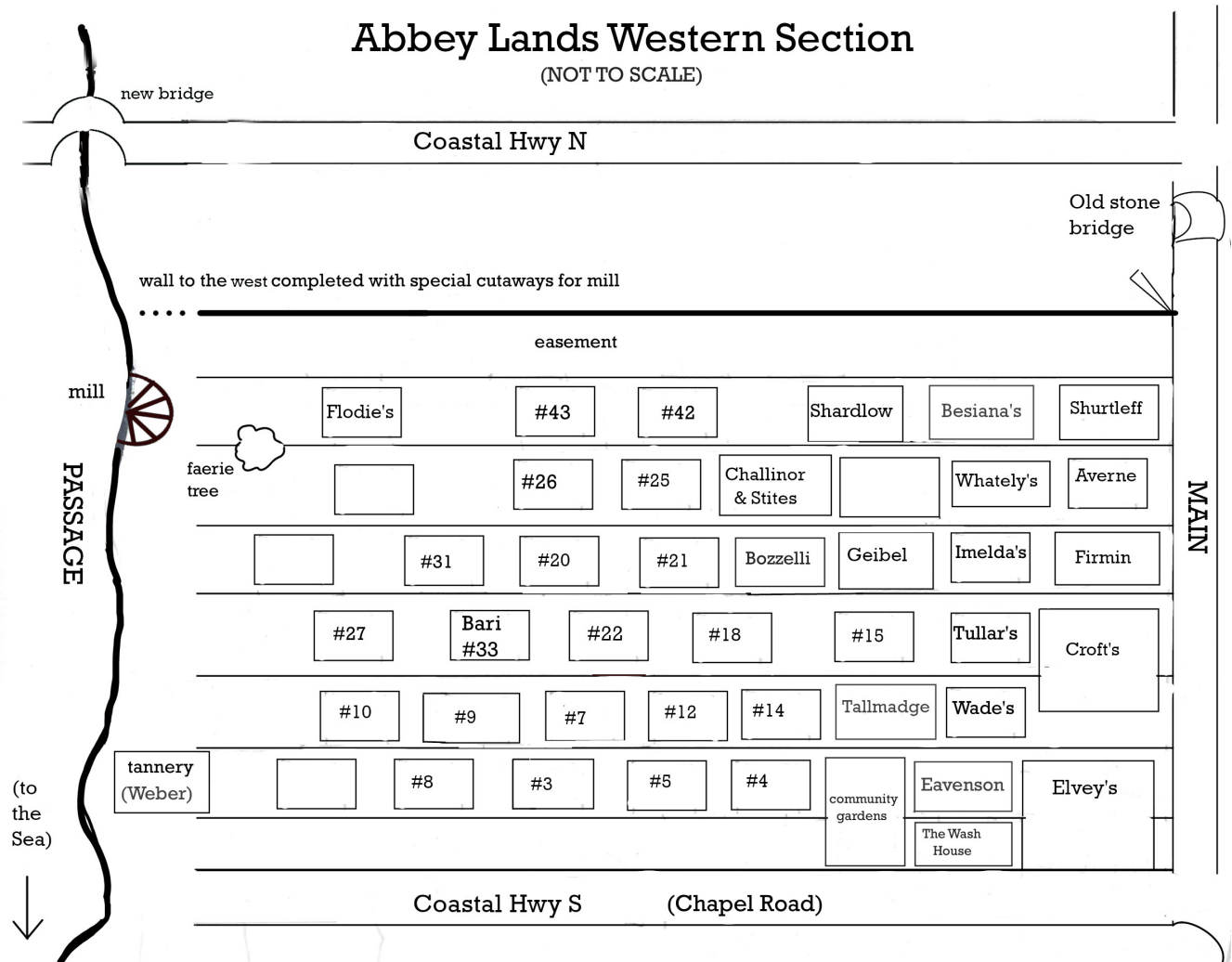
Map 5 Chapel Interior

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Abbey Lands Western Section

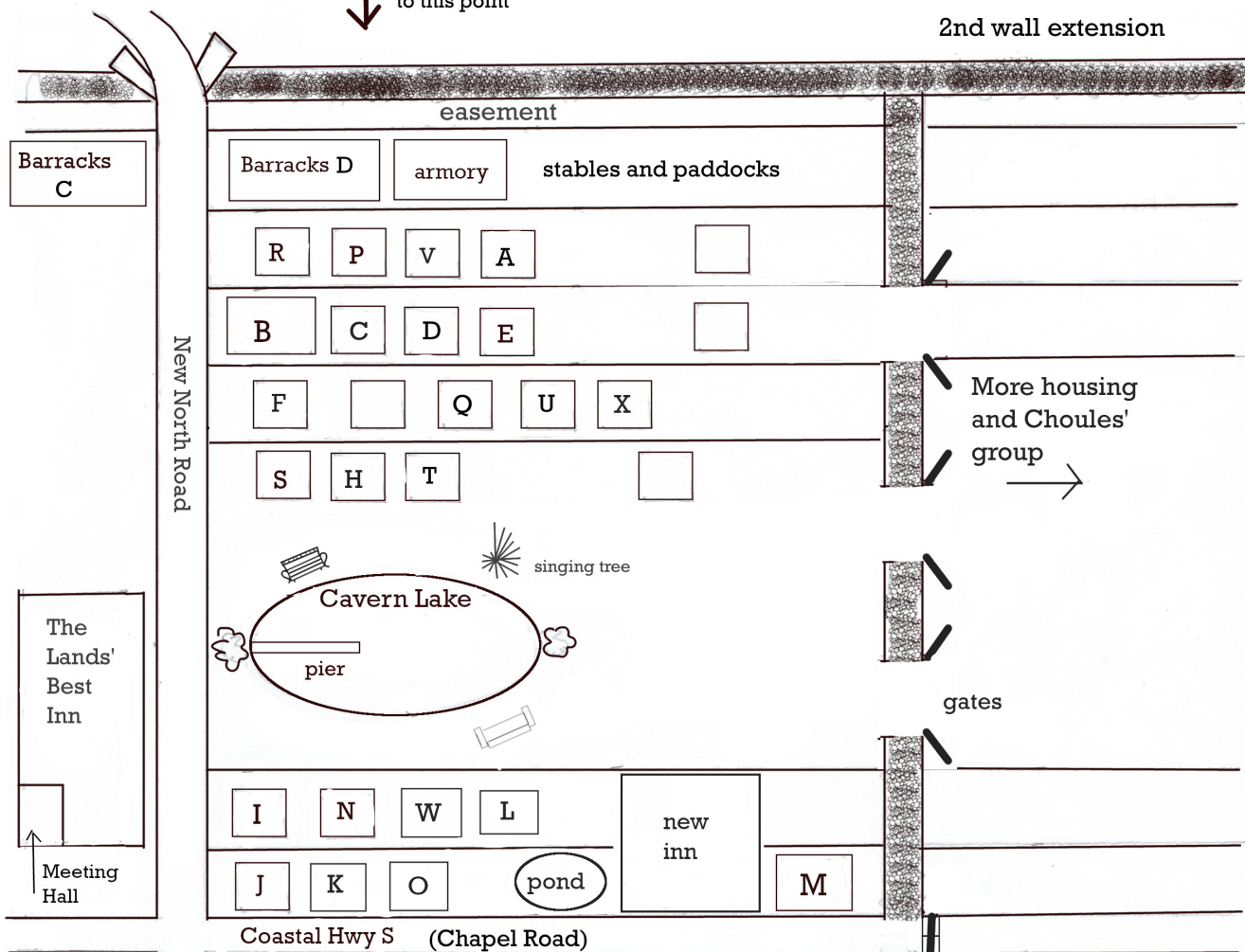
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road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

1 mile from wall gates to this point

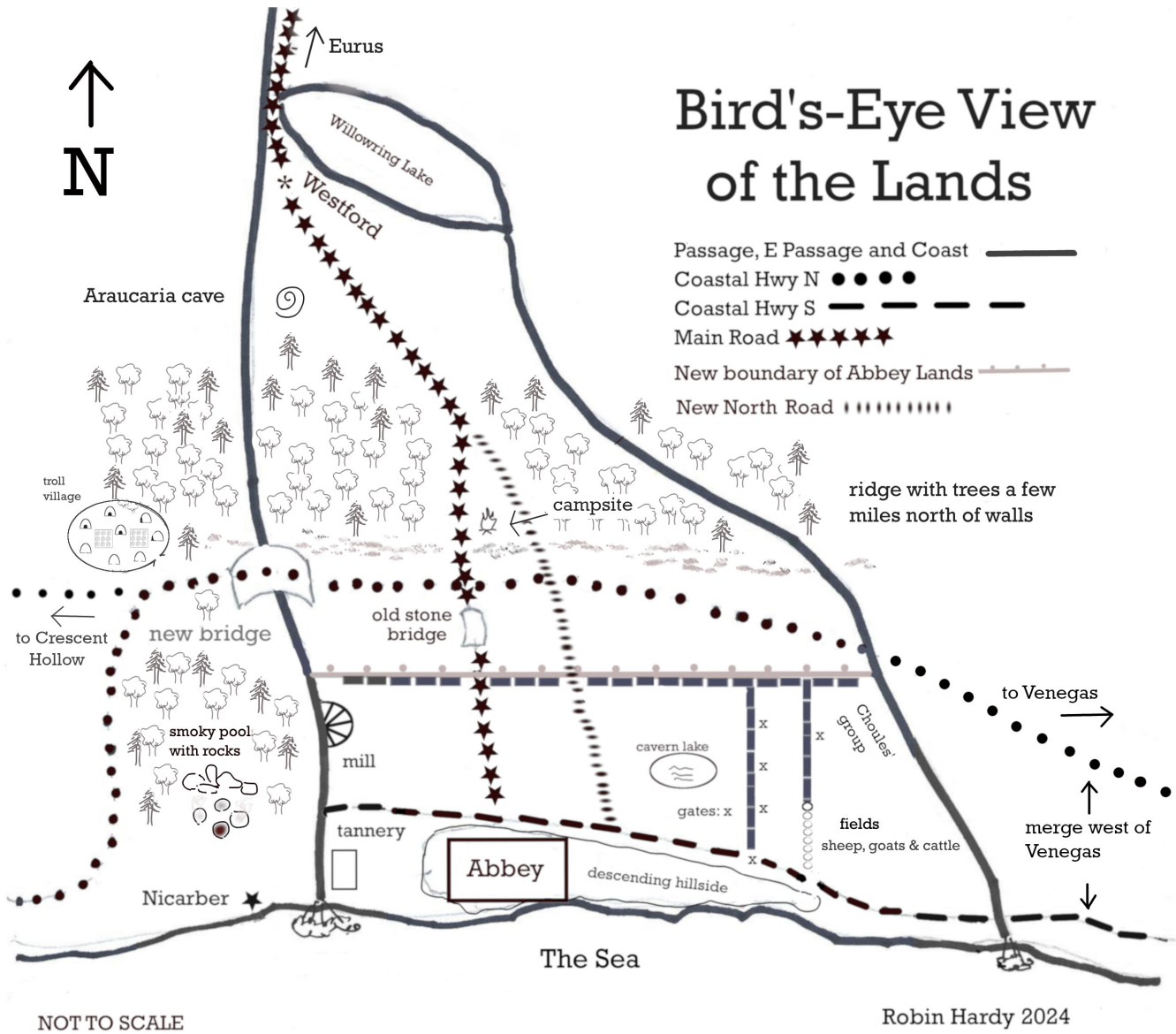


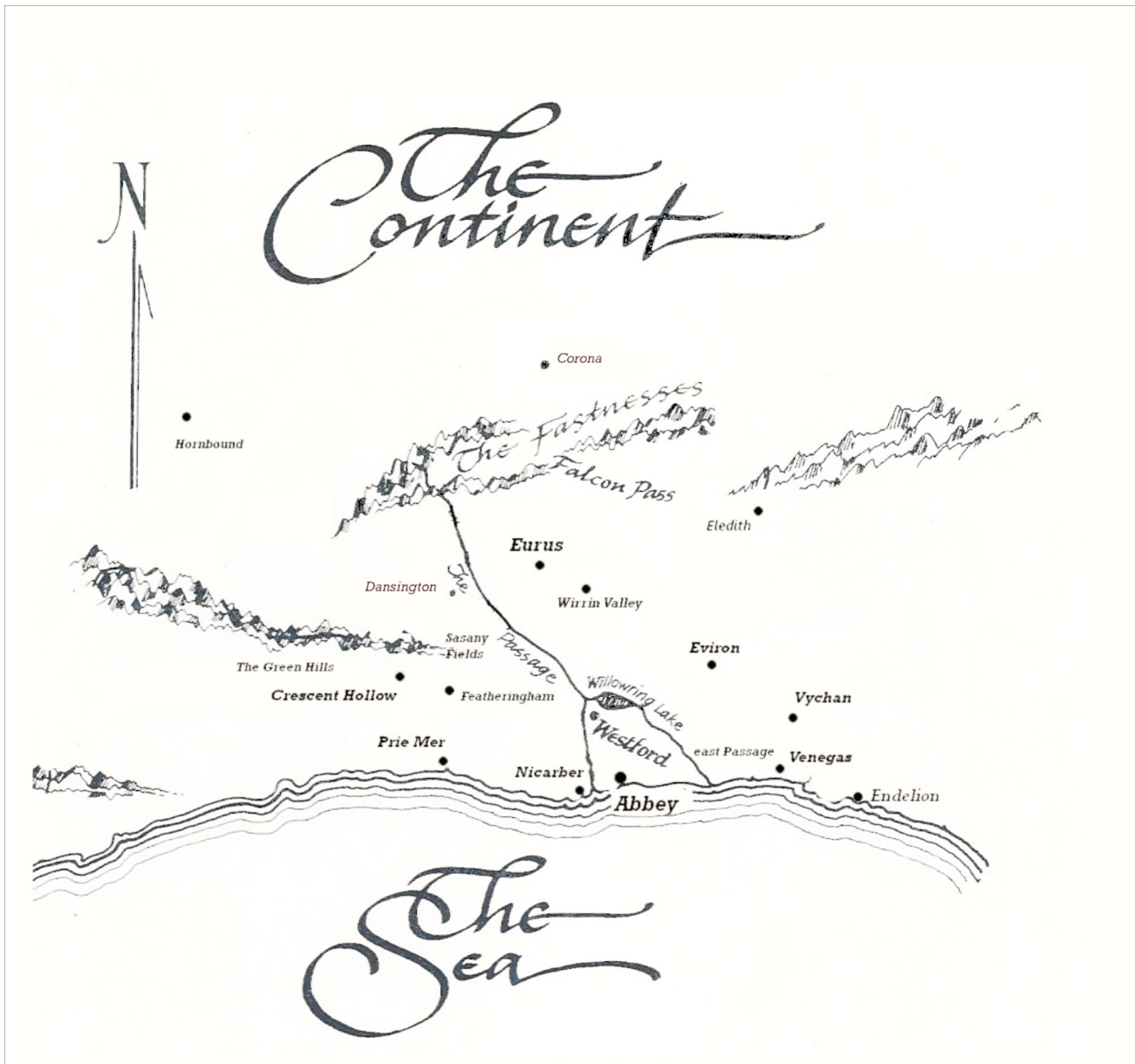
new switchback
to courtyard gates

- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C - Pelagatti's Hats
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F - East Lands Chapel
- G
- H - Wonders & Illusions
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K - Notary Oulton
- L - Tambling's family & Escarra
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring & Trina
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office

- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry (#71 Orchid Row)
- W - Barrueta & Colletta
- X - Old World Spices

barricade
→





Oldknow at the Smoky Pools (Book #32:
Lord Efran and Oldknow)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



My inspiration for the smoky pools came from Yellowstone National Park, especially its [hydrothermal systems](#). Since the park comprises [2.2 million acres](#), it's ridiculous for me to put three of their features in this one illustration. Never having let reality stop me, however, I've got from left to right: [Crested Pool](#)¹, [Morning Glory](#)², and [Emerald Pool](#)³ (just behind the old man). The rocky foreground came from [here](#)⁴, and the dead trees from [here](#)⁵.

I managed to get all the principals in this one illustration, including [Kraken](#)⁶. I resorted to my old standby for [Efran](#)⁷, who looks pretty irritated at Oldknow. [Jian](#)⁸, eager to see it put down, is on the left behind the rocks. After being so bold to come out here without Efran, [Minka](#)⁹ is really glad to see him. And [Marguerite](#)¹⁰ (after her makeover) has some thoughts about the lizard.

For all his brilliant coloration and size, however, he's just a [Common Collared Lizard](#)¹¹; the [old man](#)¹² is the one with the power.

Robin Hardy
June 20, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

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