



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

Book 31

Lord Efran in the
Tide of Time

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Two days following Christmas, Minka and Efran were out on the back grounds watching as the children were released from class, along with Nakam and Joshua. The toddler would turn two on January 1st.

He ambled over to greet his parents, but was mostly waiting for his hauling partner. Looking toward the stables with his pudgy hands on his hips, he stopped to order, "Kaken."

Minka almost fell over, so that Efran had to catch her around the waist. While he checked her in mild alarm, she gasped, "He's standing just like you when you're waiting for someone who hasn't shown up."

"Oh," he said, looking to the little tyrant again.

Then Efran glanced over the children as they scattered to their favorite play areas. Scanning them once, then again, his face clouded. Meanwhile, Minka was walking Joshua over to Willis, who had Kraken in the harness, ready to haul. Efran whistled lightly, pointing to Toby. When he and Alcmund ran to him, Efran said, "Toby, I don't see Isreal."

Alcmund looked guardedly at his friend, who sagged a little. Toby said, "He's still in the classroom, Efran. He didn't want to come out because Noah was making fun of him for being slow." Isreal was a Polonti foundling who had been raised by mountain trolls.

Efran leaned back, telling him, "Go tell Isreal that I'm here. Alcmund, you go tell Noah that I want to speak to him." An incident like this particularly stung Efran, because Noah and his sister Ivy were the first children he and Minka had adopted, next to Toby.

Wide-eyed, Toby and Alcmund began running off in different directions. As Joshua rode Kraken over to the compost bins, Minka came up to Efran to whisper, "Noah's making fun of Isreal?"

Efran glanced at her with a short nod, and she exhaled in distress. He murmured, "Wait a moment."

Alcmund brought Noah over first, who was shuffling in the realization that he was in trouble. The other children were following at a distance. Efran merely told him, "Stand by," then looked up to where Toby had emerged from the back door with a reluctant Isreal. Seeing Efran, Isreal picked up his feet to begin running awkwardly toward him.

Then Efran nodded to Noah. "Follow me." All of the children fell in behind Efran as he walked rapidly to the archery range. Quennel approached, questioning, and Efran said, "Get me a bow and quiver."

"Yes, Captain." Quennel turned to gesture at Caswall, who brought over his own equipment. By the time he handed them to Efran with a salute, all of the children were gathered around him, including Toby and Isreal.

"Stand behind me," Efran instructed them, positioning himself before a far-off target. Glancing at it, he spread his feet to nock the arrow. Toby made all the children move back as Efran lifted the bow and fired without pausing to aim. The arrow hit the target dead center. He did this over and over, until the arrows were tightly grouped in the center. All the men around were watching as attentively as the children.

With a few arrows left, Efran turned to extend the bow to Noah. "Now you do it."

Noah's jaw dropped and his eyes began watering. "I—I can't! I don't know how to do *aike* shooting, or even regular shooting, and, and--"

Efran said, "Until a month ago, Isreal had lived his whole life with mountain trolls in a cave. He never had shoes or books or friends who spoke our language. He ate insects and wore a sheet all the time. He has a lot to learn before we can expect him to do anything. Now, is there anything more you want to tell him?"

Dropping tears, Noah hung his head to nod. Efran waved to Toby, who brought Isreal over for Noah to croak out, "I'm sorry."

But Isreal wasn't looking at him; he was looking at Efran—peering at him, studying him. Efran smiled, but Isreal came over with an aspect of deep concentration to touch Efran's hand and arm. It was as though he were gleaning something from them.

Efran knelt before him, and Isreal put a hand on his forehead and his eyes. With a sudden purposeful look, Isreal took the bow.

Efran stood to whistle and call, "Bring a child's bow and arrows. Bring another target; move it up here." Men scrambled to comply.

Shortly, Isreal had a learning bow in his hands, which he was studying minutely. Efran demonstrated how to nock an arrow with the bow he held, but Isreal didn't watch so much as feel—he put his hand on Efran's arm while he was nocking, and checked his eyes as though reading something.

Isreal looked at the target, nocked an arrow, raised the bow, and shot without aiming—copying Efran's *aike* shooting. Because he had little arm strength, the arrow bounced off the target. But it had touched close to the center.

Efran whistled to Quennel, instructing, "Move it up a bit more." Quennel did that, then jumped aside as Isreal loosed another arrow. This one hit the center and stuck. He continued to shoot, grouping his arrows as Efran had done, while the soldiers, children, grounds workers, washer women, and Minka watched in fascination.

When his quiver was empty, Isreal turned to Efran, who snatched him up, laughing. The other children, including Noah, crowded around to congratulate him. But Chorro cried, "I'm Polonti, too! I want to learn *aike* shooting!"

"Why can't *we* learn, if we want?" Hassie demanded. She was not only a girl, but a Southerner.

So that day, *aike* lessons were arranged for any of the children who wanted to learn the Polonti art of shooting by instinct. Just to make sure they got it down right, they all felt Efran's head and arms. Some of them felt Isreal's, too, but Efran's provided a firmer guaranty of success.

Because Isreal was most hindered in his shooting by weakness in his arms, back and shoulders, Efran assigned him to help Tourjee spread compost and dig in the garden. Tourjee was glad for the additional help, and Isreal did whatever he was told to do, once he understood what that was.

When the children had done all the shooting they wanted for the day (which was not much, because none of them picked it up as quickly as Isreal), they ran off to play. Efran and Minka parted as well: she went to see her auntie, but Efran had been summoned to an emergency meeting at Barracks A. It was an emergency because it involved the new black flat caps for the Abbey Lands army.

The caps were such a success, and the demand for them so immediate, that neither the original maker of the cap, Pelagatti, nor the women of The Lands Clothing Shop had much time for Christmas that year. And the demand was intensified when soldiers who still had to wear the old hats saw hats of the same style being paraded in bright colors on the heads of women wearing Elvey's dresses. The outcry from hundreds of men was deafening.

Although the flat caps were a simple design, they had to be made to fit each man's head, which slowed production considerably. So today, December 27th, Commander Wendt put out two announcements: first, that men who had to wait for a flat cap were no longer required to wear the old hats, and second, the Fortress was offering a bonus to assembly-line workers who could turn out a certain number of caps that passed inspection.

The bonus was such that diligent workers could earn as much as heavy lifters who were digging the new sewers. Some of these men, such as Bullara, were taking home four royals *a day*—unheard-of for unskilled labor. (Some of the other men, such as Marguerite's son Verlice, were barely hanging on at a royal a day. But if he wanted to stay on the Lands, he had no choice; he had to pay off his fine for illegal gambling. And the only other job that paid as much without intensive training was cleaning garderobes.)

But some of the capless men, especially new Polonti, had other questions such as: why did they have to cut their hair? Traditional Polonti warriors wore their hair long—either tied back, braided, or secured by a head band. All of the Polonti in training at Sasany Fields (or those who had served under Master Crowe) had long hair. When they signed up with the Abbey Lands army, they accepted cutting their hair to be able to wear the uniform hats properly--that is, without looking silly. But flat caps accommodated any hair length. And, frankly, Captain Efran sometimes let his hair grow long to please his wife. When he did get it cut recently, he appeared on the streets in a rakish, non-approved style. Was that fair?

This question provoked the hours-long conference among the officers to which Efran had been summoned. The resultant decision was that haircuts would no longer be required for the army. However, each man must present a neat appearance (as judged by his captain) so as to not impede his eyesight or movement. Hair pulled back in a traditional Polonti manner was acceptable, as long as it was clean. Any man who had lice, fleas or ticks in his hair was required to get sheared and present himself to Coghill or Tolliver for treatment.

By the time Efran got out of that meeting, he was both amused and exasperated. He had always been a stickler for tradition, especially as it concerned army protocol. The hats which had been part of his Westfordian uniform were naturally incorporated into the Abbey army uniforms, and he never thought twice about it until Elvey started making ladies' hats off their uniform blocks. That opened his eyes to how really ridiculous they were. Sprites aside, the flat caps were more practical and appealing on any level.

So he was astonished when their Polonti Captains Stites and Chee opposed letting the Polonti keep their long hair while his Southerners, Captains Towner and Rigdon, were fine with it. Their contention led to Efran and Wendt calling in the Steward Estes, a Polonti himself, to mediate.

After hearing all the arguments in favor and against, Estes told their Polonti Captains, "It seems to me that you're afraid of our army being seen as backward or undisciplined if we regard these Polonti traditions. But no matter what we do, a lot of people in Westford, Crescent Hollow, and Eurus are going to look down on us. So, for our survival, we have to meld our Polonti and Southerners into something new, and that means sharing the best of both cultures. We've seen Southerners take up the war drums, and Polonti embrace Christmas. So how about we let the Polonti keep their long hair and the Southerners their rakish haircuts? Under flat caps, they're both acceptable." For the record, Estes wore his hair in the same short, traditional style from his Westfordian days.

This argument convinced everyone, hence the new leniency toward hair. Efran was particularly glad for that, because he had no idea that his growing his hair for Minka had rankled some of the Polonti who couldn't do the same for themselves.

As he was loping Kraken up Main, shaking his head over this, Ryal appeared on the front steps of his shop. So Efran immediately pulled Kraken over. "Hello, Ryal. Did you need me?"

"Yes, Efran," Ryal said, looking distracted. "Can you come in for a moment?"

"Of course." Dismounting, he told Kraken, "Don't go any farther than the trough behind the community well." Taking that as permission, Kraken trotted over to the well practically next door. (So that he wouldn't cut through the little park area, someone had thrown up a short picket fence around it. Efran had advised him that if he knocked it over, he wouldn't be allowed loose on Main again. Kraken respected that particular threat.)

Efran followed Ryal into the shop, pausing at the front counter where Ryal had several books and parchments spread out, but no customers at the time. Efran glanced into the back room to see Soames taking up the table recopying transcriptions for their files. Then Efran watched Ryal go behind the counter to pick up the page fragment that Minka had brought out of Nicarber.

Ryal began, "I wish you could have brought the whole book, or at least more of it." Efran was inhaling upon thoughts of the impossible, but Ryal continued, "This page was apparently from a book introducing Nicole's Harbor to visitors. And most of the language here--related to the one spoken on the Isles--is not what was spoken in Nicole's Harbor at the time this was printed."

"All right," Efran said blankly.

"That is good, in fact," Ryal said, and paused to dab his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Ryal, are you sweating? I don't think I've ever seen you sweat," Efran said in wonder.

Soames came to the counter from the back room. "Lord Ryal, are you all right?" he asked in concern.

"Yes, Soames. I've just rarely encountered anything so . . . remarkable," Ryal said.

"Do you need to sit down?" Efran asked, now mildly fearful.

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Chapter 2

A little aggravated, Ryal said, "No, I don't need to sit down; I just need to gather my thoughts. The reason that it's good this was printed in a foreign language is that it's one I can translate, partially. This little bit here at the bottom of the verso page is apparently a publisher's note in the language of Nicole's Harbor. I say 'apparently' because I cannot translate it at all."

"Ohhh, so the greater part of that page, both sides, is something you *can* translate," Efran said.

“Somewhat, yes,” Ryal said. Soames continued to stand at the counter to listen. “You see this one line written broadly?” Both Efran and Soames looked at it to nod. Ryal continued, “That says, ‘Here is the language of Nicole’s Harbor when it was part of Occitania.’”

Efran lifted up. “‘Occitania.’ That sounds familiar. Where . . . ?”

Ryal said, “Two hundred fifty years ago, Barthelemon the Great ruled Fenolheda in Occitania. And that line is in their language, Occitan.”

“Barthelemon,” Efran breathed. “Who negotiated with the Destroyer.”

“Correct. And from what I gather here, around that time, Nicole’s Harbor was known as ‘Niça.’ And the Passage was called the Paillon River,” Ryal said.

“Niça. The Paillon River. Those names sound familiar, too. Why?” Efran murmured.

“Because there is something about them both in the book I compiled on Barthelemon. But I will have to go back and reread it to find out what that was,” Ryal said.

Nodding, Soames returned to his work in the back room. Efran lifted up thoughtfully. “Yes, do that, Ryal.” Then he looked around to demand, “What have you done with Giardini?”

A little exasperated—as Ryal had to answer this same question from Efran whenever Giardi was not here--Ryal replied, “She’s out visiting friends, Efran. I don’t keep her chained to the counter.”

“Oh. All right, then. Ah, let me know,” he said, nodding to the wrinkled page.

“Yes, you may count on it,” Ryal said. Contemplating that, Efran went out to retrieve Kraken to ride up to the fortress.

At this time, Minka was sitting with her Auntie Marguerite on the patio of the chapel, having just recounted to her the two weird visits to Nicarber on the 23rd and 24th. Minka waited quietly, watching her auntie think about this. Hesitantly, Marguerite said, “It appears that a hole in Time has sprung up around here.”

“A hole in Time,” Minka repeated. “What is that?”

“No one really knows, as it’s so rare,” Marguerite half laughed. “But, Time flows, you see, like a great river. And it only flows one way. But there may be obstructions in the river which cause eddies and holes, or strong winds that force the river water to flow backward for a while. That may help explain what you saw in Nicarber, until the river of Time reasserted itself.”

“Then what we saw was from the future,” Minka suggested.

“Yes, that seems certain,” Marguerite agreed.

“I almost got caught in it, when I picked up a book and couldn’t let go of it. If Efran hadn’t snatched me up and ripped the book out of my hand, I would have been swept away in the tide of Time, wouldn’t I?” Minka asked.

“Perhaps. Or it may have just dropped you in the road. If the small book was too heavy to enter a contrary stream of Time, then it seems likely that you were too heavy to enter one, as well,” Marguerite said pensively.

“I hope you’re right. I’ve hardly slept since then,” Minka groaned.

“Please remember that you were *not* swept away,” Marguerite said wryly.

Minka let out a whining laugh, but asked, “If there’s one hole, could there be another?”

Marguerite mused, “It seems unlikely, just because they’re so rare. But again, we don’t know why this one popped up.”

“It’s the Lands,” Minka said. “There’s this great draw to the Abbey Fortress and Lands. We keep seeing it, with so many people and--things being drawn here.”

“That may be,” Marguerite murmured, with a sudden cautionary look.

“Well,” Minka exhaled, standing. “I’d better get back up to the fortress. Efran will be looking for me.” She kissed her auntie, then headed for the front door, her bodyguards Gaul and Ori following.

At this time, Efran was riding Kraken up the old switchback at a leisurely lope, half listening to the harpist from the Faire, Arenivas, strumming his lyre harp as he sat on a new bench at the intersection of Main and Chapel Road. He had discovered that playing here for just a few minutes every morning earned him enough to retire to the lakeside to play for the remainder of the day, which peace he much preferred. Also, whenever he played this close to the fortress, the rooftop bells chimed along (courtesy of the bell fairies who were responsible for them).

As Efran listened, he mulled over several things—first, DeWitt had hired Lemmerz to supervise the demolition of some large, unapproved buildings on the far eastern Lands. These would provide free lumber for residents on a waiting list which Pieta had drawn up and DeWitt approved. The fortress Christmas tree, which was fir, was now being sawed into lumber. And the Abbey’s building engineer Gerard had gone through the woods west of the Passage with their structural engineer Thrupp to mark ten large trees—fir, maple and hickory--for felling. All this would help supply their critical need for lumber until someone could get to Venegas to find out when their production would start up again.

Glancing over to the northwestern hillside, Efran saw Jonguitud and his babies—now about 2 1/2 months old—snoozing around the hillside hole after their latest feeding session in the caverns. The Abbey children had been demanding to play with them again. But the babies were so big now, with such sharp teeth, that Efran was unwilling to let the children get close until Jonguitud taught them to sit and talk, and not to bite. That might be difficult, because their mother Gevorgyan was wild.

Efran glanced up to the courtyard gate guards. They were watching him ascend, as well as another man below him on the switchback (whom Efran didn’t see). Then something heavy knocked Kraken over so that they both fell sideways on the switchback. Efran hit the retaining wall of the next higher level so hard that he lay stunned for a moment, until he could shake off the dizziness and get to his feet. He tentatively felt the metal plate in the back of his head. Fortunately, it had not come in contact with the wall.

He looked around for Kraken. Not seeing him, Efran anxiously looked over the edge of the switchback. But he still didn’t see him. Nor did he see the man stirring against the retaining wall two levels below him. Raising his eyes, Efran saw something else.

The switchback ended at an unpaved dirt road surrounded by meadowland. There were no buildings, no streets, no sidewalks, no traffic, no people. There was nothing but the wind ruffling acres and acres of meadowgrass. It

was all as it had been the first time Efran had come here, looking for herbs to bring down Minka's fever.

But that included the wolves. Efran looked quickly down at Canis and Lady Lupus, among others, watching him with tawny eyes through the tall grass. This was also before Pia had helped him make peace with the wolves. They did not know him now. With lowered heads and raised hackles, they began stalking up the switchback.

Efran turned back up the hill. But now the wolves—at least six of them—were pursuing him, loping up the switchback road. Fortunately, the levels were too broadly spaced for them to leap straight up; they had to run the long way. However, they ran a lot faster than he could. Still unseen, the man below threw a rock at them, barely missing the one in the lead.

Meanwhile, Efran scaled the retaining wall to the next level, and then the next, which brought him to the gates barely in time to wrench them open and slam them shut before the wolves could follow him into the courtyard. He paused to gaze down at Canis, whose feral eyes showed no recognition of him. Efran drew the gate latch down as it had been.

Backing away, he wiped his mouth, looking around. There were no stables, nor stalls, nor pens, only the broken-down shed that he'd lodged Bastard in that first night when he had brought Minka and Toby two and a half years ago.

Trotting up the fortress steps, Efran opened the doors to enter the foyer. In case the wolves found a way up, he closed the doors behind him. With a hole in the pit of his stomach, he gazed around at the echoing emptiness. Doane's cubicle now contained only the abandoned chair and desk with the gate key lying on it. Everything was covered with a thick layer of dust.

Sick, he went to the head of the lower corridor to open the door to his and Minka's quarters. He scanned the desolate receiving room, then looked into the bedroom, where the skeleton of the bed sat as though entombed. For the first time, he realized that someone had done a lot of work to make this room ready for him to consummate his marriage to Minka here.

He swallowed hard, backing out again to close that door. He went across the corridor to enter the dim, dusty, long-abandoned library, with its shelves of unread books sleeping under layers of dust. The Librarian was here somewhere, having not yet been awakened, but there was no Holy Canon, nor Law of Roman, nor sword of Ares. Nor were the books here yet that Ryal had removed to his shop for safekeeping. Nor was Ryal here.

This seemed to pierce Efran worst of all, even more than knowing that Minka was not here. Ryal was the backbone of the Abbey, its link to days of glory under Ares and Henry. Also, as notary, he was the one who kept the Abbey and Efran bound to observe Roman's Law. Until—and unless—Efran were Lord of the Abbey Fortress long enough to absorb its spirit, Ryal embodied its soul.

Before Efran could completely fall apart, he remembered—someone was here; there was someone already here who could help him.

He turned to cry, "Sir Nomus! *Sir Nomus!* I know you're here; you've been here since the beginning! I need you! Help me!"

The door to the hidden library opened, and Efran looked down at the little man in the parchment paper suit. Behind him stretched the Firmament, with the planets whirling in their courses, the sun and the moon rising on one hand and descending on the other, and the stars stretched out to infinity. Absorbing the harmonies he could not hear, Efran stilled, looking up to the windows of heaven with its golden light pouring down on the waters.

Having calmed enough to speak somewhat coherently, Efran stepped toward the Atticitian. “Sir Nomus—what happened in Nicarber, has, has—it’s all gone back in time to the beginning, before I even brought Minka here--”

“Yes, Lord Efran, I see that,” Nomus said.

“Can you change it back?” Efran asked breathlessly.

“No, Lord Efran, I can only watch. The Firmament is largely impervious to Time, but neither can I control that great river.”

“What can I do?” Efran asked.

“You must wait, Lord Efran, until the river rolls back to where it was,” Nomus said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a tremendous amount of work waiting in the Hall of Memories--”

“Wait! How—how long will that be, until the river rolls back?” Efran asked, shaking.

“There is no way to know,” Nomus said.

“Can I wait with you in the Firmament, so you can help me watch?” Efran asked. Already he was deeply needing the sound of another voice.

“No, Lord Efran—if you are in the Firmament when the river rolls back again, it will bypass you, leaving you there forever,” Nomus said.

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Chapter 3

“And with you in the Firmament forever, I’d never get anything done for your continual questions,” Nomus said, a little querulously.

“But—isn’t the Hall of Memories in the Firmament?” Efran asked.

“Yes, Lord Efran, which is where I’m trying to work,” Nomus said, strained.

“But—you told me the Hall could cross realms, and it did, to let me into the faerie realm to bring Alberon back. Can’t I cross back to my realm from there?” Efran asked, flailing.

“Not when the current of Time has dropped you here, Lord Efran. It is a power unto itself. Nothing can lift you back but the current’s revisit,” Nomus explained.

“So I must wait alone?” Efran asked, dismayed.

“I see no other course open to you. But while you wait, you must be extremely careful to change nothing on the hill,” Nomus cautioned.

“Change nothing? What do you mean?” Efran asked.

“Move nothing. Alter nothing. Remove nothing on the hill. For whatever you change will bind you to this realm, and you will never be returned to the other,” Nomus lectured.

Uncomprehending, Efran glanced around. “I—I don’t understand. How will it bind me?”

Sighing at his denseness, Nomus said, “Your life will begin again here, in this realm. You will live as best you can here, as it is now. But it will never be as it was before.”

“But—what will happen to Minka, and the children, and the Lands?” Efran asked, near to anguish.

Nomus explained, “They will carry on without you in their realm, parallel to this one. And being parallel, that realm will never intersect this one.”

Efran struggled to understand this. “So, I have to wait without moving anything. But I opened and closed the gates. Am I bound here now?” Tears were standing in his eyes, but he didn’t break down. Yet.

“No, opening the gates did not alter them because you closed them again. But to move furnishings alters them. To take the key off the desk alters it. To take a book out of the library alters it. To awaken the Librarian. To eat the food that is stored here. To drink from the well. To eat from the overgrown garden. To clear away stones or rubble. To repair or build. To urinate or defecate on the hill alters it. To use *anything* on the hill alters it,” Nomus explained, near to exasperation.

Efran gazed at him. “Then, how do I live, waiting for the tide to turn? If it is more than a day, or a week, how do I survive?”

“Whatever you must do that would materially change your surroundings in the slightest way, you must do it away from the hill,” Nomus told him.

“Away from the hill,” Efran repeated. “With the wolves on three sides and the Sea on the other.”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Nomus said. His eyes darted back to his work, but he knew more questions were forthcoming.

Efran looked away, thinking. Then he said, “So, I have not changed anything yet.”

“No, Lord Efran; you have not,” Nomus said. He did not say that nothing was changed.

“How will I know that I have changed something?” Efran asked.

Nomus squinted. “I do not know how you, as a human, can perceive that.”

“Is there no warning?” Efran asked desperately.

Softening at his plight, Nomus said, “Here. Put your hands to my hands.” He held up his hands, palms out. Efran bent to put his hands to Nomus’, palms to palms and fingers to fingers, though Efran’s hands were much larger.

“There,” Nomus said, pulling away. “I have imbued you with sensitivity to your surroundings. You will feel a

warning when you have altered something, in which case you must quickly put back what was changed. If you are quick about it, you will not be bound.”

“Good. That’s good. Now, I have to find a way off the hill around the wolves,” Efran said, mentally searching.

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Nomus said.

Remembering something, Efran said, “Let me ask you this: can I lift the trap door and go down into the cavern without changing anything?”

“Yes, as long as you put everything back the way it was. Any door you open, you must close. After you lift the trap door, you must lower it again. I do not know how long you will have to get through the trap door before you must lower it or be bound,” Nomus said, squinting.

“All right. But just walking across the cavern below the fortress will not change it,” he said.

Nomus said, “No, it should not. Again, you will be warned if it does.”

Efran caught his breath at his next thought, and asked, “If I am inside the hill when the tide of Time turns back, will it reach me?”

“Yes, as long as you have altered nothing,” Nomus said.

“And if I get down to the base of the hill, then I am safe,” Efran said.

“Yes, when you change something and feel no warning, you will know.”

Efran looked aside intently, thinking. Then he said, “That gives me hope, Sir Nomus. Thank you.”

“God speed, Lord Efran.” Nomus withdrew into the Firmament and the door closed.

Turning into the corridor, Efran paused to gather himself and close his eyes. *God of heaven . . . God of Heaven, God of Earth, and God of Time, please, please enable me to get back.* Then, drawing a deep breath, he walked down the corridor toward the cold storage room.

In the realm that Efran had left—his primary realm, his home--it had been a year and a half ago that Krems found the entrance to the caverns at the base of the hill, and somehow climbed up to the cave under the cold storage room. Having gone down to talk to Swimmer there, Efran had known about that cave previous to Krem’s finding it. But since Efran had not seen how Krems had ascended, he’d just have to find his way down in the dark.

Coming to the cold storage room, Efran opened the door gingerly, immediately feeling a warning tingle in his hand. The longer the door stood open, the more pronounced the tingling became. When Efran slipped inside to close the door, the tingling stopped. “That helps,” he murmured, then progressed to the closet in which the trap door lay.

Opening the closet door produced the same warning, so he shut himself in quickly to stand over the trap door with his feet on either side. Then he had to stop and think about how to open it, get down onto the short stairs, and then get the door closed over him quickly. He decided to crouch behind it and hold it up with one hand while he slipped off the floor onto the stairs.

That neat plan proved difficult to execute. First, Efran discovered (again) that he couldn't pry up the trap door with his fingers; he needed an edge. He didn't have a knife on him, and he couldn't take one from the kitchen. But he did have something.

Unbuckling his belt, he fingered the buckle in the dark. This he slipped into the crack around the door to pry it up. But getting it up just a fraction of an inch set off that warning tingle. So Efran quickly lifted it to slide his feet over the edge, feeling for the stairs.

By the time he was able to slip down into the opening, the warning had spread painfully up his arm. With one hand on the handrail, he couldn't get the trap door settled correctly to stop the burning tingle. So he balanced on the stairs as best he could to bring up both hands to set the door in place. The warning subsided.

But having let go of the handrail, he began falling backwards into the darkness.

Flailing with his left hand, Efran managed to grab the handrail to stop his fall. Then he had to get his feet back on the steps, all in the darkness of the cave.

By the time he got down to the cavern ledge, he was shaking and breathless, and his arm was sore. But now that he was here, he rebuckled his belt, then went down on his knees to feel his way across the ledge to the other side, where the rocks were. Remembering when Krems pushed him into the water, Efran knew that the path down had to be over here somewhere.

Climbing carefully over the rocks so as not to dislodge any, Efran saw a spot of light below and to his left. He made his way past the rocks to look down on a stone stairway enclosed in a narrow shaft. The shaft was illuminated by holes bored through the western rock of the hill. Peering down into the shaft, Efran couldn't see the end of it. He didn't know how far down it went, or whether he would have to negotiate branches.

But since this must have been how Krems got into the cavern, Efran had to trust that it led out, as well. He began taking this stairway down one step at a time, facing outward.

As he descended, bracing his hands on the sides of the shaft, he noted that the light appeared to be from an early afternoon sun. If it was, the tide should be ebbing now. That was good, very good, since it meant he wouldn't have to wait long to exit the tunnel at the end. And he was glad for any light, even though it didn't illumine much of the shaft. He couldn't imagine trying to descend in utter darkness.

He unconsciously picked up his pace going down, noting what appeared to be the demarcation of the next level by numbers carved into the side of the shaft. Without pausing to study them, he thought they probably indicated depth. But then, unsure of the elevation of the hill, he grew uneasy. He did not know how deep this shaft went; he *did not know* that it led directly to the tunnel. It was almost certain that Krems and Cennick's men had died here, but how was unknown. Was there something waiting below? How could he fight in the confines of this shaft, without a weapon? And he couldn't fight anything in the hill, else he'd be bound here.

Surely Nakham is here, as well. Won't he help me? Yes, but--Efran knew by now that Nakham came on the scene only when Efran could do nothing on his own. He had to keep going, and deal with whatever he encountered when he got there.

On the way, he vaguely considered that with all the people who had been on Main Street or in the fortress when the tide of Time turned, it was strange that he was the only one affected. Did that have anything to do with the switchback, and that there was no one else on it at the time? Had no one else been on it? He knew that no one

had been above him, but had there been anyone below him? Efran froze a moment to probe his memory, then continued his descent.

He knew he had arrived on the next level when he saw the depth notations carved on the shaft wall. Also, there was the slightest shift in the tunnel, indicated by a ring where the lower part was off by a fraction of an inch. Hearing water lap below, he realized he was catching up to the outgoing tide. So he had to go slower on the next set of stairs, waiting on the ebb current.

But the mossy steps were slick this far down, and his foot slipped into the water. The immediate thrashing around his boot reminded him that the eelfish were here. Their eating him would certainly bind him to this realm. So he followed the ebb current with greater caution down these steps.

The water receded to reveal the upper portion of an arched opening in the shaft below him. When he leaned down to look through it, his heart constricted at the deep darkness. There was no light, no other opening anywhere he looked.

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Chapter 4

“Wait,” he told himself. “The tide is still ebbing; wait.” So he continued to follow the ebb current down the next few steps of the shaft—and then saw light to his left.

With a few more steps remaining to descend—and eelfish still in the water—he couldn’t yet leave the shaft. But he could lean out far enough to see the top portion of the tunnel appear brightly over the lapping water. And he exhaled in deep relief and gratitude.

From there, it was a matter of minutes—perhaps a half hour--until he was able to drop from the stairway and cross the wet sandy floor of the cavern toward the light. Stepping over thrashing eelfish that had gotten stranded, he entered the tunnel on his hands and knees to creep twenty yards toward the growing light at the end, finally reaching the strip of beach at the bottom of the hill. And he stood to bask in the midafternoon sunlight.

Here, with the remnant of the ebb current lapping at his boots, he picked up a handful of wet sand to squeeze the water from it, and felt no warning.

He rested for a minute, looking around. He had made it to the bottom of the hill, but could not stay here; the flood current would inundate all the intertidal area. So he began picking his way inland, over the rocks, past the marsh to where the meadowgrass prevailed again.

Then he heard, “Captain! Ho, Captain! I found you!” With constricted heart, Efran spun to watch one of his men in uniform running through the meadow toward him.

When the man drew closer, Efran saw that it was Detler, one of the Forty, one of his best men. Upon reaching him, Detler exhaled, “What in the blazes--? I saw the wolves chase you up to the fortress, Captain, but—*what happened?* Where is everyone?”

“Detler,” Efran whispered. Reaching out to grasp his hand, Efran fell back at the shock that shot up his arm. He yanked his hand away to cry, “What did you move? What did you touch?”

“What?” Detler asked.

In anguish, Efran raised his face to cry, “Sir Nomus! How is he bound?”

He heard Nomus reply, “He threw a rock which remains displaced.”

“Can you tell us where?” Efran gasped. Unable to hear who the Captain was talking to, Detler was watching him in bewilderment.

“Along the second-lowest level of the switchback. That is all I can tell you, Lord Efran,” Nomus replied.

“Can I feel which one’s been moved?” Efran cried.

Nomus said, “If you put your hand close to it without touching it, yes.”

“Come,” Efran told Detler, running along the bottom of the hill. “We must find the rock you threw and put it back. Be careful not to dislodge any other rocks running.”

Following along behind him, Detler said, “Find the rock . . . ?”

“Yes, else you’ll be trapped here when Time returns to normal,” Efran said, running onto the second level. “Look around for the rock you threw. Where did it land? Don’t pick anything up; just look.”

Detler glanced around. “I don’t understand, Captain.”

“I’ll explain everything once we get that rock put back. Look around; what do you see?” Efran demanded.

“A lot of rocks,” Detler laughed weakly. He turned abruptly. “And wolves in the meadow.”

“Detler,” Efran said in his flat voice of command. “Find that rock. Look around for any rock that is the size and shape of the one you threw.”

“Yes, Captain.” Detler turned to survey the winding dirt road, then began walking toward the midpoint. “It should be somewhere along here. That one looks about right,” he said, pointing.

Efran leaned down to put his hand close to it, then straightened. “No, that’s not it. Look for another.”

Detler looked in dismay at the rocks littering the road from the partially broken retaining wall. Then he jerked around. “Captain--!”

Efran wheeled in time to see Canis pounce. Catching him by his throat with both hands, Efran cried as he fell, “Canis! Lady Lupus! Sami! Bounder! I am your friend!”

It was enough to make the great wolf pause, jaws inches from Efran’s face. Detler was reaching for another rock, but the other wolves had stopped. Efran whispered, “Canis, you will know me in days to come.”

His latent capacity as *aina*—one who could command animals—stirred in him, and Canis backed away. Efran shakily got to his feet, glancing at the rest of the pack. “Hello, Bounder,” he said, looking him in the eye. That wolf dropped his head. “Lady Lupus,” Efran acknowledged. “Sami, come here and let me pet you.”

Head lowered warily, she did approach a few steps for Efran to lean over and stroke her coarse gray fur. Then he straightened to tell Canis, "I have to help my friend. As you were."

Without looking to see that they stayed put, Efran turned back to Detler, who tensely straightened. "One of these?" Efran asked, gesturing to the rocks that littered the road. Detler opened his mouth, but Efran leaned over to place his hand over each of the likely rocks that lay in the area.

"Yes! This one!" Efran said. Lifting up, he dug a line in the dirt with his heel to mark the place. Then he paused in concern. Leaning over to test the change, he found that he had to efface it again, quickly. "I'll just have to remember," he exhaled. He glanced back at the wolves, who were sitting, watching him.

"Now," Efran said, returning to Detler. "Go back to where you were standing when you picked it up."

With glazed eyes, Detler turned to walk back up the road a few paces. He stopped once or twice, glancing back to gauge the distance to the rock, then stopped. "Somewhere around here."

"All right." Pausing to fix in his mind the location of the displaced rock, Efran went over to where Detler stood on the inner edge of the switchback. Leaning over, Efran placed his hand inches above the ground all around him, trying to feel the empty spot where the rock should go. After covering the space closest to Detler, Efran began fanning out to feel in a widening circle. The wolves had disappeared by this time.

He did this for almost an hour. Just as Detler was shaking his head at the futility of it, Efran said, "Here! It goes here!" Looking back, he ordered, "Get over here; stand here."

Noting that the location was a good fifteen feet away from the spot he had indicated, Detler ran over to stand by the Captain, who said, "Here. Point your foot right here." Detler complied.

Efran then ran over to grab up the rock and run it back to where Detler stood. Placing it on the ground, he had to readjust its position twice before pausing to feel the air around it. "It's back. I think it's back," Efran breathed. Lifting his face, he called, "Sir Nomus! Is he unbound?"

There was a moment of silence before Nomus replied, "Yes, Lord Efran. He is unbound now."

Efran sat down where he was to cry in relief. Detler sat pensively beside him to ask, "So, when Time changes back, I'll go back with you?"

"Yes." Efran wiped his face with his dirty sleeve. "But we need to get completely off the hill now, so that we don't change anything else." He stood to begin walking down the switchback. As Detler followed, Efran explained why that was important.

When the sun began to set, they lay down at the foot of the switchback. Exhausted, they fell asleep.

Upon the rising of the sun, Efran and Detler blinked awake. They sat up groggily to look around themselves. Time had not revisited during the night; everything was as wild and unchanged as it had been. Only—there was a dead rabbit beside Efran.

He laughed, "Thank you, Canis. Or Sami. Whoever thought of us."

Detler groaned, “There’s a thought. I suppose we could drink out of the Passage, but if we can’t eat from the fortress stores, what can we eat?”

Efran came right awake, then. Thinking back over what Nomus had told him, Efran watched Detler go out into the meadowgrass to evacuate, then look around. “There are some shagbark hickories in the woods west of the Passage. I suppose we could live off those for a while.”

As Detler began to walk north down the road, Efran said, “Wait.” Detler turned back, and Efran asked, “Sir Nomus, where . . . where was the river of Time flowing when Detler and I got caught up in it?”

Nomus said, “The portion that captured you was building up Main Street to encounter turbulence on the switchback, then flowed as usual through the fortress and hill, Lord Efran.”

That was evidently why no one else was taken. “So, do we need to be in that same path to go back? Anywhere on Main up to the hilltop?” Efran asked.

Nomus seemed to hesitate. “I would not risk being caught on the road, Lord Efran. Since you were taken on the hill, then only on the hill, anywhere on the hill, would you be restored when it flows back again.”

Efran exhaled, “But we can’t disturb anything on the hill until the river flows back.”

“That is correct, Lord Efran.”

By this time, Detler had walked over to him with a face of deep confusion. “Captain, are you hearing someone tell you that we have to wait on the hill but can’t do anything on the hill for an unknown length of time?”

“Yes,” Efran said.

“Oh.” Detler came to sit down beside him.

For the next three days, Efran and Detler waited near the switchback, watching the sun traverse the sky from one horizon to the other. The wolves came to look at them periodically, but did not offer more game after he and Detler had rejected the rabbit, with no way to clean or cook it. Sami did allow herself to be petted, however.

Detler ventured out into the meadow several times to see if there were anything they could eat, when they both knew there wasn’t. All three mornings they woke early to try to catch the dew on the grass. This they did, but there was not nearly enough to slake their thirst. Nor did it rain.

Detler explored the switchback—carefully—to see if there were anything they missed, or anything he might do to provoke the river’s return. That was futile, of course. He also walked a bit down the main road, just looking. Efran kept an eye on him from where he sat at the end of the switchback, conserving his strength. But when Detler started ranging over the northwestern hillside, Efran waved him back: “If you put a foot through the hillside, it’s over.” So Detler gave up, sitting beside him once more.

By the fourth day, Efran was lying down at the end of the switchback. No matter how hungry or thirsty he got, he remembered the tremendous speed of the tide of Time when Minka held on to the book. He was in no condition to try to catch it now, were he caught away from it.

Detler, however, became increasingly restless, continually looking to the west. “The Passage is right there,” he

kept saying—an easy walk. They could clearly hear its rumble from where they sat. His voice was slurred for lack of moisture.

Efran murmured likewise, “The longer we wait . . . the more likely the river will run back. Don’t risk it.” He closed his eyes to preserve the moisture so that he could see.

“Yes, Captain,” Detler said. Then he immediately sprang up to begin staggering toward the Passage. Efran groaned, shaking his head.

But then there was a disturbance along the northern road on the horizon—not just the road, but the trees, the ground, the air—which flowed rapidly over the old stone bridge north of the Lands. Efran lurched up. He had seen that before, rolling in from the Sea over Nicarber. He called hoarsely, “Detler! Detler!”--who didn’t hear him.

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Chapter 5

Summoning all the moisture he could, Efran stood to cry, “*Detler!*” He finally turned as Efran gestured wildly to the north.

Detler ran back as hard as his depleted strength would allow. Efran ran to the far western edge of the first bend of the switchback, reaching out for him.

But the river flowed too quickly. Seizing Detler’s hand, Efran was pulled off the switchback toward him. So the river snatched at Efran, but let him go. Detler was never touched by the flow as it passed them by.

They were still there, but not there; neither had they been bound to this realm. So they were both flung out of it.

Efran opened his eyes to look around. He saw gray trees, gray undergrowth, and stagnant pools of gray water surrounded by dead reeds. There were no sounds but the soft, listless wind and gentle creaking of long-dead branches. There was no sun, nor moon, nor starlight, just this diffused half-light everywhere. Efran knew where he was, having seen it in Marguerite’s family lineage.

It was the Gray Lands, the place for those indifferent dead who did not merit the joy of Paradise nor the flames of Hades. Seeing trees around him that moved, Efran tried to focus on them. It was hard, because nothing here was very clear. After a moment, he perceived that the walking gray trees were—or had been—people. He looked down at his own body then: his hands, his arms, his work shirt, trousers and boots were all the same dull shade of gray.

Hello Efran, a voice seemed to say. He looked over at Smaha, a Westfordian woman. Although he didn’t remember her at all, her past identity, thoughts and actions surrounded her like an aura. He saw himself leaning over a shop counter toward her with outstretched hand. His ignorance of the incident didn’t prevent her trying to excuse it with, I didn’t mean all those things I said to you. It was fine for you to be in my shop.

Blinking past her, he saw others approach him with their unwanted memories: there was Loizeaux, former

Surchatain of Eurus. I was killed by a usurper, so I should be in the Hall of Heroes, he insisted. Lundeen and Callisto appeared as though they were conjoined twins. One or both of them said, We were only following orders. We had no choice about it. Dileonardo, once notary of Crescent Hollow, complained, I always did what I thought was right when I was sure it wouldn't get me into trouble. Auber, the former Surchatain of Crescent Hollow, said, I don't know why I'm here. Why are you here?

Efran didn't know, either; he was dumb and numb. But he looked at Detler beside him, also completely gray. Detler said, "This is my fault, Captain. You are here because of me."

There was a sudden burst of light. Clothed in brilliant silver accented by a rainbow, Nakham said, "All right, enough goofing around, you two. Time to get to work." Efran and Detler were jerked up and thrown down to land on hard-packed dirt.

Efran groaned, looking up at a noonday sun. Detler was stirring beside him. Closing his eyes against the brightness of the light, Efran pushed himself up to a sit. Then he looked around to see piles of debris.

Snapping awake, he peered at the demolished buildings and waterlogged trash along the sides of the road in which he and Detler sat. Turning to look behind him, Efran saw the fragment of signboard that he and Estes had moved to enter Awfyn's then-current hiding place.

"Nicarber," Efran whispered, standing shakily. "It's the present Nicarber."

Detler was bracing himself with one hand on the road, the other draped over his raised knee. "I can't get up, Cap'n. Don't know how long I can make it." His words were one long slur.

Efran turned, blinking to clear his vision. "There's a—here. A well." He began staggering to the other side of the road. Detler found that he could get up to follow.

"Here," Efran breathed, straining to raise a crumbled wall. "Their community well is under this."

Detler came to his side at once. Together they began tossing aside the fragmented remains of the wall to uncover the mouth of the well. Noting the taut rope, Efran began turning the pulley handle to hopefully raise the bucket on the other end.

It did come up, but was filled with debris which Efran emptied. Then he had to lower and raise the bucket twice more to bring up water, filled with finer debris. So Detler found a lightly cracked pot which he set on the ground. He stretched his shirt tail over the mouth so that Efran could pour the water through it, straining it enough to make it potable—he hoped.

"Don't drink too much, to make ourselves sick," Efran muttered. "There'll be good water in the Lands." He almost sighed as he said it.

"And ale," Detler noted. "But now I'm about to chew on some of this wood here."

"Let's check the coast for seaweed," Efran said, standing.

"Sure, before a nice roast at Croft's," Detler muttered.

Efran agreed, leading down the dirt road to the rocky coast. When they came to the rock pools, they sat to take

off their boots and socks, then went wading. “This here?” Detler asked, picking up a long strand of kelp.

Efran looked over. “Ah, yes, but since we can’t cook it, go for the lighter, thinner fronds. Here, the sea lettuce is better raw.” He tore leaves off to swish them good in the water, then handed the bunch to Detler.

Chewing on it, he said, “Better than nothing. At least it’ll hold me till we get to Croft’s.” Nodding, Efran stuffed a well-washed handful into his mouth.

After eating for a little while in silence, Detler murmured, “Who or what was that, what jerked us out of the Gray Lands?”

“Nakham, the guardian angel of the hill,” Efran said, pausing over the dripping sea lettuce in his hand.

“What was that he said?-- ‘stop playing around and get to work’?” Detler asked.

“Something like that,” Efran said. He tossed down the rest of the sea lettuce to look out over the waves.

“Why did he drop us here and not in the Lands?” Detler wondered.

“I don’t know. Guess we’d better go see,” Efran said uneasily. He sat to put back on his socks and boots, as did Detler, then they began walking up the main road toward its intersection with the meandering east-west dirt road.

Efran abruptly paused to look at the large fragment of signboard that had once welcomed visitors to Nicole’s Harbor. Leaning over it, he discerned the random holes which hadn’t been there before. Detler came up to observe, “Someone’s been using that for target practice.”

“Yes, that’s what it seems,” Efran mused, raising up. As he did, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and glanced quickly at half a shop building that was still standing, somehow. As there was no more movement while he was watching, he continued up the road with Detler.

They paused at the intersection of this dirt road with another. As the sky had grown overcast, they were unsure of their bearings, so followed one dirt road in what they assumed to be an eastward direction. In fact, they were wandering westward.

Then they came to the broken wire fencing that encompassed the five-mile stretch of woods that the Lands had claimed west of the Passage. “Whoa! What’s this?” Detler said, lifting a sign that had been attached to the fence.

“It should say that it’s the property of the Abbey Lands,” Efran said, craning his neck to look.

“Not quite.” Detler held up the placard that read, “These grounds belong to Queen Windry of Minunni.” It wasn’t even new. Detler said, “I don’t think we’ll be going home quite yet.”

“Let’s find out,” Efran nodded.

Given the landmark of the fence, they found a footpath through the woods to follow it east without seeing anyone. Before crossing the new bridge over the Passage, Efran gestured to the children’s playground. “Let’s check in here.” They quietly approached the tall wooden fence gates, which stood partly open.

Efran shoved one gate open wider for him and Detler to look in at long-abandoned huts. Not only were the trolls gone, but the children obviously had not been here in a long time. Quelling his rising tension, Efran muttered, “I

begin to see what work we may have to do here.” From there they progressed to the old stone bridge. Turning south to cross it, they walked slowly toward the Abbey Lands.

The gates were standing open to heavy traffic consisting entirely of grim armed men, both on horseback and foot. A pair of haggard Abbey soldiers in old, dirty uniforms were trying to coordinate the flow both in and out of mounted men and marchers. For the amount of abuse they drew, they didn’t appear to be succeeding—mostly because no one was listening to them.

As Efran and Detler got caught up in the flow, one gate guard desperately pulled them aside. “What’re you doing? They’ll run you down. Get over here,” he said, glancing at Detler’s comparatively new and clean uniform. The Captain was wearing his usual work clothes, now dirty.

When the young guard pushed them behind him, Efran whispered, “Jehan?”

With a gasp, the guard turned so that both Detler and Efran could study him. It was Jehan, except years older, both hardened and sad. “Captain,” he whispered. “We thought you were dead. Where have you been?”

“How long has it been, Jehan?” Efran asked.

“Almost five years,” Jehan said, studying him in shock. His eyes turned to the other man, then. “Detler. You disappeared at the same time.”

“What’s happening here?” Detler demanded.

Jehan groaned, looking over to the other Abbey gatesman across the road, who was trying to see them around the horses and men. Jehan whistled at him. By skill of long practice, he worked his way across the street, darting in between horses to arrive at Jehan’s side.

It was Connor. Scarred and weary, he looked at Efran with tears in his eyes. Efran grabbed him by the back of the neck to utter, “Whatever’s happening here, we’re going to fix it.” Connor lowered his head to cry, which no one had ever seen him do. “Where can we go to eat and talk?” Efran asked.

“Here.” Glancing back to make sure they weren’t observed, Jehan led them behind what used to be Shurtleff’s Fish Market, but was now just an empty, derelict stall. While Connor kept watch behind them, Jehan brought them into another broken-down building that Efran belatedly recognized as Besiana’s Bath and Bed Supplies.

Stephanos and Earnshaw were inside. They looked up in alarm at the entrance of the strangers, but then Earnshaw said, “Detler!”

And Stephanos said, “Captain.” His voice was low with emotion.

Sitting at the rickety table with them, Efran said, “Tell us what happened.”

And Detler mentioned, “We haven’t eaten anything but seaweed for four days.”

More men trickled in, standing along the wall or sending out messengers with word of the Captain’s return. Meanwhile, Connor explained, “Days after you vanished almost five years ago, this swordsman Gnecco proclaimed Windry Queen and his men started killing everyone who disagreed. They didn’t care about the charter, so she renamed us the Kingdom of Minunni. I don’t know where that came from. All the men were out looking for you, so Gnecco and his handful just swept in and took over the fortress. I don’t know what happened

to Administrator DeWitt and Steward Estes; I'm sure they're dead. I don't know what happened to the children, either, but Windry's got her two in the fortress with her, now, I understand. They can't leave."

"What about Minka?" Efran asked.

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Chapter 6

"I don't know what happened to Lady Minka, Captain. No one knows," Connor said. "It's crazy how Gnecco could come in with only twenty, maybe, with all the hundreds of men we have—or did have. He killed Wendt, Gabriel and Ryal first off, and burned the Law. No one of our army joined him, so he sent out summonses for all the mercenaries on the Southern Continent. Oh, and, he found the signet and used it right away, so, they've probably emptied out the Treasury by now. They forced Meineke the moneyer to show them how to make coin, and then killed him. So they've been stamping out poor coinage by the bucketful."

By this time, Conte had brought in plates of mash and ale for Efran and Detler, who inhaled it all. The men let them eat, then Truro pleaded, "What happened to you, Captain?"

"We got caught up in a Time hole," Efran said around a mouthful.

The men looked warily at each other, a few asking, "Did I hear him right?"

But Efran went on, "I still don't know--" Then he looked up at a corner of the room to ask, "Sir Nomus, are you there?"

"Yes, Lord Efran," he replied. The men jumped, hearing his voice but seeing no one.

Efran asked, "Sir Nomus, is this my realm? Am I free to act here?"

"No and no, Lord Efran. This is a parallel realm, and the conditions remain the same: if you or Detler change anything on the hill, you will be bound to this realm. If you are on the hill when the tide of Time turns, you will be returned to your proper realm," Nomus said.

Efran looked off, frowning in concentration. "But there are people here now, Sir Nomus. If I leave this realm, will they continue here?"

"Those who lived on the Lands will return with you, Lord Efran. But if you are bound here, then they will stay also. As you are Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, your people go where you go," Nomus said.

"Detler, too?" Efran asked.

"No, because Detler was taken by the tide, he must be returned by the tide, as I told you before," Nomus said, growing impatient.

"Then how were—never mind. Thank you, Sir Nomus," Efran exhaled.

“You are welcome, Lord Efran,” Nomus said.

“Time is as fickle as a woman,” Efran muttered. He looked off, thinking, then asked, “Why are all these men massing now?”

Stephanos looked up at Truro, who said, “They’re going to attack Venegas at first light tomorrow, Captain. Venegas has been a vassal for years, and now they’re trying to break free. Gnecco aims to teach them a lesson.”

Efran lowered his head to spread like a cobra. “How many men do you have?”

“About sixty, Captain,” Stephanos said.

“Do you have horses? Or can you get them?” Efran asked.

“Yes, Captain,” Stephanos said.

“Weapons?” Efran asked.

“Yes, Captain. We’ve been preparing, but Gnecco watches us. If he sees something he doesn’t like, he just kills more of us. We’re not organized to fight back. Or, we haven’t been,” Stephanos said. Stirring in excitement, the men looked to their Captain.

Efran asked, “Are the northeastern gates still open?”

Stephanos glanced up to Allyr, who said, “We can get them open, Captain.”

Efran instructed, “Start sending out a few men at a time to Venegas. Get them out of uniform; take care that they’re not noticed. They’re to tell whoever’s in charge at Venegas that we’re coming to throw a welcome party for Gnecco and his men. Venegas must start gathering men and arms. And--” He paused, staring off in space for a moment. “Cable. Long enough to reach across the road and strong enough to stop a horse.”

The men began to get a glimmer of what the Captain had in mind. He repeated, “Start getting them off now.”

“Yes, Captain.” Stephanos stood to give two men on the edge of the group instructions, who left at once.

Detler began, “Captain, if the tide turns tonight--”

“We have to risk it, Detler. Neither of us can sit on the hill to wait until we clear away the usurpers,” Efran said. Detler acknowledged that. Then Efran groaned, “I need another plate. Detler probably does, too.” Detler agreed.

As that day waned, Efran kept to the shadows, watching mercenaries gather by the hundreds, well-armed. He glimpsed Slade among them, which dismayed him, as Slade had been a reliable source in the past. But now, one way or another, a new past and present were being forged.

Seeing one hard-faced man stalk among them, giving orders, Efran whispered to Stephanos, “Is that him?”

“Yes, Captain. That’s Gnecco,” Stephanos whispered. Efran studied Gnecco’s decorative breastplate, and smiled. Gnecco apparently didn’t know its weaknesses. Efran did.

Stephanos kept Efran apprised of the number of men they’d been able to slip out, telling him, “Ellor was afraid

that men riding out of the northeastern gates would be noticed, so we're dispatching more down New North Road directly to the coastal highway south, which is a faster route to Venegas, anyway."

Efran's brows drew down. "Yes, it is, certainly. Why isn't Gnecco going that way?"

"Because of the wolves that have been killing his men, Captain. He hasn't been able to wipe them out, but, they seem to be leaving our men alone," Stephanos told him.

Efran drew in a breath. *Canis, Lady Lupus. You remember us.*

With twilight on the horizon, Efran skulked to the barracks yard to observe Gnecco's men gathering. Efran had to be careful, because they noticed anyone watching. Krall was knocked unconscious by one of the mercenaries, who hated Polonti.

Grabbing a bucket, Routh ran over to the man who had hit Krall. "They've been ordered to clean out the sewers! If you don't let them do the work, it'll run over the whole grounds!"

"Eh," the man grunted, turning aside. But he allowed Routh to rouse Krall and equip him with the bucket. Thereafter, Efran led a whole brigade of Polonti with buckets. They were able to coordinate practically in the midst of the mercenaries, but that meant they actually had to clean out the open sewers (which should have been covered, as they had been in the past).

This proved to be a good blind, however, in that they carried their buckets clear to the coastal highway to empty. There, Tourle and Serrano were waiting with whatever horses they could walk from the stables. None was saddled, of course, but equipped with halter and harness as though for hauling.

The stratagem also proved lifesaving when Efran was able to watch Gnecco send out two scouts to Venegas for a report on their current state. Returning to Stephanos with his stinking bucket, Efran told him, "The rest of us have got to leave now. We've got to catch those scouts before they reach Venegas."

"Let's go, then." Stephanos took his bucket; Efran armed himself with another. As they walked their waste to the coast, Stephanos silently signaled all of the rest of the men to follow.

When Efran leapt up on the last horse, he looked down in concern at the handful of men left behind. Numan waved, "Go on, Captain; we'll follow one way or another." Nodding, Efran turned the horse's head to ride east on the coastal highway with Stephanos, Routh, Martyn, and Whobrey as twilight deepened behind them.

They rode hard to catch the scouts, and within minutes spotted them ahead in the gloaming. The two men paused their horses to turn and look. Stephanos waved to them, shouting, "Supreme Lord Gnecco has further instructions!"

So the pair waited for the group to draw up. "What is it?" one man asked with a suspicious glance at the two Polonti in the group.

Surreptitiously drawing his knife from his belt, Stephanos said, "That you must watch for--" and drove the knife into his belly under his breastplate. At the same time, Efran lifted a foot to kick the other man out of his saddle. By the time he had landed, Whobrey was on him with a knife as well.

While the two were rolled off the road into the ditch, Routh took the reins of their horses to lead them back west for new riders. After stripping the dead, Efran, Stephanos, Martyn and Whobrey resumed their ride to Venegas.

They arrived after dark to see Venegasans with torches clustered around the main entrance to their city, where about fifty Landers were milling among them. As Efran dismounted, Heus told him, “They say they don’t have any cables, Captain.”

“Then we’ll have to use rope. Who’s in charge here?” Efran asked.

A large Polonti stepped toward him. “I am Ghio. Who are you?”

“I am Captain Efran, and we’re going to stop Gnecco and his mercenaries when he comes here in a few hours. We need to rig a trap over the road, so if you don’t have cable, get us rope,” he ordered.

Ghio regarded him, then nodded. “He had twenty-five observers here already. The first ten men of yours that arrived killed them.”

“Oh, very good,” Efran said blithely.

So from there, working by torchlight, Efran selected a point in the road where the trap would be laid. On the far side of the road, laborers hammered a heavy iron rod, five feet tall, deep into the earth. On the opposite side of the road, that near Venegas, they hammered in a companion rod, this equipped with a crank pulley. They fastened the strongest rope they could find to the far rod and laid it slack across the road to the pulley. This they had to test several times before they were sure it could be raised and secured quickly.

Someone then ran up to Efran with bundles of fishing nets. “Ah. Excellent,” he noted. As backup to the rope, he had these laid beyond it, to catch the hooves of loping horses. Then he had them throw up a hasty barricade of brier bushes jammed into crossbeams across the open entrance to the city. And he sent them hunting for all the bows, arrows, spears and long swords they could find.

Toward dawn, he asked for himself and his men to be fed. Finally, with bow and quiver across his chest, he lay down at the barricades so that he’d be sure to wake whenever Gnecco arrived.

It seemed almost minutes later, in the first faint blush of sunrise, that Martyn was shaking Efran awake. “Captain, here they come!”

Efran was up at once, crouching beside Stephanos at the crank. They intently watched the shadows pounding down the road toward them. Someone behind them muttered, “Cripes, they’ve got hundreds.”

“Shh!” Efran hissed. They couldn’t afford to demoralize the Venegasans who had been beaten down for so long.

After another few heartbeats, Efran whispered, “Crank it up, now!” Stephanos shoved the handle down and then up, and the rope began to rise moments before the lead riders hit it.

As Efran had hoped, there was pandemonium in the forward ranks as horses went down and riders were thrown. But the horsemen behind them merely left the road to ride around the barricade into Venegas, swords sweeping.

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Chapter 7

Efran whistled his call to battle, whipping the bow off his shoulder to nock and shoot in rapid fire. He brought down one after another, but the influx was unabated. Venegasans began running away.

Outnumbered by at least three to one, Efran's men hung on, and against better-armed men. Besides the aforementioned weapons, they had clubs and whips, the latter devastating in the hand of a practiced whipman. He could catch a man by his arm, leg or neck and bring him down to be trampled or stabbed. But the Abbey men were on fire, fighting with abandon for their Captain and their freedom. The yells of the combatants, the clashing of swords, and the cries of the stricken filled the air.

With the increasing daylight, however, Efran saw an increasingly bleak scene. Gnecco's mercenaries, well-paid and well-fed, were enjoying themselves as they cut down the ragged remains of the Abbey army. Most of the Abbey men had no protective gear; neither was Efran wearing any. He tried not to watch the number of his men falling, but his chest tightened and his heart cried out to God.

Then he glimpsed Gnecco stalking among the fallen Landers. With a wall of mercenaries encompassing him, Gnecco advanced casually through the wounded ranks of Abbey men to dispatch each one with a quick thrust of his sabre. A mercenary behind Efran, catching sight of him, swung a club at his head, but Fiacco stopped him with a two-handed strike of his longsword. Glimpsing the club, Efran fell to his knees to pivot with his bow and fire his last shot toward the glittering decorative breastplate.

When the arrow sank through the breastplate into Gnecco's chest, he looked down at it in surprise, then tumbled forward onto his face. Stupefied, the mercenaries who had been protecting him watched him fall.

Efran lurched to his feet to shout, "I am Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands! The usurper is dead; you get no more pay! If you leave, I won't chase you down; if you fight I will kill you all!"

Breathing in fury, Efran swung around to face Slade. The bounty hunter paused, then saluted Efran with two fingers and turned to remount his horse and ride away. The rest of the mercenaries shrugged and did the same. The remaining defenders, exhausted and gasping, looked around blankly.

Efran tossed down the cracked bow. "Detler and I have to get back. If we're on the hill when the tide of Time rolls back, the Lands will be restored as they were. Detler?" He scanned the faces around him.

"Yes, Captain. Let's go," Detler said wearily, bringing up two horses. As he and Efran mounted to head back to the Lands, the remaining Abbey men clustered around Stephanos, who had heard the invisible Nomus explain the means by which they would all go home. Then everyone who could find a horse—and still ride one—followed the Captain and Detler west.

When they two arrived at the Lands hours later, they wanted something to eat, but none of the few remaining merchants would give them anything until the Abbey men began returning, who could offer payment for the two. Finally given plates, Efran and Detler took their dinner to eat on a relatively stable spot low on the northwestern hillside.

From there, they watched the newly invigorated Abbey survivors chase away or kill Gnecco's surprised home guards. Truro reported to Efran that Venegas was caring for the wounded, but they all were urgent to return to the Lands. So they were being loaded into carts to be transported throughout the night.

With the sun descending on their left, Efran and Detler lay down right on the hillside amid the rocks and brier bushes to go to sleep. Martyn and Fiacco went out to stand guard over them for the first watch, and others relieved them for the later watches.

When the sun rose the next morning, Detler woke to see the Captain sitting up next to him. Glancing at him, Efran said, "How do we get them to bring us breakfast? We can't throw rocks at them, and I don't see anyone close enough to yell at."

Detler yawned, "I've got to unload my bladder; I'll find someone close by."

"All right," Efran said. While he waited, he looked at the fortress over his shoulder, then at Stephanos, Truro and Lund crossing the road toward him at the bottom of the hill.

"Captain." Stephanos saluted, as did the other two. "We're thinking we'd better check the fortress, see what this Gnecco has done."

Efran hesitated over this, then decided, "It can't hurt to look. But just in case, be careful not to move anything. If you open doors, close them again. Leave everything as it was."

"Yes, Captain," Stephanos said, saluting.

As those three were ascending the switchback on foot, Detler arrived with a breakfast of mash for himself and the Captain. Handing Efran his plate and cup of water, Detler glanced at the soldiers on the switchback. "Here you are, Captain. It will be grand to get back to the fortress dining hall, won't it?"

"Oh!" Efran said as in deep pain. But because he was hungry, he began eating.

Settling down carefully on the hillside, Detler asked, "What're they doing?" He nodded to the three now entering the courtyard.

"They wanted to see what Gnecco has done in the fortress," Efran mumbled around his mouthful.

Detler was shaking his head. "That's useless and dangerous. It doesn't matter what he's done; when we get back, it'll all be undone. We need to not mess that up."

"True. I should have told them not to bother. I'm afraid I might have been just as curious," Efran said, draining the cup. Setting it and his empty plate beside him, he added, "We have to move our dishes down a few feet."

"I'll do that," Detler said.

As Detler finished eating, Efran lay back down, sighing. "I hope we don't have to wait long. I wish I knew the reason for Time roiling like this; I wish it would stop. It's hard enough trying to right matters in the present; it's ridiculous taking care of future matters."

Detler thought about that. "In this case, I don't know, Captain. Gnecco was a threat that you've taken care of now. I don't know where you or I will be in five years, but we know that Gnecco won't be ruling the Lands with the help of mercenaries."

Studying the clouds, Efran acknowledged, "You're right."

They both looked over as the three soldiers came out of the fortress to begin hurriedly descending the switchback. “Uh oh,” Efran said uneasily, sitting up.

He and Detler watched Stephanos, Truro and Lund exit the switchback to salute. (Obviously, there were no faerie trees here anymore, nor anywhere on the Lands that Efran had seen.) Stephanos reported, “Captain, Windry has locked herself and her children in a room on the second floor. They’re crying to get out, but she won’t let them, and she won’t leave.” Other men approached the hill to listen, while staying on the road. They all knew their fate if the Captain were prevented from leaving this realm.

“Did you tell her Gnecco is dead?” Efran asked.

“Yes,” Stephanos said in disgust. “I told her I saw you shoot him through his chest armor. She didn’t believe me.”

Efran exhaled, “Hopefully, it won’t matter. But I’d better ask. So, Sir Nomus, please pardon me for interrupting you again. I assume that you heard what Stephanos said about Windry and her children. I also assume that they’ll be taken back to the Lands when the tide returns. Is that correct?”

Nomus said, “Partly, Lord Efran. Lilou and Calix are firmly bound to you, so they will go with you, wherever you are, as your men will. But Windry is bound to this realm. If she comes out at once with the desire to return to the Lands, she *should* be restored. But if she refuses to leave, she will be left behind in this realm.”

Efran closed his eyes in aggravation. “Which I’m sure she doesn’t know. Sir Nomus, is there any danger in my talking to her? If Lilou and Calix want to come out, will that bind me here?”

“You must not remove anyone or anything from the fortress, Lord Efran, or you and your men will be bound. The children need not leave the fortress to be returned to the Lands in the coming tide. Talk to Windry at your peril. Remove nothing from the fortress or you and your men will be bound,” Nomus repeated.

The men around him went still at the severity of the warning. Efran got up to put his plate and bottle on the far edge of the road at the bottom of the hill. “Well, I can talk to Windry; that’s it. I’ll do it just to assuage my conscience that I’m not the one who separated a mother from her children.”

Detler stood in foreboding. “She’s a grown woman, Captain. Let her be responsible for her own choices.”

“It’s not for her; it’s for me. It’s why I left her the first time,” Efran said in disgust. He turned onto the switchback to begin ascending.

Upon passing through the gates and the courtyard to the fortress steps, he looked at the number of men behind him. “Don’t follow me in,” he scowled. “If you dislodge something accidentally, you’re just as bound as if you intended it.”

They stopped, but when he entered the fortress, many of them did, as well. In the foyer, Stephanos turned to them to hiss, “Stay here.” So he and Truro were the only ones to accompany the Captain to the stairs.

On the way, he glanced down at a servant sitting on the floor against the corridor wall, hiding her face. Truro whispered to him, “A floor cleaner. She’ll be returned to the Lands.” Efran nodded vaguely; Truro and Stephanos glanced at each other, having already talked to her.

When they reached the second floor, he looked questioningly to Stephanos, who pointed down the corridor. "This way." So Efran followed him to the room that had once been Estes' and Kelsey's. And Efran ached to see his friends again.

Knocking on the door, Efran said, "Windry." Immediately he heard Lilou and Calix crying and pounding on the door. He paused at their voices, which sounded different. Then he realized that after five years, Lilou would be almost eighteen and Calix about sixteen—neither of them children anymore.

Efran said, "Lilou, Calix, be quiet and listen." They did, and he went on, "You'll be returned to the Lands. You don't need to do anything; it won't be long before you're let out. So just be still and wait."

Lilou said, "All right, Efran. We'll do that."

But Calix said, "Why can't we come with you, Efran?"

"That will take too long to explain when I don't have much time. But I promise you will get back without having to do anything. The problem is, Windry won't. Windry? When the tide comes in, your children will be taken back to the Lands as they were, and all the Abbey men will be taken, because we all want to go home. But as long as you're here, and you want to stay here, you will not go back to the Lands with your children."

"Liar! You're lying! I'm staying for Gnecco! she shouted.

"Windry, he's dead. I killed him. You'll be here by yourself," he told her.

She began screaming at him, and he lifted his face. "Why couldn't I listen? This was a mistake." So Efran turned away from the door to begin proceeding back downstairs. Truro and Stephanos smiled at each other wryly.

Turning off the stairway into the lower corridor, Efran again glanced at the servant sitting on the floor against the wall. He passed her by, then paused. There was something familiar about her. He turned back slowly, but Stephanos said, "She'll be fine, Captain. She'll be returned with all of us."

Efran didn't hear. He was looking fixedly at the girl, who was covering her face. She was pale, and wretchedly thin. Her head had been shaved practically bare, and was scarred in places. But that's what he recognized: the shape of her head. He knelt before her to pull her hands away from her face. "Minka," he breathed. Her scarred eyelids were tightly closed over empty sockets. Her eyes had been gouged out.

"Minka." He crushed her in his arms, then lifted her.

Stephanos and Truro were beside him in an instant. Truro said, "Captain, if you carry her out like this, you damn her to living blind the rest of her life in this wretched shadow of the Lands. If you leave her, then you'll find her whole when you get back. Let her go now to save her, Captain." Men were watching from the foyer.

"Yes, Efran, leave me here," she whispered. "I heard Sir Nomus; you have to leave me here so I can see you when you get back. Please. Please, Efran."

Eyes pouring tears, he struggled for a moment, then knelt with her. "Yes. I understand," he gasped.

"Thank you." She tried to smile at him, which tore his heart out.

"Minka!" He grabbed her up again. "I can't leave you! I can't!"

“Captain, you have to,” Stephanos said.

But Efran was crying on her scrawny neck. “No, Minka, I won’t leave you like this.” Stirring in fear, the men in the foyer began inching into the corridor.

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Chapter 8

Minka said authoritatively, “Efran, don’t be silly. I don’t want to be blind the rest of my life with no hair. Look at my head! Leave me here so that I can grow my hair out for you when you get back. You know that’s what you have to do.”

The men were utterly still as he drew long, deep breaths. “Y-yes,” he said, teeth chattering. “You’re right.” So he laid her down tenderly against the wall where she had been, and stood to turn away.

He stopped, then. Stephanos and Truro were bracing to carry him out against his will, especially when he said, “I can’t. I can’t walk away from her like this. I can’t.” He turned back to pick her up again, gathering her skinny limbs in his arms. “We’ll make it work, Minka. I won’t leave you. I won’t--” The crazy thing was, neither he nor anyone stopped to realize that he could simply wait here with her for the tide to turn and be taken back safely. But without anyone’s knowing how long that would take, the prohibition against his altering anything on the hilltop remained.

The men converged on them from behind. While Truro and Stephanos were shouting at them to stand off, one of them withdrew a cudgel from his pocket to hit the Captain on the back of the head. He fell, dropping Minka to the floor against the wall. Screaming, Windry ran off the stairway to fight her way through the crowd of men. She was the first one down the switchback.

There was bedlam in the corridor as men fought without knowing why or with whom. “Who hit him?” “Stop!” “Wait! We’ve got to--”

There was piercing whistle from the foyer. The men paused to look at Detler. He roared, “The tide’s turning! Everyone out! Don’t touch anything! Don’t *leave* anything!” The men jostled each other to get out of the corridor and leap down the fortress steps. Then they surged out of the courtyard onto the switchback.

They could all see the tide of Time building in a tremendous wave from the north. Air, sky, clouds, trees, roads and the far horizon rippled in one unified motion that surged soundlessly south. While the men poured off the switchback onto the road, Detler looked around, scowling, “Where is the Captain?”

They stared at each other in dismay. And Meece, the man who had struck him, looked down to see his cudgel missing. He did not know that he had dropped it in the corridor.

There, with everyone else gone, Minka edged over to find Efran laid out on the marble floor beside her. Feeling him, she realized that the thump she had heard was someone knocking him out. So she lifted him enough to run her hand along the back of his head. There was the metal plate, and surrounding it were the fragile edges of skull. Lightly touching these newly broken edges, she whispered, “Oh, Efran. Oh, my darling.” And she held

him as the soundless, mighty river washed over them.

When the river had swept on, one man was left on the barren east-west road. Alone, Meece looked at the deserted streets, the rundown shops, the sighing grassland, and the wolves.

Approaching the new switchback on Rose, with Gaul and Ori following on their horses, Minka looked up to see Efran ascending the old switchback on Kraken. She smiled, about to call out, when she saw Kraken fall abruptly against the retaining wall of the upper level as though there had been an earthquake. Gaul shouted and Minka gasped, seeing Efran thrown violently against the wall.

She kicked Rose to lope toward the entrance of the old switchback, where the faerie trees were waving their branches in distress. Although Rose didn't want to lope, and the men's horses were faster, they stayed with her to ascend. They glanced at Detler getting to his feet on a lower level of the switchback, but passed him by. Minka hadn't even seen him.

Arriving on the second level from the top, Minka threw herself down from Rose to land beside Efran as the courtyard guards Youshock and Graeme were skidding toward them. She studied him in confusion for a moment. Although she had seen him hit the wall with his left shoulder and side, he was now lying on his back, with his face turned outward. She didn't see how he could have landed in that position from where he had been when he hit the wall. Kraken, having regained his footing, was snuffling him.

Minka pushed his nose aside as she looked up at Graeme and Youshock. "He's hurt. Bring a stretcher to take him to Wallace."

"Yes, Lady Minka," Youshock breathed. Graeme had turned to shout up to the men in the courtyard, two of whom ran into the fortress.

Youshock knelt beside Minka as she carefully lifted Efran's head to feel along the back, especially around the steel plate. "He's broken his head again," she gasped. Then she paused, having clearly seen his fall from below. He hadn't seemed to have hit his head at all. She was gripped by an impression—not a picture, just the sensation of a hubbub, and a swift, sweeping movement over his head.

Blinking, she looked up as two men scabbled toward them with a stretcher between them. She told them, "Lift him carefully; he's broken his head along the steel plate."

"Yes, Lady Minka," Truro said. As he held the Captain's head steady, Shane and Graeme gingerly lifted him onto the stretcher. Watching, Truro had flashes of something—men converging, pushing, shouting, and an arm coming down--

Shane said, "We'll get him right up, Lady Minka, no fear."

"Yes, I'm coming," she said, standing on shaky knees. She watched them run the Captain the rest of the way up the switchback, careful to keep him level. Then she climbed back on Rose to urge her up with Ori, Gaul, and Youshock right alongside. But Rose declined to go any faster than a trot.

Upon reaching the courtyard, Minka fell from the saddle to run up the fortress steps and down the corridor to the stairs. Ascending to the doctor's quarters on the second floor, she paused at the cluster of men around his door. They parted for her to enter, and Leese motioned her to the back room where Wallace had Efran on his side facing the door. Standing on the far side of the bed, Wallace was delicately fingering the back of his head.

Efran, now awake, raised his eyes to her. She came over to fall on her knees beside the examining bed on which he lay. He blinked at her, but did not smile or speak.

Wallace raised up to grunt, “Yes, he’s shattered the bones along the upper left side of the plate. Efran, can you hear me? Lift your left hand.” Efran did not move.

“He heard you, Wallace; he blinked,” she said. Truro and Graeme were watching from inside the door to the corridor.

Wallace delicately laid Efran flat on his back with the lower part of his head on the pillow. Noting the trail of saliva from the right corner of his mouth, Wallace asked, “Efran, what can you move?” All Efran did was blink at him and turn his eyes back to Minka.

She leaned over him, gently smoothing his hair back out of his eyes. He slowly blinked at her, and she felt his chest expand. She could almost hear him say, *It’s all right now.*

Straightening, Wallace looked over to the doorway. “Leese, will you come in here for a moment?” She slipped into the room to stand over the bed. “We’ll be right back, Efran,” he added, taking Minka by her elbow to lead her out and shut the door behind them.

In the outer room, they found DeWitt and Estes waiting with a group of men who spilled out of the doorway to fill the corridor. Wallace cleared his throat. In the silence around him, he said, “The skull around a portion of his steel plate has been shattered. I can do nothing for it. He’s entirely paralyzed except for his eyes. And he has evidently lost the ability to swallow.”

The men received this news in shocked dismay. DeWitt asked, “Can he be given food or water by tube?”

“Not successfully, no. If the problem were in the upper throat, we might could get around that. But with a brain injury. . . .” Wallace left the rest unsaid. Minka closed her eyes in silent, anguished prayer.

From beyond the closed door, there was a sudden *thump*. The men jumped, staring at the door, then Wallace reached over to open it. He, Minka, and Estes looked in to see Leese standing wide-eyed beside an empty bed. DeWitt pressed forward to ask, “Are you all right? Leese? What happened?”

She snapped awake. “Yes, Administrator. There were—two men, ah, who said, one said something like, ‘As much as we’d love to stay and chat, dear, there’s none such option for us right now. Please excuse us.’ And they--they—opened a door in the floor and took the Captain.” She looked down at the smooth wooden floor.

Minka exhaled in a teary laugh. “Nonesuch and Asmuch! They’re the ones who put the plate in his head to begin with! You remember, Estes? DeWitt?” That was after Efran had been hit in the back of the head with a shovel almost ten months ago.

DeWitt said, “Yes, Minka. We remember. And it took a while, but he recovered completely.” She nodded as though vindicated, and Estes put an arm around her shoulders to walk her out.

The men parted for the Administrator and Steward to leave the doctor’s quarters and return to the workroom, Minka with them. Those men who had heard what happened relayed it to the others, who then peeled away to return to their duties. As Truro walked toward the stairs contemplatively, he glanced up at Stephanos. The two studied each other for a moment, then Stephanos asked, “Are you free?”

Truro shook his head. "I have sparring practice. I'll be off for dinner."

"Croft's, then?" Stephanos suggested.

"Yes," Truro said thoughtfully. "I'll meet you there."

Minutes after the men had dispersed, Wendt and Gabriel arrived at the doctor's quarters, where they heard a complete report from Wallace. Following, they went on down the corridor to the workroom. As they entered, Minka looked up with a sigh.

Nodding to her, Wendt said, "We just talked to Wallace. So Nonesuch and Asmuch are back on the job, are they?" he asked wryly.

DeWitt said, "Apparently. Do you remember them?"

"I only heard about them. But that's certainly encouraging. Do we know what caused his horse to fall on the switchback?" Wendt asked.

DeWitt looked to Estes, who said, "No. Some of the men saw Detler fall at the same time, but he was on foot, so got right back up. He just seemed a little—dazed." Minka was looking off in hard thought at this time. Again, there were impressions of upheaval, and . . . Efran holding her. *I can't leave you! I can't!*

Wendt was saying, "Well, we just got more reports that I needed to share with Efran, so I'll tell you instead."

DeWitt said, "Yes, sit down, you and Gabriel, Commander."

As they took their seats, Wendt nodded to Gabriel, who began, "First off, in the eight days since Efran dispatched Cocci for us, Westford's come back to life. Our scouts tell us that Lord Baroffio has been cracking the whip on the rebuilding, and has sold the house that Cocci was building to McElfresh. Ah, the Notary Shaffer is back on duty, which we'll have to tell Ryal. Shaffer still doesn't remember anything about Minka's hearing, and was greatly offended at the suggestion that he would overrule Ryal on anything."

"Good," Estes said. "Ryal has great respect for him, and Westford certainly needs a competent notary."

DeWitt leaned forward to ask, "How are they getting lumber for rebuilding?"

"From Guialme's logging operation in Eviron," Gabriel replied. "It's more expensive than Venegas' lumber, but he has plenty, and Eviron is actually a little closer to Westford than Vychan."

With a glance at Estes, DeWitt said, "Then we'll send a wagon up there."

Estes silently concurred, then asked, "What have we heard from Venegas?"

Gabriel said, "They're getting back on their feet, slowly. Sewell is still Surchatain, as they executed a few scapegoats for the torching of so many acres of trees. But their production is still down, because they have to haul the raw wood so much farther to their sawmill."

"Ah," Estes said.

After a silence, Minka asked, “Does anyone remember Smaha, who had some kind of a shop in Westford . . . ?” She looked off as though searching her memory.

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Chapter 9

Estes groaned, “Oh, for pity’s sake, what made you think of Smaha? Efran only went to her shop one time, I believe. We were running errands for the palace administrator that day. That particular stop was to pay for bedding for the barracks. She berated Efran for daring to set foot in her shop while he was trying to give her money. Her husband finally came over to take his payment and give him a receipt. When did he tell you about that?”

“I don’t remember,” she murmured.

“What did Smaha say to *you*, then?” DeWitt asked Estes.

“She didn’t even see me!” Estes exploded to their laughter. “When Efran walked in anywhere, with anyone, he was the one they all looked at. I was invisible. Which was good, in fact. Anyway, I hope someone set her right,” he grunted. “I’m not usually such a stickler for respect, but that was after he’d been made Captain; was wearing his uniform with insigne. Westford was proud of our army. The least she could’ve done was look at what he had in his hand.”

Wendt was nodding in agreement. “Even I heard about that. Efran just shrugged it off; he seemed to be used to it.”

At that time Ellor came to the door, saluting. “Commander, ah, Windry’s here, demanding to talk to the Captain.”

There was a moment of silence, then Minka said, “I’ll talk to her. But not here, at Ryal’s. Get me a pair of men to walk down to Ryal’s with us, please.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Ellor said, glancing to the Fortress leadership.

Wendt stood, as did Gabriel. The Commander said, “Bring your men, Minka, but I’ll walk down to Ryal’s with you. Gabriel, I’ll need you to pass along word about Efran to the Captains.”

“Yes, Commander,” Gabriel said.

“Let us hear how it goes, Minka,” DeWitt said pensively, and she raised her brows at him so that Estes laughed.

So the four of them—Minka, Wendt, Gabriel and Ellor—went down to the foyer. Gabriel slipped out to get his horse and ride down to the barracks. Ellor resumed his post while Minka and Wendt paused in front of Windry.

Upon seeing her, Minka was momentarily shocked that she looked older. Did she, really? Yes, there were new lines in her face, so that she looked years older from the last time Minka had seen her (three weeks ago, at the hearing to decide if Minka should go to trial for perjury).

Refocusing, Minka said, “Efran’s resting from a bad fall on the switchback, Windry, but I’m happy to talk to you. Commander Wendt is going to walk us down to Ryal’s, because he may have answers for you that I don’t know myself.”

“Then he came back here, too?” Windry asked suspiciously.

Minka paused. “Came . . . back?”

“Yes, from my kingdom, Minunni, that used to be the Abbey Lands,” Windry said.

Minka absorbed that, then said, “Yes, he’s back. Let’s go on down to Ryal’s so that he can help us understand.”

“You don’t remember any of it? I guess not, since you got your eyes and your hair back,” Windry said. Minka glanced at her as she, Wendt, Serrano, and Arne accompanied Windry out to the courtyard. Arne led the Commander’s horse as they all went down the old switchback on foot. Windry mentioned, “The new switchback was useless. There wasn’t enough traffic to justify it.” Serrano was listening intently, but no one replied to her.

They came off the switchback to walk right up the steps to the notary shop. Entering, they found Ryal at the counter with a customer, so they drew aside to wait. (Arne tied the Commander’s horse to the post outside before coming in, as well.) Ryal glanced up at the group, and Windry snorted, “So you came back, too. Gnecco chopped your head off and burned this shop to the ground.”

The customer looked at her, shocked. Giardi came out of the back room with a ledger which she placed on the counter, evaluating her. Windry shook her head at Giardi with, “I don’t remember what happened to you. Someone must have disposed of you early on.”

Ryal asked, “Are you quite all right, Windry?” To the customer, he said, “There you are. Good luck with your shop; I think you’ll do well.”

“Thank you, Lord Ryal. We’ll be particular as to who we do business with,” he said. He directed a heavy glance at Windry as he left around her.

She sneered at him. Ryal asked, “Commander, Lady Minka, what can I do for you?”

Minka told him, “Windry wanted to talk to Efran, who’s resting from a fall on the switchback. So I offered to talk to her here, if you and Giardi are free to listen. The Commander was curious to hear her, as well.” Windry looked back at Wendt, then, and shook her head as though she didn’t remember him, either.

“That sounds interesting. Should Soames take notes?” Ryal asked. Soames had come to the door of the back room to study Windry.

Minka said, “If you don’t mind, Soames. That way Efran will have something to look at when he’s feeling up to it.”

Ryal said, “Come on back, then. Soames, if you’ll sit at the amanuensis table to take notes, I think that the interview table will accommodate Lady Minka, the Commander, Windry and me. Giardi, dear, I’m going to ask you to stand at the door in case other customers come in.” She nodded agreement.

Entering to sit at the table, Windry said, “You will address me as *Queen* Windry of Minunni.” They all paused upon that declaration, then sat at the table while Arne and Serrano stood against the wall.

Ryal asked, “Where is Minunni, Windry?”

“Right here,” she said firmly. “At some point in the future, the Lands will cease to exist. Gnecco will kill all of you—except Minka. He had her blinded and her head shaved. She cleaned our floors.”

Serrano’s face went white, but he said nothing for now. Minka asked slowly, “So, when did this happen?”

“It will happen, and soon,” Windry said.

Ryal observed, “But you talk about it as though it had already happened. Something cannot be both past and future.”

“It’s another realm,” Serrano blurted. They all looked at him, and he said, “I was there, too, and now that I’m back, it’s like—walking a corridor that you know well, but, keep stubbing your toe on something that shouldn’t be there. I don’t understand it.”

Minka said, “I’m feeling something like that, too. Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin, can you help us understand about this realm?”

The two faeries then appeared in the middle of the table. Sir Ditson bowed, wearing a splendid winter white suit and top hat, and Sir Nutbin’s tail spread as he cleaned his monocle on a large kerchief plucked from his plaid vest. Ditson began, “Thank you for the invitation, Lady Minka. Nutbin and I are delighted to elucidate the concept of realms for you all.


“It is fitting, Serrano, that you mention your splashdown from the great river of Time as akin to stubbing your toe in the corridor, for, as Marcus Aurelius said, ‘Time is like a river made up of the events which happen, and a violent stream; for as soon as a thing has been seen, it is carried away, and another comes in its place, and this will be carried away too, and then another thing will float by, and, try as one might to catch it, wetting one’s best sandals, it will drift on, and so on, until--’”

“Dear Ditson, let us find the point again, if it has not washed irrevocably downstream,” Nutbin urged, tail twitching.

Gathering himself, Ditson said, “So true, dear Nutbin, and here I find that I almost drowned in a quotation. Nonetheless, good Serrano’s symptoms are common from visiting parallel realms.”

Minka murmured, “I’ve visited several realms, especially those that Alberon devised as traps, and’ve never experienced anything quite like this before.”

“Please allow us to illustrate the difference, Lady Minka,” Ditson said, spreading in tutorial mode. “The realms you have visited in the past, especially those of the disgraced King Alberon’s making, can be shown—greatly simplified, thus--”

He gestured to Nutbin, who drew shimmering silver lines in the air shaped like this:  Ditson continued, “The vertical lines represent subordinate realms in relation to your primary realm, which is represented by the sloped line. It intersects all others, you see.”

While everyone in the room studied the drawing, Ditson elaborated, “Because your realm intersects all the others, you may go back and forth between yours and them at any time, no matter how many realms you visit.

All the secondary realms still have less pull on you than your primary realm.”

“But—we couldn’t get out of the spider cave until Efran passed Alberon’s test of affection,” Minka remembered.

“That’s only because neither of you realized that you *could* by asserting your authority as Lord or Lady Sovereign of the Lands,” Ditson said in part sympathy, part chastisement. “However, when something as powerful as the river of Time throws you into another realm, that can be represented thus--”

And he gestured for Nutbin to draw silver lines that looked like this: |||

Ditson explained, “You see that all of these realms appear equal, and none intersects the others. So while your heart remains bound to your primary realm—because that contains your memories--any of them could become your *new* primary realm, were you to bind yourself physically to it, as Sir Nomus warned Lord Efran.”

Minka said, “And because my realm doesn’t intersect the others, I wouldn’t be able to return on my own.”

“That is correct, Lady Minka,” Ditson said. “And even though Lord Efran was successful in preventing—or undoing—his and Detler’s binding, you, Serrano, and the others still walked on the hill and in the fortress; you breathed the air and touched wood, metal and stone. All these small contacts left tiny pieces of that realm within you, or tiny pieces of yourself there. These bits are what’s causing the discomfort you’re feeling.”

“I see,” Minka said, looking at Serrano, who nodded. Then she asked, “But what about Windry?”

Ditson and Nutbin stared at the erstwhile Queen of Minunni, then Ditson said, “I don’t know why she’s here at all; she’s still quite bound to that realm.” Nutbin nodded so earnestly that his teeth clattered.

Then Minka said, “Sir Nomus, can you help us understand about Windry?”

Without deigning to appear in the same room with a faerie tutorial, Nomus said, “Windry is sitting on a fulcrum, as it were, Lady Minka; she is perfectly balanced between realms. Her heart and her desires are divided between the wealth and the power she had as Queen of Minunni versus the familiarity of her life and friends here, as well as her former lover Lord Efran.”

Everyone looked quickly at Windry, who looked away. Nomus continued, “She must decide which realm she desires and give her heart fully to that realm, else she will continue to be stretched across both, which no mortal can endure for long.”

“Thank you, Sir Nomus,” Minka said.

“You are welcome, Lady Minka,” Nomus said.

In the ensuing silence, they all studied Windry. Serrano said, “If you’re counting on Gnecco for anything in ‘Minunni’ [he sneered] he’s dead. Captain shot him in the chest, and when he was face down in the dirt, Captain told the mercenaries to leave or die. They all rode out.”

Quietly, Minka said, “There’s no room in the Lands for Minunni, Windry. And I don’t think anyone’s left there.”

Windry lurched up to run out of the shop. Then Soames looked down at the blank paper in front of him. “I was so caught up listening, I forgot to take notes! I’m sorry, Lord Ryal, Lady Minka!”

Ryal shook his head, dismissing the failure, and Minka said, “No fear, Soames; I’ll tell Efran about it” *when he comes back. And I know he’ll be back.*

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Chapter 10

While everyone waited for Nonesuch and Asmuch to bring Efran back, they had plenty of work to keep them occupied. DeWitt, Estes and Ryal never skipped a beat in their duties, seeming to remember nothing of Minunni. But other men, especially Detler, Stephanos, Truro and Jehan, were constantly stubbing their toes as they tried to reacclimate to their home realm. At least once a day, sometimes twice, they would meet at Croft’s to share what they were learning.

On December 28th—the day following the pivotal day of the 27th, when the tide of Time broke open the boundaries between realms—Detler and the other three mentioned above met for the midday meal at Croft’s to eat and talk. Detler said, “First off, I know that some men were killed in the battle at Venegas with Gnecco and his goons, and I thought I remembered who they were--”

Truro interrupted, “Hawk, Kaas, Tomer are who I saw go down.”

“Right,” Detler said. “I checked today’s duty rosters, and they all reported to work. I even went out to the cattle pasture to find Kaas and talk to him. He didn’t remember a thing about Minunni or fighting Gnecco in Venegas; thought I was pulling his leg.”

Jehan said, “I’ve tried to talk to Coish about it, too, and he’s sick of hearing it. But he was killed early on.”

“That seems to be key,” Stephanos said. “The Commander, the notary and the administrators don’t seem to remember anything about it, either, but they were also killed right away.”

Truro demanded of Detler, “Then what happened with you and the Captain? You two didn’t appear till right at the end, while we were there years. And we all checked out of Gnecco’s Lands on the *same day*—yesterday!”

“It’s just got to be a quirk of that Time hole,” Detler said. “And here’s something else: have you noticed how old Windry is looking?”

Stephanos said, “Yes, years older than yesterday. Surley can’t believe it—he keeps asking her what happened. But Lady Minka was there all that time, as well; got tortured and blinded, then came back all fresh and new.”

Detler said, “Remember Nomus’ warning about bonding with the realm? Windry bonded hard, but Minka didn’t want any part of it, ever. And her heart was always with the Captain.”

“That’s the other thing Nomus said, that his men went with him,” Truro added. “Oh, and I checked the duty rosters, as well. The only one who hasn’t reported in today without leave is Meece.”

Jehan said, “I thought he was on duty at Featheringham.”

“Not according to today’s roster,” Truro said.

“One more thing,” Detler said, shifting closer to speak lower. “I wasn’t in the fortress when the Captain found Minka there, so I didn’t see what happened--”

Stephanos said, “Truro and I were right there with him. We tried to pass her off as a servant, so he’d walk on by, but he recognized her, somehow, and couldn’t bear to leave her like that. We explained, and even she told him to go on, so that they’d all get back whole. He knew that; he agreed, but, couldn’t seem to let her go, so somebody coshed him--”

“And that’s when the tide came back in,” Detler said, leaning back. “But while everyone else came back healthy—even Minka, even those who had died--Captain came back with a broken head. *Why?*”

They pondered this, but no one had an answer.

Over the next several days, the administrators were involved with continued reports from the rebuilding at Westford, which Lord Baroffio had reinvigorated with a vengeance. That was encouraging. And Commander Barr at Featheringham sent daily reports from Crescent Hollow. While that city had never suffered from an invasion of walking sticks, they were presently fighting a losing war with monkeys.

The monkeys had first appeared in the Market District—Crescent Hollow’s sprawling center of fresh fruits, vegetables, grains and meat—about three months ago. Because there were only a few in the beginning, the merchants simply swatted them away and made sure to lock up their produce at night. But over the ensuing weeks, their population blew up to such an alarming number that the rat catcher Stief had been engaged to set traps laced with arsenic.

This killed enough monkeys to cause their migration to the city dump, where their numbers increased exponentially. At the same time, the remaining population in the Market District revived. So now the city had a plague of monkeys on their hands, and not enough money in the administrative coffers to offer a bounty of even a royal a head.

The city had entertained high hopes of a good, cold winter cutting into the monkeys’ numbers, but alas! The monkeys in the dump simply tunneled into the great heaps of trash to keep warm, while the monkeys in the Market District learned to unlatch large baskets of fruit or vegetables, in which they crowded together to snuggle and snack at the same time. So in these late December days, the Council was forced to meet repeatedly to address the outcry from the merchants.

With that distraction, Wendt was confident that the Lands wouldn’t be facing another attack from Crescent Hollow any time soon.

Meanwhile, Minka waited, spending most of her days on the back grounds with the children. They asked about Efran, and she told them that he had been badly hurt falling on the switchback, and was receiving special care. This they accepted. Meanwhile, her heart throbbed to see Isreal working hard in the gardens with Tourjee. Then he spent at least an hour a day at archery practice, until he could hardly lift his arms. But he never looked distressed or worried; he knew that Efran would come back, and Isreal wanted to be ready when he did.

On January 1st, Minka asked the kitchen to hand out special treats to the children in honor of Joshua’s second birthday. But there was no celebrating apart from that.

The day following, Minka took two men, Capur and Fennig, to ride down to the chapel for her to receive some much-needed encouragement from Auntie. Minka had no worries about her son Verlice bursting in with his own important announcements, as he was still digging on the sewers and boarding at Laborers' Hall to pay his fine for illegal gambling.

Hartshough met her at the door of the chapel, as usual. "Good afternoon, Lady Minka. Shall you and your men care for bracers?"

She sighed, "Thank you, Hartshough, but I just can't enjoy it until Efran comes back to tell us what's in it."

"I understand, Lady Minka. Lady Marguerite is in the backyard," he said.

"Thank you." Minka patted his arm, then she and her bodyguards went out to the patio. There, Minka stared at the empty table. She couldn't fathom coming out here and not finding Auntie.

Fennig pointed to the yard. "When the butler said 'the backyard,' I think he meant it, Lady Minka."

She looked out at Marguerite on her knees in the grass at the edge of the flower beds. Running over to her, Minka chided, "Auntie! What are you doing?" Her bodyguards came with her, but did not upbraid Lady Marguerite.

She sat back on her heels, laughing, "I was astonished to see weeds growing in the Lands. I had thought it impossible." She waved a hand shovel that she had been using to evict the offenders from among her dahlias.

Minka sank to her knees beside her, then turned to Capur. "Go get me gloves and a trowel from Hartshough, please."

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said, running to the back door where Hartshough had appeared with the requested tool and gloves.

Marguerite told her, "You don't need to do this; we can sit and talk."

"No, I've got to have something to keep me sane while Efran is being treated. Do you know what happened? Thank you." Minka took the hand shovel and gloves that Capur handed her to put them on and begin digging out dandelions. Meanwhile, the bodyguards were fidgeting in their desire to replace the ladies at this task, but were strictly disallowed to interrupt.

Hesitantly, Marguerite said, "I heard about the realm where Windry ruled, and that Efran was somehow injured."

"Yes, one of the men hit him on the head when it looked like Efran was going to take me out of the fortress, preventing anyone from coming back here. We all came back all right, but Efran came back with a broken head, so Nonesuch and Asmuch came to get him. That was six days ago. Auntie, can you sense anything from him?" Minka was digging out weeds so energetically that she found she had to apologize to a few asters and tamp them back down.

Marguerite paused, lifting up. "No. But I'm not surprised; those two are far beyond me. But as they have Efran in hand, he'll be all right. What concerns me more is this roiling of Time between realms. I can't imagine how it's even possible, much less why it's happening here and now."

"Another attack?" Minka asked warily.

Marguerite glanced up at the sky to vaguely shake her head. “I can’t see who could acquire the power to manipulate Time. So we just wait, Minka.”

“I know,” she sighed. But she continued to help her dig weeds for an hour, until Hartshough brought them bracers.

Early the next morning, January 3rd, Minka was awakened by a persistent knocking on her door. Falling out of bed, she ran to the receiving room to throw open the door. Connor, outside in the corridor, whispered, “He’s on the back grounds.”

Heart in her throat, Minka slammed the door on him to run back to her closet to throw on a riding dress and put on her boots. She paused before the large standing mirror to look at her disordered curls, now just past her ears. Then she ran out without attempting to do anything with her hair.

Coming alongside as she ran down the corridor, Connor said, “He’s standing at the back fence looking out to the Sea. But, Minka--” He took her arm to make her stop and face him. “There is still something wrong. He’s not responding to the men.”

She lifted her chin. “All right. Thank you for telling me.” She continued to the back door, just at a fast walk.

Emerging from the door, she found the sun barely peeking over the eastern horizon. So she had to peer hard as she came across the grounds toward the apple orchard, finally glimpsing him through the trees. She approached watchfully, and the men around him fell away.

As Connor had said, he was standing at the seven-foot tall black iron fence, grasping the pickets to look south over the Sea. Coming closer, she could discern the newly shaved strip along the back of his head, and the new row of stitches—which would make three rows along his head to itch and irritate him, especially when he tried to lie down.

She came alongside him to take his arm, looking up to him. Turning his face down to her, he faintly smiled. She encompassed his waist, murmuring, “How are you, Efran?” Without attempting to answer, he only turned back to look at the Sea.

So she pulled on his arm to draw him away from the fence. “Are you hungry?” she asked. Again, he did not answer, but allowed her to lead him through the back door and up the corridor to the dining hall. She sat him at their usual back table, then went into the kitchen to request plates for them. The men followed at a distance to watch.

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Chapter 11

Ella, dressed for work, came in to sit beside Efran on the bench. “How are you, Father?” she asked quietly. He looked at her, but still didn’t speak. Smiling, she said, “I’m afraid I got my hair trimmed again. Quennel is getting used to it.” It was even shorter than the first cut she’d gotten about six weeks ago.

Again, he didn't answer, so she just leaned over to kiss his cheek, then slid down the bench to make room for Minka to bring plates for him and herself. Loghry brought over a mild ale for him and milk for her. Quennel came over with plates for Ella and himself; seeing Efran, he saluted in surprise. Efran barely glanced at him as Quennel sat on Ella's other side to whisper to her.

Minka watched in satisfaction while Efran ate quickly, obviously hungry. With less to eat, she still had no time to chatter at him and still finish by the time he was done. As the dining hall began filling up for breakfast, men came over to salute him. He only nodded before he stood, turning into the corridor.

She followed as he walked rapidly to their quarters, then she waited while he used the garderobe and washed his hands. Encouraged by these signs of normalcy, she took his hand, breathing, "You are better. Let's get you up to Wallace, so he can have a look at you." Somewhat reluctantly, he allowed her to draw him up the stairs by a hand and then drag him to Wallace's quarters.

They had to wait a few minutes for Wallace to pull himself together this early, during which time she watched Efran grow uneasy. The doctor finally came into the examining room where they were waiting and said, "Ah, Efran! You look good. Here, sit a moment." He obviously meant for Efran to sit on the examining bed, but Efran didn't move until Minka drew him over to the bed.

He sat in discomfort for Wallace to tilt his head forward so that he could look at the new stitches and feel his skull. Wallace said, "Ah. They did it again. They've extended the steel plate to replace the bits of skull that were broken in this last attack. And what a success, for Efran to regain his mobility. And he's had breakfast, as well?"

Minka nodded excitedly. He went on, "That's excellent. What do you think?" he asked Efran.

Efran regarded him, then lowered his eyes. Wallace directed, "Efran, look at me." When Efran did not respond, Wallace said, "Leese, come in here a moment."

"Yes, Wallace?" she said at the door. Efran barely glanced at her.

Wallace told her, "Go stand behind him and clap your hands." When she did this, Efran quickly glanced over his shoulder. "So he's hearing, just not understanding. Is that right, Efran?" Wallace asked. Efran's eyes vaguely traveled to the wall behind him. Minka began shivering.

The doctor then stepped to the outer room and returned with a parchment. He told Minka, "This is a treatise I wrote on a better way to set the broken bones of the forearm." Handing it to Efran, he said, "Read that to me, please." As Efran obviously didn't understand what he said, Wallace gestured to the paper and spread his fingers in front of his lips, indicating speech.

Efran looked down at the paper, then dropped it, looking away. Minka picked it up off the floor to hand it to Wallace, who left the room with it. Efran looked tensely at Minka, and she came beside him to stroke his arm, whispering, "It's all right, Efran."

But he did not understand her, either. Shortly, Wallace returned with a paper on a writing board and a wrapped piece of charcoal. Minka stood back as Wallace handed Efran the charcoal, placing the board on his lap. On the paper, Wallace had written, "Write your name."

Efran looked at him questioningly, and Wallace gestured to the paper. Efran looked down at it, then back up to him. Wallace gestured to the charcoal. Growing frustrated, Efran held up the charcoal. Wallace took his fingers

that held the charcoal to press it on the paper. Efran drew the charcoal across the paper in an angry line and got up to stalk out.

While Minka ran down the stairs after her husband, Wallace went to the workroom to tell the administrators that he was ambulatory, but could not understand speech nor writing. Essentially, the Captain was unable to communicate.

Efran returned to the back grounds to grip the pickets of the fence and look out over the Sea. When he did not respond to the men who approached him, they looked back to Minka, on the edge of the orchard. And she explained what Wallace had discovered. So they did not approach him again.

The children came up talking to him, so Minka had to tell them, “Efran took a bad hit on his head, and can’t understand you right now. We believe he’ll get better, but it’s going to take some time.” They patted him, telling him that they hoped he’d get better soon, then ran off to play again.

Except Isreal. He knew all about not being able to understand. So he hugged Efran, then made him come over to the archery lines so that Isreal could show him how much better he was shooting. Efran could understand that, and praise him without words.

But from that day on, the Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands was relegated to the corner as a nonessential person.

That had happened before, when he had been hit on the back of the head with a shovel. His struggling back to health became a matter of great urgency, for the insurrection was brewing. Now, his incapacitation was concerning, but not—life-threatening.

The administration of the Lands was so efficient, with so many capable people in positions of authority, that getting important information to Efran was as unnecessary as it was onerous—and in most cases, impossible. He was brought to meetings in the hope that he would glean something, but after sitting inert and uncomprehending through several of these, he wouldn’t sit for any more.

Not knowing how to reach him, the men stopped trying. They saluted him and greeted him courteously, but that was the end of the interaction. The men who tried hardest to communicate with him suffered the most. As it was always a failure, Efran turned away when he saw them coming. To an extent, this applied to Minka, as well.

She clung to his side as long as he would let her, but in his restlessness, he had to go do something. So he began hiking up and down the northeastern hillside again. He didn’t try to take Joshua, who was too mobile and active to be carried, but not up to dealing with the occasional scorpion or adder on foot. It was too dangerous even for Isreal, who was not yet coordinated enough to negotiate steep, sandy slopes.

So Efran walked for hours a day, but when he was done, and had to go into the fortress, he was locked again in isolation. For a man to whom the army had been his family, his friends, almost his entire world since he was 14, the severance was nearly unbearable.

He still had Minka, but her desire to be there for him constantly became almost intolerable itself. He couldn’t even make love to her anymore. She continued to sleep snuggled into his side—when she could sleep—but this most intimate of bonds was also broken. Without words or lovemaking, she had no means left of comforting him. So she withdrew to watch from afar, praying for what to do.

Of course, he no longer appeared on the Lands, and stopped going to Ryal’s shop. What was the point, if they

could not talk? What was the point of his being Lord of the Abbey when he could not understand their concerns, much less address them? Worse—in a funny way—Efran could no longer threaten to give up his title and his charter. So when he had walked himself to exhaustion on the northeastern hillside, he came back to the fence behind the orchard to look over the Sea.

And the old, evil, long-dormant desire to end it all came slithering back. How many years did he have before him, suspended in isolation while everyone else went on with their lives? The funny thing about *that* was that the fence made it considerably harder to just jump in the Sea—getting over those seven-foot high rails with finials was so difficult, someone was bound to see him trying and come pull him down. Then there'd be the additional humiliation of pity: *Poor old boy, so useless he can't even end himself properly.*

To top it off, there were always new men coming in, many of whom knew who he was but not that he was now an idiot. So they'd come saluting to introduce themselves, and Efran had to endure watching someone else get crushed by his lack of response. He made the mistake once or twice of attempting to respond, to get something, anything, out verbally—and the resultant bleat caused the victim's eyes to widen in horror and pity.

So then came the new men who *had* been informed of his state, and approached in respectful concern to inform him that they were newcomers with healthy brains who would soon erase all memory of any good he had done for the Lands.

Dinner was a special kind of hell. This had always been Efran's favorite part of the day, when he could talk and laugh with friends and fellow soldiers over good (or often mediocre) food. But now conversations around him sounded like rocks being broken or a wild ox thrashing through the woods. Women's voices were screeching fingernails on slate or pottery crashing to the floor; men's voices were a combination of drumbeats, barking, clattering, and the shrieks of a roomful of lunatics. Even Minka, with the voice of a nightingale, was incomprehensible.

At Estes' request, Pia had come into the dining hall to pause behind Efran. He did not see her, but Minka glanced back at her, smiling. She watched hopefully while Pia focused on Efran for a few minutes. Then she went up to the front of the hall where Estes was sitting with his family to tell him, "I hear nothing from him."

"All right, Pia. Thank you for trying," he said dismally. She nodded and left the hall with her attendants. Minka, watching from the back of the hall, understood without hearing, and closed her eyes in disappointment.

So Efran ate with his head down. It was particularly painful that Joshua, talking more now, freely expressed to Quennel or Minka what he preferred to eat. Since Efran did not respond, he became invisible to his son. Toby always came by to pat Efran on the shoulder or back, but that was about all he could do.

Isreal was the only one fairly unperturbed by Efran's silence, knowing what he was experiencing. So Isreal often came over to sit beside him—just sit in unspoken understanding.

Of course, Efran's greatest fear was that someone consequential—either as an enemy like De'Ath or an ally like Sewell—would approach him at table, and find that the Lord of the Abbey Lands was an imbecile.

During this time, Windry was experiencing her own difficulties. After almost five years as queen of her own realm, with a powerful Lord Counselor and lover in Gnecco, she now found herself transported back to her dowdy little house with her middle-class husband who kept staring at her, confounded. "What happened to you?" he kept asking—specifically, regarding her face.

She kept snapping, "Nothing, stupid!"—until she happened to glance into her fitting mirror in afternoon sunlight.

There, she stared at the lines around her mouth, on her forehead, and at the corners of her eyes. Worse, long gone was the winsome pout of a pretty girl; she now had the fixed expression of a harridan.

In shock, Windry turned away to sit at the table that she thought was so nice when she had bought it. “Lilou!” she shouted, who had no choice but to come running when her mother called her. “Lilou!” she shouted louder. Then she remembered, again, that they weren’t in Minunni anymore. They were back in . . . the Abbey Lands? Where Lilou worked at . . . Firmin’s?

Pensively, Windry rose from the table to leave her house. She got lost on unfamiliar streets for a little while, then remembered that she had to cross New North Road to get to the main street of the Lands that she once knew so well. Shortly, she stopped in front of Firmin’s, next door to Averne’s with the pond. Scanning this area, she saw her daughter emerge with a tray from the awning-covered patio at the back. She took the tray to unload it at a table with friendly chatter to the customers. Only, she looked like a little girl again, not the young woman Windry had left in Minunni.

“Lilou!” she cried fearfully. Lilou’s head jerked up, and the people at the table looked over. “Lilou, come here to me!” Windry ordered. How could this happen? With a hard look back at her, Lilou finished unloading her tray, then turned to take it to the back. “Lilou!” Windry bellowed, both panicky and angry.

Firmin himself came out then. He drew up to say, “Windry, I’m afraid you mustn’t stand in front of my eatery shouting like this, or I’ll have to call a man over to remove you.” He was kind but firm.

She looked at him with vacant eyes. “That’s my daughter.”

“She’s emancipated, Windry, and doing very well on her own. I must ask you to leave now,” he said.

Windry turned away to somehow arrive back at her house, where she sat at the table to think. “I don’t understand how this happened. I don’t understand why I feel so . . . stretched and disconnected. I don’t understand.”

While Windry persisted in her state of disconnect, Efran’s wretchedness continued for over a month. During this time, the only good thing he knew was that there had been no more disruptions of Time. That is, no more disruptions that he knew about. For he no longer knew what he knew.

Then on February 8th (of which date Efran was unaware) he was sitting with Minka on the forward-facing bench under the walnut tree when Earnshaw approached with a sheaf of papers. Efran, head down, elbows spread on his knees, did not look up. But Minka darted a wary, pleading glance at the soldier—*please don’t remind him again of what he can’t do*.

Unheeding, Earnshaw sat beside Efran on the bench, riffling his papers. “Good morning, Captain, Lady Minka. I’m trying to decide on a good reading for the men for Dominica, and happened to stumble into Ecclesiastes. Now, normally, Captain,” he said apologetically, “I don’t bother with Ecclesiastes because some of it’s just—unchristian, if you know what I mean. But I’ve found some bits I’d like to bounce off you, if you don’t mind.”

Having no expectation of an answer, he got his sheets in order to begin, “What do you think of this?— ‘I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man’s mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.’ You know, Captain, it seems to me that there’s a few profound thoughts there, especially that we were made to seek after something that we’ll never know completely in this life.

“And this: ‘That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.’ I suppose that goes along with the bit that there’s nothing new under the sun, but-- ‘what has been driven away’? Does that refer to truth that has been obscured? Commandments that have been ignored? Or—something *we* have lost that God seeks for us? The men could argue about that all day long. Very interesting.”

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Chapter 12

Earnshaw riffled some more sheets, then read off, “‘Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.’ Isn’t that the whole grounding principle of our army, Captain? I think we should have that engraved somewhere to remind us that we are a body.

“Oh, and this: ‘Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools. Don’t be rash with your mouth, nor be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words to Him be few.’ I’m afraid I might need to remember that as much as anyone,” Earnshaw said critically. By now, Efran had turned his head to watch him. Breathing suspended, Minka was watching Efran.

“And this I’m going to stamp on a couple of men’s foreheads: ‘When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it; for he has no pleasure in fools. *Pay what you vow*. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.’ Why is that so hard to understand? But half the men who come hear this will leave swearing they’re going to walk the straight and narrow,” Earnshaw said, shaking his head.

“Now we get into the short bits: ‘He who loves money will not be satisfied with money; nor he who loves wealth, with gain. Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let him sleep.’ I don’t have the surfeit of the rich, but I also don’t have any problem sleeping after a ten-mile march. Oh, and: ‘Don’t listen to every little thing men say, lest you hear your servant cursing you; your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others.’ Well, I’m not going to admit to *that*, Captain, but you see the point.

“I don’t want to overly tire you, sir,” Earnshaw said, glancing at his attentive gaze. “So I’ll just leave this last one here for you to chew on: ‘Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the men of skill, but time and chance happen to them all’--*as God ordains*,” he ad-libbed.

Standing, he tucked the sheets under his arm and saluted with his free hand. “Thank you for your patience, Captain, and, let me know if you think Ecclesiastes is a go or not. Lady Minka,” he nodded to her, and she grinned back at him. Then he turned to walk away.

Efran straightened, looking back at her, and she shrugged, “Might be worth hearing.” As he regarded Earnshaw’s retreating form, men nearby were seeing new life in his eyes. And they began scrounging for anything they could read to him or talk to him about that didn’t require any response on his part.

From that day on, Efran was stopped repeatedly on the back grounds to hear recitations of everything from duty

rosters and equipment lists to plays and songs, all on the pretext of soliciting his opinion. Earnshaw had warned them to keep it short and not even allow for a reply.

And Efran listened to them all. Then he began to make love to Minka again, as they all knew when she flew out on the grounds on wings of joy.

Four days later, on February 12th, Efran and Minka were again sitting on the bench under the walnut tree when he slowly raised up. Looking at him, she saw that he had thought of something. He stood to glance down at her almost in apology, then began walking toward the northwestern side of the fortress. Kraken, wearing a bridle but not hauling at the moment, pricked his ears toward him, and Efran whistled lightly.

As Kraken trotted to him, Efran paused at the archery line to extend his hand for one man's bow. He quickly handed over his bow and quiver to the Captain, who slung both on his shoulder before grasping Kraken's mane with his left hand to swing up on his back. (After his experience with "Lord" Wolverson, Efran tried not to ride anywhere off Main Street unarmed.) When he loped Kraken around the corner of the fortress to the courtyard, Minka closed her eyes in prayer.

The courtyard gate guards had them open for him to trot through and on down the switchback. Efran guided Kraken east on Chapel Road, loping him past all the new houses and development, past the gates and the barricade, past the buildings that were being torn down for lumber, to the far eastern Lands.

By Efran's agreement with the wolves, the last five miles to the east Passage was their territory, and he had the sudden hope that he may yet be able to communicate with them without words. Reaching the line of warning flags, he slowed Kraken to a walk, watching.

Before long, Canis, Lady Lupus and Sami did appear in the midst of the long meadowgrass. Exhaling, Efran dismounted to walk toward them. They watched attentively, and Efran heard some kind of buzz in his head. Unable to make sense of it, or even determine where it was coming from, he waited. And when he did not respond to them, the wolves slipped away again.

Crushed once more, Efran remounted to ride back west.

Upon arriving at Main Street, he turned Kraken north on another impulse. Pulling up to Delano's brewery, Efran dismounted to pull open the door and enter (still with his bow and quiver slung over his shoulder).

Madgwick was at the counter, waiting on a line of customers. Drawing up alongside the line, he gazed at her in a wordless plea. She looked up and said, "You will overcome this, Efran."

Everyone in line heard it and looked back to him. But what he heard was, "Nur call muddersky, Urburgh." He turned out of the shop with his ribs crushing his heart in a vise.

There was sudden shouting and an aborted clang of the wall gates' alarm bell just three doors down. Pivoting, Efran saw one of those marauding bands that were a plague to villages and small towns who had no gates nor organized defense. This band numbered about fifteen. As they were well-armed, they apparently decided to try their luck with bigger game. Riding over the old stone bridge, four archers in the lead cleared the way for the rest of the men behind them, armed with long swords and knives.

With the fusillade of arrows coming over the gates, the Lands gatesmen ducked or fell away, leaving a clear path for the marauders to leap off their horses onto or over the gates. Having done their surveillance, they were

prepared for the great trees: hacking off the limbs with axes appeared to be the sole job of two of the raiders. From there, the plan was always to disappear down side streets, killing and robbing, until they had enough to run out, regroup, and ride away.

The success of this strategy hinged on the devastating surprise attack and their dispersal through the town, whose defenders had to decide which of a dozen or more men to chase down. If a few of the marauders were killed, the rest considered it just the chance of the game, worth it for the haul. Part of the thrill was being one of lucky men who made it out alive. Then they compared the cash value of their take, and the winner was toasted at the closest bar (which was also a thrilling risk).

When the invading archers sprang their surprise, everyone on Main fell down or darted into the nearest entryway—except Efran. He stepped out into the street to whip his bow off his shoulder, nock and fire. The foremost marauder fell against the gates with an arrow in his chest.

But then the rest swung their bows toward Efran. He lowered his shoulder to let one oncoming arrow fly over it, then fired off another to kill a second archer. He had to drop to the ground, then, to get under the next round of arrows whizzing over him. From where he lay, he canted his bow to kill the third archer.

By this time, Abbey defenders had rushed the gates to cut down the men trying to climb them. One gate guard took an arrow to his shoulder (protected by his breastplate), but while the archer was trying to nock again, Efran's shot landed deep in his exposed belly.

With the archers taken out, Efran scrambled up to nock again and fire at the marauder atop the gates, who was in the act of throwing his knife at him. It lightly scored Efran's cheek while the man who threw it dropped with Efran's arrow lodged at the base of his throat.

When the Abbey men had beaten back the rest of the invaders so that they started running away, Efran rushed the gates to fire at the fleeing backs. The faerie trees stretched out what limbs they had left to grab the two who had been hacking at them. Three more raiders fell with arrows in their backs, and then Efran's quiver was empty. But the other Abbey archers brought the rest of the band down. There would be no comparison of the haul for them today.

Then the defenders ran up to Efran with glad cries of, "Gurp bartle urcher bleek!" "Camoo diddle brut?" "Brencher hoe, curdlelort!"

Glassy-eyed, he tossed down the bow and empty quiver, then walked over to swing up on Kraken and turn him toward the switchback. Despite the brush-off, some of the men were reminded why they still needed the Captain.

But when Efran glanced at Wendt, watching from the front of Barracks A, the Commander saw the old Efran—the one who courted death because living was too painful. Wendt groaned softly; Efran rode Kraken at an easy lope to the switchback.

When he arrived at the courtyard, Minka was waiting for him. She and a dozen men had watched the short fight from here. Estes and DeWitt, having watched it from the second-floor balcony, withdrew to the workroom.

Minka evaluated the light scratch on Efran's cheek, then took his fingers to lead him to their quarters. Here, she squeezed out a cloth in the washbasin to clean his cheek, then his face. When she took off his shirt to begin scrubbing down his neck and chest, he laid his head on her little shoulder to cry. She held his head, dropping tears with him.

For the next few days, Efran climbed up and down the wooded western face of the northwestern hillside. It was an amazing view, seeing the woods cover half the world to the far horizon and the Sea cover the other half. Past the Passage, he could see most of Nicarber from here. Gazing down at the little ruins, he decided to ride out and see what, if anything, had changed. He didn't fear the Time hole anymore; for some reason, he thought it was just about done in this area.

So the next morning, February 15th, he went out to the stables to saddle Kraken. As Efran was leading him out, Connor drew up to him, leading a horse as well. He said nothing, just looked at his Captain with a tight, stubborn face. After a moment of resistance, Efran nodded, and more than one man exhaled in relief to see the Captain ride out with someone. Several men had heard Connor and Hawk arguing because Hawk wanted to go, too. But Connor convinced him that for Efran to hear them talking to each other would insure he'd never take anyone with him again.

Not wishing to annoy her husband any more than she had to, Minka watched from the courtyard balcony as he and Connor rode out of the gates down the switchback. And she was just as relieved as anyone to see that there was someone he wanted to ride with.

While he was gone, she took a horse and bodyguards down to the chapel to see Auntie. Finding that Marguerite had gone to the barracks at the request of her husband, Commander Wendt, Minka expelled a disappointed sigh and returned to the fortress.

Connor let Efran lead, obviously, as they rode over the old stone bridge to cross the new bridge over the Passage. From there, Efran led into the woods. He and Connor had to occasionally dismount to lead the horses through the undergrowth and bracken between the trees. When they remounted to turn south, Connor had a pretty good idea of where they were going.

Shortly, they arrived at Nicarber's pitiful main road via the dirt road leading to it. Efran dismounted again to walk alongside the now-familiar piles of debris. He was relieved to see nothing changed: no unexpected clearing or building, no evidence of mercenaries. At the same time, to see it still in rubble almost four years after the hurricane was depressing. It could be a wonderful little harbor town again, if anyone would invest in it.

There was nothing here now; there was no reason to have ridden out here, except to get away from people talking to each other. Exhaling, Efran turned, so Connor did, too. Startled, they looked at two men standing in the middle of the road about ten feet away. One of them said, "It will be a little while longer, Efran." Then they disappeared in a shimmer.

Connor lowered his head, but Efran fell to his knees to sob. Without understanding the words, he knew what Nonesuch had said.

Windry was sitting by the pond at Averde's with a mild ale that she hadn't opened yet. She was vaguely watching people pass on the sidewalk in front of her, but had no inclination to try to lure anyone to her table. Surley was supporting her with his construction job in Westford, which paid very well.

He was still living in his house Normous because it was close to his work, but he did come down to the Lands to visit her every now and then—especially since she still had his favorite chair in her house.

Frankly, she didn't care that he came. She didn't miss him when he was gone and wasn't thrilled when he showed up. She was trying to make sense of this realm business. Was Minunni really gone, then? Was Gnecco

really dead? If they were, she needed to get back into life here—she didn't want to be stretched across realms or lured back to a wasteland.

Sighing, she opened the ale. Before she could take a swig, a man ambled over to her table. "Hello. Would you like some company?" he asked.

She studied him. He had a rather long face, light streaks of gray in his dark hair, and a swinging stride. In fact, just standing by her table, he appeared to be swinging as to an internal rhythm. He wore a long brown coat, nicely fitted. He wasn't Efran, but, there was a certain allure about him. "Do I know you?" she asked seriously.

"The question is really, would you like to, dearie?" he said, sitting with her.

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Chapter 13

"Gnecco?" Windry whispered.

"Call me anything you like; I'll answer to your call," he said, smiling. Even his voice had an infectious rhythm. To the server who came up, he said, "I'll have a mild drink, and, what's your best dish?"

"Uh, fried fish bites?" the young server proposed.

"Is that what you like, sweet lady of my heart?" Windry's new Gnecco asked her.

"I suppose so," she said, evaluating him.

"Then bring it, man," he told the server, who nodded and left.

At a table a short distance away, Justinian was listening sympathetically to Faciane (still Verlice's wife) complain about her husband's careless living. "And since Marguerite won't pay on his fine, he's asking me to help him with it! Can you believe it?"

"I hope you're not considering it," Justinian said.

"No, of course not!" she said vehemently. "I don't make that much to start with. And even though I board here, I have to have nice clothes for the job."

"True. And even in the Lands, good clothes are not cheap," he observed. She had no idea, and he gave no indication of it, but he was paying closer attention to the conversation Windry was having with her new man. Justinian was not usually much interested in other people's affairs, unless they had something to hide. Happening to step onto the sidewalk behind this man, Justinian had noted his reaching back to conceal a reptilian tail in that nice long coat.

Upon Efran and Connor's return from their quick trip to Nicarber, Connor glanced up to the courtyard balcony where Minka was looking down at them. And after he and Efran had unsaddled and groomed their horses,

Connor had seen her exit the western door. She went over to the training pens to watch Ella and Tess work with their colts. Cloud, the little white mare who had captured Minka's heart, was still too fractious to ride. Unknown to Minka, Jasque had received permission to sell her to a horsewoman who had more time to invest in her.

So while Efran went into the fortress, Connor stopped by the pens to tell Minka what had happened in Nicarber. And she repeated in a whisper, "'A little while longer.' That's encouraging, don't you think?"

"Yes, I would say so. Either the Captain didn't understand him, or he did understand, and took it to be a nice way of saying a *long* time," he murmured, glancing around.

"We'll take care of that. Thank you, Connor," she said, patting his arm. He nodded and went on his way to the hilltop barracks.

Minka reentered the fortress by way of the western door, then went straight to their quarters. There, she found Efran lifting up from the washbasin, drying his face. With a sidelong glance at him, she rummaged in his chest for clean clothes. He watched with a slight smile.

Taking the clothes underarm, she held up the key to the third-floor room. Her lifted eyebrows allowed no argument, so he accompanied her up two flights of stairs, where she undressed and opened the waterfall. Naturally, he had to join her.

Lying with him in bed afterwards, she pressed her face into his neck to impulsively whisper, "Hang on, Efran. *Please.*" This he heard as, "Grain gone often, *cheese.*"

Groaning, he started to get up. She held him tightly, then aware of her mistake, she let go again. But he didn't move for a minute. He suddenly realized that, while what he heard was nonsense, as usual, the words themselves were real. They were just disarranged.

He thought about that as he caressed her lengthening curls. She smiled deviously, and he understood that he would never again have to fight for her to keep her hair long. Reluctantly, he smiled as well.

Windry was chatting amiably with her new friend at Averne's when she saw Surley enter the wall gates. Hastily, she got up from the table to go meet him without a word to her table mate. Faciane had also gone into Averne's to get ready for her shift, but Justinian was still at the table, doing some hasty calculations with the newfangled double-wrapped charcoal sticks that Twombly's carried for men on the go.

When Windry's would-be suitor was preparing to rise, Justinian stood to put two royals on the table. In replacing his small velvet money bag, however, he missed his pants pocket and the bag dropped to the patio floor almost at the feet of the other man. Then Justinian walked away.

The man picked up the velvet bag to feel at least five or six royals in it. He began to call after the dapper gentleman: "Ah, hey there, you've--" But Justinian was halfway across the street by now.

Windry's new suitor paused, then hurried after Justinian to catch him on the opposite sidewalk. When Justinian turned in mild surprise, the man said, "Excuse me, friend, but you dropped your pouch." This he firmly pressed into Justinian's hand.

"Oh, dear! How careless of me! And how very kind of you to return it. Here," Justinian said, withdrawing a royal from the pouch to extend to him.

“No, no, not at all,” the man demurred, hands raised.

“Well, if you’re going to be upstanding about it, let’s do this right,” Justinian said. After replacing his money pouch, he withdrew a calling card from his vest pocket while the honest man cast an approving eye over his suit. Presenting this card to his new friend, Justinian said, “Now you have a reliable introduction. What name will people give me when asking if I know you?”

““Lord Officer of the Abbey Fortress and Lands,”” the man read off the card, caught off guard. “Oh, excuse me, Lord Justinian; I am Lord Heroux of Crescent Hollow.”

They shook hands amiably, and Justinian asked, “Is this a business trip? Or have you friends here?”

“A little of both, to tell the truth,” Heroux said, glancing at an attractive woman who was walking toward them, smiling.

“Excellent. I’d like for you to meet a friend of mine,” Justinian said, gesturing to the attractive woman. “Lady Marguerite, please meet an honest man, Lord Heroux of Crescent Hollow. Lady Marguerite is wife of our Commander Wendt, Heroux.”

The Hollowan looked momentarily startled, but Marguerite shook his hand warmly. “How do you do, Lord Heroux? I’m dying to hear more about the monkeys in Crescent Hollow.”

“Can’t tell what I found; I don’t monkey around,” Heroux said, glancing away as if searching for an exit. “Now, if you’ll pardon, I must be running.”

“Certainly,” Marguerite said. “Where are you staying, Lord Heroux?”

“At The Lands’ Best Inn,” he said with a bow.

“Excellent. I’ll send the invitation there,” she said.

“You’re a dear here.” Heroux bowed to them both, then turned to make his escape—away from the Inn.

Nodding to a passing matron, Marguerite and Justinian strolled up Main Street toward Chapel Road, then turned left toward the chapel house. Glancing back to see Lord Heroux swinging far down the street, she said, “How strange. Did you meet him by chance?”

Having to doff his hat to another lady, Justinian murmured, “Um hmm.”

Smiling at the passerby, she asked Justinian, “Did you get him to take your pouch? Or a royal?”

“Neither. My calling card,” he said. “Now, what kind of shape-shifter has a lizard tail?”

Checking to see whether he was serious, which he was, she posed, “Skink?”

He glanced at her. “Skank, skunk? Is that how it’s conjugated?”

“No, dear boy,” she laughed. “A skink lizard. Blue or brown tail?”

“Oh. It must have been brown, because if it were blue, I would’ve springed, sprang or sprung six feet in the air. I saw it when it momentarily escaped from under his coat,” Justinian said.

“Ah,” she said. “Well, that’s good, anyway. It means he’s just a common prankster, and not royalty, which are far more dangerous.”

“You shook his hand; what did you read?” he asked.

“Very little. He’s cloaked his true nature better than his tail,” she said in displeasure.

“Well, here--he held the money pouch pretty tightly for a few minutes.” This he withdrew from his back pocket to hand to her.

“Oh, this is better,” she said, holding it pensively as they arrived on her doorstep.

One door guard, Eustace, said, “Pardon, Lady Marguerite, but Lady Minka stopped by about an hour ago wishing to see you.”

“Oh! Tell her I’m here now; ask her and Efran to come down,” Marguerite pleaded.

“Yes, Lady Marguerite.” Eustace fetched the horse that was left grazing on the lawn and took it up the new switchback to the fortress.

Marguerite and Justinian entered the chapel to meet Hartshough on his way to the door. “Ah, Lady Marguerite! Lord Justinian. I was just about to mix a new bracer recipe.”

“Oh, Hartshough, wait just a moment,” Marguerite pleaded. “I’ve asked Minka and Efran down.”

Justinian asked, “Is he talking yet?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said, depressed.

Justinian smiled slyly under his brows. “Wait till I get an ingredient wrong in Hartshough’s bracer. Then Efran will stand on the table and sing.”

“You think so? Oh, I hope we can help him,” she said, tentative but eager all the same.

“Show me the recipe, Hartshough,” Justinian ordered.

“This way, Lord Justinian,” Hartshough said with a bow, and they two repaired to the kitchen. When Justinian came back out, smiling, he and Marguerite sat in the armchairs of the seating area.

In a matter of minutes, Efran and Minka did come. He looked weary and dispirited, but she went right to Auntie in hope. “I was just thinking—what do you know? Hello, Justinian,” Minka said, trying pathetically to look cheerful. Marguerite embraced her in reassurance, then directed them to the divan across from the chairs.

Justinian said, “Hello, Minka. Efran.” Efran glanced at him to nod, knowing that he had been greeted. Marguerite whispered something to Minka, who clutched her. Justinian continued, “Hartshough’s mixing bracers, but I met an interesting character today who was schmoozing up Windry. According to dear Auntie here, he’s a brown skink. And this is how I met him--”

Following is approximately what Efran heard of Justinian's meeting with the brown skink, "Lord Heroux": "Iuh hapenuhdud tobley walkee tah sideyalk beyind eem, wen Iuhsaw ah talley flickot beean talles oo reedy coahte. Heah zooose on Weenry singte on Aveentio. Atdieeme, Iahws Facy neery soover sit, keep aneye on eeem.

"Anhee dids putting movess on Weendry; she thoughts hee someone nee 'Nekko' afirst. Heegreed withat, or anythinapple, inorro hyten her intrest. That was cut ort when she sawyer hoosbon at te gayt. So I tryee olle monee pochdrop tsay ifreye [exhausted at this point, Efran let the next few sentences slide by before he started trying to listen again] monkees whicx everywhoon no there. Arate, after Magreet shook hies hand andeld the pouch heandede, she was able to tell that he is a skink, which is something I'm nunfamiliarith."

Now for what everyone else was hearing, as Efran slowly began to comprehend a little bit more: Minka asked, "A skink? What is that?"

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Chapter 14

Marguerite replied to Minka, "Well, I know skinks as sweet garden lizards that don't do any harm. This kind of skink is a little rarer. HARTSHOUGH!"

Emerging from the kitchen, he said, "Yes, Lady Marguerite?"

She said, "Oh, Hartshough, we think it's possible that this 'Lord Heroux' is a skink, but I'm not the expert on creatures that you mountain trolls are."

"True, Lady Marguerite," he acknowledged. "I do know a tad about them, but first I must confess that my brethren in the Guppenberger clan had great sport with me and ribbed me without mercy for my contention that the ashes of a dark altior were effective in protecting against them. Whatever power was afforded Lord Efran in meeting Cocci and the Nephilim was not *that*." He hung his head in the humiliation of being wrong, which is difficult for any man to admit. (The sprites, listening on the loft railing above, hissed at him in disagreement.)

Minka nodded, "That's nice to know; thank you, Hartshough." Listening intently, Efran leaned back with a glimmer of comprehension. This about the ashes they already knew, however, because Marguerite had told them. "So what about the skink?" Minka asked.

"One moment, Lady Minka, while I inquire." Gripping a dishtowel in one hand, Hartshough scrunched his massive eyebrows together to make a silent query. Marguerite, Minka and Efran watched in fascination while his normally placid features became animated at the response he was getting. Justinian smiled vaguely.

Finally, with an acknowledging wave, he said, "My clan brethren affirm that skinks are a rare nuisance which attach themselves to large, violent aberrations of nature. My brethren attest that one such skink was present on the water giant which afflicted Lord Efran," Hartshough noted. While not entirely understanding the words, Efran remembered the cackling presence and snapping tail somewhere above the water giant.

Hartshough continued, "My brethren argued fiercely between themselves as to whether such small irritants can draw such a great phenomenon to an area, or only exploit it. Fazakerley insists that skinks can help create

conditions for the phenomena to arise; Ruckelshaus maintains that they are only drawn to the same conditions, to feed on the chaos they create. But all agree that the blue-tailed skink is a class to be handled with care.”

After the few moments required for everyone to absorb that, Justinian asked, “Then why was this skink chatting up Windry?”

Hartshough said, “That, Lord Justinian, reinforces the theory that skinks help create conditions for aberrations such as Time holes. Someone who has jumped realms as Windry has, and wishes to do so again, is considered a factor for the reappearance of such holes.”

Again, Efran only caught a fraction of the words. But one word that sprang up out the mists of his mind was *Nicarber*. It was related. He sat back, crossing his arms. Seeing that out of the corner of her eye, Minka tried to repress the upsurge of hope: this was Efran’s thinking posture. He was comprehending something of what he heard.

Justinian also sat back, tapping the arm of his chair. “The next obvious question is, How do we kill such a creature?” Efran’s eyes shot to him as he recognized the word *kill*.

“Oh, dear.” Forehead creased, Hartshough looked to his brethren again, who told him something in no uncertain terms. Then he said, “That is entirely beyond a mortal, Lord Justinian.”

“Really?” Justinian murmured, glancing at Efran, whose eyes were unfocused. Sitting up, Justinian said, “Now, how about those bracers, Hartshough?”

“Yes, Lord Justinian,” Hartshough said, withdrawing. Efran leaned forward with his elbows on his spread knees, head down. The others silently waited, glancing at him from time to time.

Hartshough emerged from the kitchen bearing a tray of four tall glasses of a pale yellow drink with a frothy top. Three of those receiving drinks sat up; Efran barely raised his head. Marguerite said, “Oh, my, Hartshough, this is beautiful!”

“Thank you, Lady Marguerite.” Hartshough placed hers and Justinian’s drinks on small side tables beside their chairs. Efran’s and Minka’s drinks were placed on the low table in front of the divan. Each recipient was given a napkin, as well, for the froth.

Minka sipped hers eagerly, then laughed, “I feel like a child being given something naughty.” She wiped the foam off her lip with the napkin.

As Marguerite and Justinian sipped theirs, Efran looked glumly at the glass before him, knowing that he couldn’t articulate what was in it even if the words came to mind. But the lure was too great to ignore, so he picked it up to drink. Then he held it, nodding slightly.

This was Justinian’s cue to begin the performance, swirling the liquid around the glass. “Excellent as usual, Hartshough. Well, let me see. Gin and cream, obviously, syrup, lemon and lime juice, and . . . orange flower water?” He looked questioningly at the butler.

“You are correct as far as what you have named, Lord Justinian,” Hartshough said with a bow.

“Oh, there’s something else?” Justinian murmured, taking another sip. Efran was watching with pathetic intensity. “Did I mention the cream?” Justinian asked.

“Yes, Lord Justinian,” Hartshough said.

Taking another sip, Justinian said, “Oh, tonic water. Of course.”

“Regrettably, no, Lord Justinian,” Hartshough said. Tormented, Efran made a circular motion with his hand, which Hartshough interpreted as a request to repeat the ingredients stated. So he said, “Lord Efran, the ingredients which Lord Justinian has correctly identified are gin, cream, syrup, lemon and lime juice, and orange flower water. There remains another ingredient as yet unmentioned.”

Without pausing to reflect on the fact that he had understood these words, Efran squinted at Justinian, holding up his glass to point to the frothy top. Justinian lazily glanced over to say, “Yes, the whipped cream is a lovely topper.”

Placing the glass on the table, Efran raised his face in anguish. The others tried not to watch too obviously as he pressed his lips together, straining. His jaw muscles tightened with the effort demanded, and he wet his lips. Then he swallowed, opened his mouth, and squawked: “. . . Egk. Egk.” Minka was trembling at the first sounds he had spoken in 50 days.

“What’s that?” Justinian asked heartlessly.

Expelling a whine, Efran gathered himself to try again. “. . . Eggk. Egg.”

“Egg? No, I don’t taste any egg at all,” Justinian objected while Minka poured tears.

In frustration, Efran held out the front of his white work shirt. Glancing at it with curled lip, Justinian uttered, “The lords of mixology help Hartshough were he to give me anything to drink that had been on your body.”

Efran pounded his thighs with his fists a few times, then inhaled and said tightly, “Egg . . . whiate. White. Egg white.”

“That is correct, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said with a bow. Marguerite grinned at him.

Minka fell on Efran, crying. Justinian lifted his glass to him. “Well done, brother.”

Holding Minka on one arm, Efran chugged his bracer with a momentary glare at Justinian. Efran then put his glass down, licking the froth from his lips. Struggling again, he got out, “Tank . . . thank—you.”

“You’re welcome,” Justinian said, sitting back smugly.

Efran eyed him, but allowed him his victory lap. Turning to Minka, however, Efran put his finger to his lips. She sat up. “I understand. Of course I’m not going to run up to the fortress and babble to everyone that you’re talking again when you’re not ready to tell everyone, or at least don’t want everyone coming up to you asking questions trying to get you to talk when--” He pressed his lips to hers.

She drew back, eyeing him from under her brows. “I was almost done with what I had to say.” He laughed silently, hugging her, and everyone perceived that he had understood her.

With the question of the skink and Windry unresolved—and not even thoroughly understood—he and Minka returned to the fortress.

Over the next several days, Efran's routine of sitting on the back grounds was not greatly altered. He still found it helpful that the men came up to read or recite to him. Mostly, he did not reply, as usual, but he made it clear that he was listening.

Earnshaw plopped down on the bench beside him with his sheets, greatly vexed over what to read for Dominica from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. The problem was, Earnshaw found large swathes of it pretty much incomprehensible. "Now, don't tell that to anyone, Captain," he urged. "I don't want to dissuade anyone from reading it, especially bits like this-- 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now that's something everyone should hear. But this about how sin works through the law—I'm sorry; I don't understand it. However, this next bit needs to be written across the sky--" Holding up one sheet, he slowly read out, "'There is therefore now no condemnation for those--'"

"--who are in Christ Jesus," Efran whispered. He saw again the words emblazoned in lightning over the water giant.

"Yes, Captain," Earnshaw choked out, tears in his eyes.

"Thank you," Efran said. Earnshaw nodded, and stood with his notes to walk away in the glow of answered prayer.

Efran looked back to Minka, who was smiling in vindication of her stubborn hopefulness. He leaned down to pick up a stick at his feet, then began scratching letters in the dirt: "ILOVEYOU." That made her start crying again. And since he left the writing when they went back inside, word blazed through the army that the Captain was on the mend.

He went up to the workroom and shut the door behind him. While Estes and DeWitt watched intently, Efran wet his lips and said, "I . . . can speak, a little, and--"

Estes got up abruptly to come embrace him. DeWitt dropped his quill to lean back in his chair and cover his eyes. "Efran, I can't tell you how much that means to us. Now I can finally sleep at night."

Estes agreed, "Yes, Efran. There may come a day when the Lands can function fine without you, but we're nowhere near that yet."

Nodding, Efran requested, "Don't—say much."

"Not yet, no," DeWitt said. "You need peace to get back to full function."

"Yes," Efran said. His recovery seemed to be following the same trajectory as when he was hit in the head with the shovel the first time.

Since Wallace's quarters were right on this floor, Efran went over to tell him. But because Efran didn't feel up to creating a hubbub at the lower barracks, he sent Connor down to tell the Commander that the Captain was slowly regaining his comprehension and speech. Connor returned to tell Efran that he was a little shaken to see the Commander tear up. So Efran knew that he'd have to go down and talk to Wendt himself

Although Efran continued to speak little, if at all, the whole tenor of the dining hall changed overnight. Tears flowing, Ella and Rondi hugged him; men came over to salute or shake his hand with great feeling; the children

besieged his table with chatter and important news about the frogs. Efran replied with only a word or two, which was enough to confirm that he was indeed back from irrelevance.

On February 17th—two days after the breakthrough at Marguerite’s—Efran took Kraken down to Barracks A to tell Commander Wendt, the Second Gabriel, Captain Towner and Viglian what he could piece together about Windry and the skink, “Lord Heroux,” who was trying to entice her in some manner about the Time hole.

Before he could get anything out, however, Wendt told him, “I talked with Wallace about your condition when Nonesuch and Asmuch took you back to their lair the second time. He didn’t think you’d make it without the ability to swallow, let aside walk and talk. Your recovery has been—unbelievable. As unbelievable as my regaining my eyes.”

Efran dropped his head to nod. Wendt then asked, “Now, what do you think about this skink?” Marguerite had already given him Hartshough’s take on the matter, but Wendt wanted to hear Efran talk about it.

So he told them haltingly what he knew about Windry’s vulnerability, but grew frustrated trying to produce even common words and phrases. He wound up, “In short, Commander, we’re--afraid that this Heroux may--trap her, into another Time hole. And we don’t know—what that may do to—to the Lands.”

Pondering that, Wendt asked, “Do you think it would help to give Windry a . . . diversion?”

“Not me,” Efran said in alarm.

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Chapter 15

Gabriel choked back a snort and Wendt said, “No, Captain, I was thinking more along the lines of her dressmaking. Gabriel, see if you can find Administrator Tourse for us.”

“Yes, Commander,” Gabriel said, rising from the table.

An hour later, Racheal, Tourse’s wife and co-owner of The Lands Clothing Shop, was knocking on Windry’s door. After a few minutes, Windry finally opened it. Hiding her shock at Windry’s aged appearance, Racheal said, “Hello, Windry! I was hoping to talk to you about your dresses. May I come in?” With an indifferent shrug, Windry opened the door for her to enter.

Glancing back to the kitchen halfheartedly, Windry said, “I don’t have anything to give you”—without indicating whether she was talking about refreshments or dresses. She plopped into a chair at the table she’d once been so proud of.

“Oh, that’s quite all right.” Racheal slipped into the chair beside her. “I’d like to talk to you about doing some work for us.”

With a sour look, Windry said, “I don’t want to make flat caps.”

“Oh, no!” laughed Racheal. “We have quite enough people working on those. But we still have ladies stopping by the shop to ask whatever happened to those lovely, light dresses that you made.”

Windry looked off. Gamedly, Racheal kept it up. “We’re ready to try again with an exclusive line of dresses that you design. We’ll have a few workers to help you sew them, and split the proceeds with you. What do you think?”

Wendt had cleared with DeWitt that the Fortress would pay any expenses the shop incurred carrying out this plan. And because Tourse was unwilling to put his wife in a potentially dangerous situation without backup, Wendt had authorized four of his men in workman’s clothes to surround the house with buckets of waterproofing oil (in fact, water) to brush the walls while listening at windows.

“Do you know,” Windry said softly, “I was queen of my own realm. I had all the jewelry from the Treasury, and the most luxurious dresses of silk in all the colors of the rainbow. I just lifted a finger for whatever I wanted to eat—and I had Minka, blind and helpless, scrubbing my floors.” It was all Racheal could do to not throw up.

Leaning toward her, Windry whispered, “So, no, I’m not interested in helping you sell your little dresses. Lord Heroux is a Time Rider, and he says another tide of Time is going to hit the Lands soon. I’m to ride it with him back to rule again.”

“That is amazing,” Racheal said in genuine amazement. “But what is a Time Rider? And how does Lord Heroux know where and when the tide will come?”

“If I tell you, you won’t believe me,” Windry said, sitting back in superiority.

“Oh, please do tell me anyway,” Racheal begged.

Cocking her head, Windry said, “He carries a Time hole in his pocket.”

Racheal gazed at her. “With a Time hole in his pocket, how does he not fall in it himself?”

“He’s a Rider!” Windry laughed.

“Where is he?” Racheal asked.

“Lower your voice,” Windry ordered. “He’s staying at The Lands’ Best Inn. But he won’t be there much longer.”

“Why not?” Racheal asked.

“Because tonight he’s going to come get me and bring out the Time hole. Then he will take me back to Minunni, except that it will be right here, again. I will rule again, as I told you all. And this time, no one will leave,” Windry declared.

“Well, then, I’d better go get ready,” Racheal said, standing to leave.

Shortly, Lord Heroux was escorted from his room in The Lands’ Best Inn, stripped down to his breeches, and placed in a tightly guarded cell in Barracks C. Dancing and laughing, he complied with all this, his long striped tail swishing. “It won’t matter! You can’t stop it! The tide of Time will roll tonight, and you’ll all be dragged in its wake!”

While Wendt sent Heroux's clothes to Marguerite to examine, Efran rode back up to the fortress to lay himself out on the courtyard balcony in prayer. Five minutes later he jumped up again, ran down to the courtyard, grabbed a random horse that had been saddled for someone else, and loped down the switchback to ride to Delano's.

Entering the storefront, he bypassed the line to come to the counter, which Madgwick was working alone. Trembling with the effort to speak in his distress, he said, "I—need your--hell--help."

Glancing at him, she asked, "Can you tell me about it, Efran?" Then she handed the customer his change and said, "Thank you, Figgins."

"Where are your boys? I can't carry *two cases* to my wagon," Figgins complained. "I hurt my back."

He and Madgwick both looked at Efran, who was blocking the rest of the line. When he perceived what they expected of him, he stacked Figgins' cases and picked them up to run them out the front door. Figgins hurried out after him.

Returning while Madgwick was waiting on the next customer, Efran told her, "It's the tie--tide--time holes. We found a—a skink, a Tider--Tide Rider, who says one is tonight--"

Nodding, Madgwick said, "Thank you, Iliffe. Efran, would you bring her a case of lager from the back?"

Groaning, he ran to the back room to come out immediately with the case, which he took to the front door without stopping. After loading that in Iliffe's carriage, he skidded back into the shopfront. Standing at Madgwick's side now, he got a grip on himself to say, "He's going to take Windry, and, she says, says she's going to roost—rule again, and no one will leave--"

"Is that all you want, Barese? Eight bottles?" Madgwick asked, pushing the canvas sack across the counter to her.

"Yes, but I don't have a carriage and I can't carry that heavy bag all the way to my house," Barese said, eyelids drooping at Madgwick's idiot but handsome counter help.

He started swaying, then grabbed the bag and ran to the door. Barese followed. On the sidewalk, Efran whistled shrilly. Almost immediately, the magnificent Aceto appeared before him to salute. Efran thrust the bag at him with the order, "Carry."

Aceto accepted the bag, looking around for its owner while Barese stood staring at him. "Where does Madgwick find these *men*?" she muttered. He glanced away, uncomprehending. "Stupid but well built. Down this way," she instructed, and Aceto followed.

Efran ran back to the counter, which Madgwick was wiping with a cloth. "And I don't know what—what--" he flailed.

"Efran, you need to take Windry to talk to Lady Marguerite," Madgwick said.

He logged that order, then said, "Yes. Thank you." And he ran back out to leap on the borrowed horse, turn its head and lope down Main. Here, he defied the Abbey Lord's instructions that riders and drivers *wait* for pedestrians to cross in the crosswalks and *not* attempt to ride or drive around them.

After crossing New North Road, Efran turned onto a side street, Orchid Row, and rode to house #71. Drawing the horse right up beside the front steps, he shucked his foot out of the stirrup to kick the door open with a crash.

Windry came out at once, shouting at him. Efran turned the horse's thigh against the side of the steps. "Come—to Marguerite's."

"No! Why should I do what you tell me?" she demanded.

Exhausted of the little patience he had, he reached out for her arm to drag her across the animal's rump. As she was screaming, others (including Reinagle next door and Follriott on the next street) came out of their houses to watch him twist in the saddle, pulling her upright to sit behind him. Since this was Windry, they waved dismissively and went about their business. For all the noise she made, her resistance to the kidnapping was minimal.

"Hold me," he instructed, kicking the horse to turn back down New North Road with a double load. Windry saved her breath to clutch him tightly around his lower ribs. This time, however, he did stop for pedestrians who were attempting to cross a road that didn't have crosswalks yet.

It required scant minutes for them to reach the chapel. Drawing up to the steps, Efran shucked Windry off into the waiting arms of Clough, one of the door guards. Then Efran hopped down as Cudmore, the other guard, opened the door for them.

Windry jerked her arm free to enter on her own, and they met Hartshough midway in the foyer. Collecting himself to speak, Efran got out, "Madgwick says—said--"

"I will summon Lady Marguerite, Lord Efran. You and Windry please have a seat on the divan here," Hartshough said, unruffled as always. Windry flounced down to the divan and Efran sat well apart from her, leaning back to breathe. Hartshough began ascending the curved stairway to the loft.

"I don't appreciate this treatment *at all*," Windry said, deeply offended. Efran barely glanced at her, as he was watching the stairs with the same intensity that Windish had watched the sun rise on his last day on earth.

Efran received a happier sight from his short vigil, however, as Marguerite descended the stairs with Hartshough. She looked curious and mildly cautious in her approach to the seating area. Efran stood, wondering how he would ever explain this, when Hartshough proposed, "Shall I bring a refresher for you and your guests, Lady Marguerite?"

She glanced at him to say, "That would be most welcome, Hartshough." He bowed and withdrew while she sat in an armchair on Windry's side of the divan. Efran sat back down, exhaling, and Marguerite reached over to take Windry's hand. "How are you, dear?"

"Absolutely outraged," Windry said between clenched teeth. "I don't know what this animal next to me thinks he's doing, to take me out of my house by force and bring me here. I demand to be allowed to go home. There is another tide coming, and I need to be there." She spilled out that last part before realizing that she needed to stop talking.

"Oh, my, really?" Marguerite said, taking her hand in both of hers. "Then you certainly do need to rest. Are you running a fever?" Marguerite put the back of her hand to Windry's forehead, testing.

"After what I just experienced, I wouldn't be surprised," Windry said faintly, leaning back. At this time,

Hartshough brought a tray with their lemon bracers. When he placed the tall, frothy-topped glasses before Windry and Efran, she lifted hers to begin sipping steadily, and he downed his in one draught.

Marguerite took her glass with a glance of thanks to Hartshough before he bowed and withdrew. “Is that helping, dear?” she asked Windry.

“Not much. Now I feel dizzy,” she said unsteadily. Efran noted that the gin was considerably stronger this time around.

“You should definitely be allowed to go home,” Marguerite pronounced. Efran stirred in disagreement, but she asked, “May I give your men instructions, Efran?” He hesitated at this unusual request, but nodded.

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Chapter 16

“Thank you,” Marguerite told Efran. Turning to the guards who were waiting in the foyer, she said, “Please take Windry by Commander Wendt’s office, and tell him she’s not feeling well, so she should be taken home. To make sure that she’s not disturbed while she’s resting, I would like for him to put men at her door to take messages for her.”

Efran relaxed at this, and nodded to Clough and Cudmore. They saluted him, then Cudmore advanced to offer his hand to Windry. “May I assist you, ma’am?”

“Don’t call me ‘ma’am,’” she instructed, but got up to totter out on his arm with Clough following.

Marguerite waited until they were well away, then asked Efran, “Are there any more men out front?” In reply, he turned his head to whistle a summons.

Immediately Coxe and Cyneheard trotted in, saluting. “Captain?” Coxe said.

Efran nodded to Marguerite, who told them, “Go to Commander Wendt; tell him that Heroux must be secured right away in a locked room that has no opening large enough for a lizard to slip through, and preferably with no windows. He must be kept tightly locked up tonight. But make sure that Windry does not hear this.”

Coxe and Cyneheard looked to Efran, who nodded. “Yes, Lady Marguerite,” Coxe said, then they both left. Upon opening the door, they gave entrance to Minka, who had watched the unusual activity around the chapel from the fortress courtyard. She entered quietly, pausing as Marguerite told Efran, “Well that was unexpected. You have quite a task before you.” Minka froze behind the sitting area, partly obscured by the random faerie trees dotting the hall.

He leaned back on the divan, waiting. Marguerite continued, “I do not know how—probably through Heroux—but Windry has acquired the powers of a dark altior.”

Minka went pale and Efran sat up. “She’s one, then?” he asked.

Marguerite replied, “No, she’s not; she doesn’t have their immortality, and she retains her soul. But she has been

endowed with powers that approach those of Cocci. It is almost certain that she is the one who is creating the Time holes, but she doesn't know that; she thinks it's Heroux. Although he doesn't have the ability himself, he has somehow channeled it to her. I also think that what happened in Nicarber was a test to see how well she could get it down. It must have been accidental that you, Minka, and your men were there while the test was ongoing.

"As far as the next tide that took Windry and many of your men to Minunni—where you dropped in late-- something must have gone wrong for Heroux to get left behind, so he induced its rollback, somehow. I'm just guessing about that, but it's certain that he's going to make a third attempt. Her expectation that another tide is coming will certainly draw one, probably tonight," she said.

"Then what?" he asked, leaning forward.

"If she is able to ride that tide to set up her kingdom again, here, your people will be drawn into it again. If you are one of those drawn, you will be one of her subjects, as Minka was. Your only chance to stop her will be to ride the tide when she does," Marguerite said.

Efran squinted at her. "How--?"

"You have to be with her when it comes. And when it begins to carry you—as when you were thrown down on the switchback—you must be touching her," Marguerite said. Efran winced, slouching back on the divan. "It needn't be romantic," she said, pursing her lips at him. "The physical touch is enough to give you equality with her in the realm that she visits."

"What to do then?" he asked, almost pleading.

"I can't tell you beforehand; you will have to be there to see what needs to be done. But one more thing, Efran," she said, and paused. It was an uncomfortable thing. "You will share whatever happens to her. If she is returned, you will be returned. If she is injured, you will be injured. And if . . . she dies in the realm, you will die as well."

"How do I stop her if I can't--" he began, but she was shaking her head.

"You have to decide, then and there, what cost you are willing to bear," Marguerite said.

Then she looked toward the foyer, where Minka was standing among the faerie trees. Efran looked over his shoulder, then stood. She went over to him, and he opened his arms to gather her up. "You know it will--be all right," he said.

No, she didn't have any guaranty of that at all. And there was no way she could go with him. So she closed her eyes to lay her head on his chest, twining her fingers in his shirt. "I know," she whispered.

"I go to Wendt, then, to Windry. You—go tell DeWitt and Estes?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. He kissed her forehead, crinkling his eyes at her, and she felt him slip away even as she tried to hold him. Then he was gone, and she looked up to her dear auntie.

Marguerite came over to cover her with her arms. "Don't worry, dear; this is the kind of story where everything works out for good."

"Unless it's the end of the story," Minka said, closing her eyes.

Nonetheless, she did as she had promised, going up to the workroom to tell the Abbey administrators that Efran had gone to prevent another hole in Time, and may not ever come back. Estes shook his head: “Efran goes in expecting the worst. But if he does what Marguerite tells him, he’ll be fine.”

DeWitt agreed, “He can’t get used to the fact that he’s covered.”

“Thank you; I needed to hear that,” she exhaled.

Efran went to Wendt with a similar but less optimistic report, and the Commander listened quietly. Then Efran walked to Windry’s house from the barracks, sending the horse back up to the courtyard and its frustrated owner.

The men that Wendt had stationed around Windry’s house saluted Efran as he knocked on her door. He heard light running footsteps, then the door was flung open for Windry to look out eagerly. Seeing Efran, her face drooped. “What are you doing here? Go away!”

She tried to slam the door on him, but he slipped inside to lock it. So she stomped back to the gathering room, where at least there were comfortable upholstered chairs.

Efran followed to sit in one, looking at the dead ashes in the fireplace grate. The Lands seldom got cold enough to require fires for warming a house, but they did provide light and, a sense of home when one was on the edge of the unknowable.

Windry observed cuttingly, “Surley will be here shortly, so don’t take your boots off.” In his womanizing days, Efran had been notorious for refusing to remove his boots when he climbed into a strange bed.

He inhaled, then murmured, “Not tonight.” Her husband will have been warned in some manner to stay away.

They sat silently in the chairs, looking at the empty grate and blank walls, then she whispered, “Do you miss me, Efran?”

He looked over to lie only a little: “A little.”

Abruptly, she got up from her chair to come sit in his lap and kiss his neck. He let her sit there, but did not kiss her in return. She pouted some, then fell asleep. With an arm draped loosely around her, Efran waited.

But the tide was long in coming. As the hours passed into deep night, Efran grew drowsy. Abruptly, then, he sat up straight, fully aware. Looking intently toward the front door, he saw it unlock itself and slowly open. A grinning, lizard-like face peeked into the opening--

But then there was a soundless rush, a great upheaval. Holding Windry, Efran fell out of the chair to the side as Heroux leapt onto it. They were all three lifted up and thrown down again forcefully. Efran hit a hard paved surface, still holding onto Windry.

Pushing himself up, he looked around in the bright glare of late morning. The first thing he saw was a small brown lizard struggling to right itself nearby. Efran scrambled up to bring his booted foot down on it hard, watching it flatten. Satisfied, he turned to scan the area. But after he was safely out of sight, the lizard began quietly reforming and enlarging itself.

First, Efran saw that the gray pavement he had landed on was not just a road; it covered the entire area—acres of

it, from what he could see. And directly before him in the medium distance was a hill—the hill, on which a switchback led up to a white fortress at the top. In fact, he looked to be standing approximately where Windry's house had stood in relation to the fortress.

Before he could process anything more, Windry sat up, moaning. Efran reached down to lift her, and she stood as though she were a rag doll, leaning on him for support. But when she turned to see what encompassed her, she let go of him to stand on her own.

There was no meadowgrass, just pavement. The old stone bridge was gone, and the gully it once traversed had been filled and leveled to be covered with that same unending pavement. The ridge that had been north of the Lands was still there, somewhat; while it had not been paved, the trees were gone, leaving only grass.

Looking to the west, Efran held his breath, listening for the roar of the Passage. But he didn't hear anything. There may have been water running over there, but he couldn't tell from where he stood. The mill was gone, as were all the shops, houses, and even the eight-foot tall stone wall that Efran had helped build. He could not see if the new bridge over the Passage remained, but the thick woods that had covered the west bank of the Passage for miles were also gone. In the far distance, he could discern some trees, but he wasn't even sure how far away they were.

Looking to the east told him nothing. There might have been grassland beyond the acres of gray pavement; if there were, he couldn't see it from here. When he turned back toward the lonely white fortress on the hill, Efran belatedly saw seven or eight ghostly buildings lining the avenue leading to the hill. So he started walking toward it, and them. One thing seemed certain, of which he was unspeakably glad: his people had not been brought on this tide.

Windry hurried to keep pace with him. "What is this? This is ridiculous; I can't rule here. What've they done?"-- whoever "they" were.

"We'll see if we can find out," he muttered. Scanning the area they passed, he paused to detour from the road a little ways to look at faded white lines painted on the pavement. They made identical three-sided rectangles in long rows as far as he could see.

"What are those?" she demanded. He shook his head vaguely, then returned to the road to approach the first of the buildings.

When Windry tripped, he caught her arm and looked down at a curb he hadn't noticed, being the same color as the pavement. Then he saw that curbs surrounded all of the buildings, and when he stepped over this one, he found himself standing in faded short grass.

Scowling in bewilderment at the faded green of the blades, he bent down to pluck some, then discovered that he was holding a square of this faded grass-like stuff that had never been alive. He tossed it down to advance up the walk to the listing door of the first building. Here, he paused at two pots on either side of the door that held bleached fronds that looked like ferns. Feeling how stiff and brittle they were, he saw that this was something else that was never alive made in the shape of a plant.

Noting glass windows on either side of the door, opaque for the layers of dirt that coated them, Efran pulled open the door on screeching hinges for him and Windry to look in. The arrangement of counters and shelves appeared to indicate a shop that had been vacated long ago.

They entered, looking down at the footprints they left in inches-deep dirt. Efran walked around the counters to

open one or two doors with a shake of his head. “There’s nothing here. It looks to have been abandoned for a hundred years or more.”

Windry, eyes unfocused, murmured, “Why does it feel familiar to me?” Efran shrugged, but she looked down at something her foot had found pressed against the toe kick of a cabinet. Bending, she brought up a painted figure about four inches tall. It was that of a queen, or a princess, with a crown and a flowing dress. Wiping away the dirt revealed relatively bright colors on the figure.

Efran came over to look as she studied the statuette. It was highly detailed, for being so small, depicting an intricately embroidered ensemble on a woman with curling brown hair. She murmured, “I used to have a dress that looked like that.”

He said dubiously, “I’ve never seen anything like it, either in Westford or on the Lands.”

“Not there,” she whispered. “But. . . .” She dropped the figure to walk out of the shop.

They looked in a few other buildings, which all appeared to be similar in design and purpose to the first. But in the last building they stopped at, which door stood open, Windry grabbed Efran’s arm to scream. There was something dead on the floor. But it was not human.

While she clutched the door jamb, Efran went over to look. There was a four-legged skeleton with desiccated skin and stiff gray fur. “A wolf,” he said. “Probably the last one in the area, who came looking for . . . anything.”

He nudged it with his toe to find the remains very dry, very old. Disturbing the carcass revealed something under the tail, so Efran squatted to lift it gingerly. Beneath was a lumpy cluster on the stained floor.

Coming to look over his shoulder, Windry grimaced. “Eww! What is that nasty mess?”

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Chapter 17

“Her cubs, stillborn,” Efran said, standing again.

“Well, for goodness sake, leave it alone!” she chided with a shiver.

“There’s nothing left that could hurt you,” he murmured. Why he should grieve the wolves, he had no idea. Only, if they were all dead, then there was truly nothing left alive on the Lands.

From there, he and Windry went on to the switchback, where Efran found something else new: a metallic gray fence that encompassed the whole base of the hill, as far as he could see on either side. There were high, broad gates across the entry to the switchback, secured with a cable and lock. Hanging on the gates was a large sign in faded red and black letters, obviously a warning against trespassing. It was in a language he had never seen, which hardly surprised him.

Efran lifted the cable to look at the lock, and saw rust under the peeling paint. Before he broke it, he paused at the possibility of being bound here. “Sir Nomus? Are you here?”

She watched as he waited, listening, then shook his head. “Whatever they did must have driven him out, as well.” That thought was even more depressing than dead wolves. Then he saw that the gate was actually off the hill, thus out of danger. But more than that, he felt that a realm as dead as this could not bind him. So he opened the latch to pull hard on one gate, snapping the lock.

As he unthreaded the cable from the gates, she asked uneasily, “Do you really think we should break in?”

He looked back at her. “I don’t see anything else to do. Do you?”

Regardless, he shoved open the creaking gate to begin walking up the switchback. At the first east bend, he looked over to the northeastern hillside. There were only the faintest indications of where the new switchback had been.

Progressing to the courtyard gates (with Windry puffing behind him), he paused to assess the gates and the fence. They were not original to the fortress; the wreath of thorny roses had been replaced by an encircled squiggle which might have been a letter in their language--whoever they were who had swept in to overhaul his fortress as a . . . tourist attraction?

Nevertheless, the gates were not locked, so he opened them to enter the courtyard and look to the west, where the stables had been. They were gone, and the lightweight, leaning fence enclosed far less of the grounds than the original seven-foot-tall black iron fence had, when it existed.

Mildly wondering what force could have removed that heavy fence, he walked up to the broad steps leading into the fortress. When he surveyed the great arched, iron-banded doors, he thought they might be the original, especially seeing the scars on the hard oak. Hefting the doors open, he walked into the foyer.

It was the same as he remembered, only naked. There was nothing of the great faerie tree anywhere, nor any of the lesser ones that had been scattered all over the Lands, wherever there were people to admire them. Looking up at the high arched foyer ceiling, he thought about this last Christmas--watching Isreal eat treats and listen to songs and look at the decorations going up on the great fir tree—Efran closed his eyes, wondering if he would ever witness that again.

He took himself in hand to glance into the small dining room and the small receiving room. There, he remembered dressing up with Minka to greet her sister and Justinian on their visit, and how they had used Arenado’s poison powder to try to kidnap Minka. He could hardly believe that he and Justinian laughed over that now, and Minka’s sister had received the unimaginable opportunity to start life over in a loving, stable family.

Shaking off the memories in a wasteland, Efran returned to the foyer. Windry was staring at a portrait on the wall of the receiving room, which had evidently been used as a visitors’ center. The portrait was that of a severe woman in a crown and rich robes. But what stood out was the elaborate vandalism done in brightly colored paints—white for the fangs emerging from each corner of her mouth, red for the blood dripping from them, black for the stern, heavy eyebrows, and red again for the horns sprouting from her head. And not only was the painting not cleaned up, but the new version had been prominently displayed.

Teeth clenched, Windry staggered out of that room in time to see Efran walk into another, which had been the keep. Anxious to not lose sight of him, she edged in behind him. He was staring at the empty space where the ten-foot-tall crucifix had once stood. Instead of benches, the room was filled with small tables and rickety metal chairs. There was a podium at the front of the room, but the Holy Canon was not on it; something else was.

So he went over to look at stacks of old, brown, fragile booklets. Opening one, he found it filled with text in that unknown language. But there were drawings, as well. “Ho, they sure hated this queen,” he observed, handing her the booklet. (By the way, he had no difficulty speaking at all.)

She looked at a picture of a sneering woman in rich robes pointing whole families to pits filled with wolves. “That’s not true!” she gasped.

Efran didn’t hear her, as he was looking at the wall that had been across from the crucifix, with the Scripture engraved in it. Now, that section of wall was covered with a large pennon embroidered in that unknown language. Efran reached out to yank it down, and underneath there it was: “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him. . . .” His eyes filled with tears and his heart with gratification that some things couldn’t be effaced.

However, he did not see that this unauthorized alteration had triggered a warning system, the likes of which were unimaginable to him. Alerts were transmitted to responders throughout the fortress, which then began searching for the intruder.

From the keep, Efran went to the head of the lower corridor, the first door of which led to his and Minka’s quarters. Opening the door, he looked into an obvious office, where a desk and chair remained. Windry looked in reluctantly, fearing what she might see.

But it was stripped bare. Efran opened a lower drawer in the desk, just checking. Then he paused to pull out a small rectangular cuboid. “Strange,” he whispered. “It has a red dot that brightens, goes black, and then brightens again.”

Without looking, she said, “This place is creepy. We should leave.” She was glancing around in genuine fear.

Efran, hardly hearing her, placed the device back on the desk and went to open the other door, that had led to the bedroom. (He was hardly surprised to see that all the doors, walls, and windows had been changed out.) But he stopped at the open door of the inner room without going in. It was filled with metal cabinets decorated with strange knobs and buttons. There were also small black holes on these that turned bright red before blacking out again.

He closed this door thoughtfully, then exited the suite into the corridor. He immediately crossed to enter what had been the library. Windry, shivering, was practically glued to his back. Here, he looked around at shelves on which remained a few pitiful books, folders or papers.

But—Efran almost gasped to see that the scalloped edges on the bookcases remained. He darted over to the one which opened into the hidden library, pressing the scallop that triggered the door. When it didn’t open, he began pushing and pounding on it. “Sir Nomus!” he cried.

Windry shouted, “The Treasury is empty! I told you that!”

He leaned on the shelf, closing his eyes to whisper, “I’m not looking for the Treasury.” He turned away without seeing the dot over the door that went from red to black to red again.

On down the corridor, he glanced into the kitchen, which was still a kitchen, though stripped and abandoned, and the large dining hall, still a dining hall, though filled with flimsy tables and benches that were not worth carrying away.

Windry was wringing her hands by now. “All right, I’m ready to go back,” she said, her voice trembling.

He glanced over his shoulder to pause. “Don’t we have to wait for the tide to roll back? Or—can you call it back?” After what Marguerite had told him, he began to think that this was possible, even if Windry didn’t realize it.

She started crying, which he ignored, studying the next door across the corridor. This had been a cold storage room—in fact, the one with the closet that had led to the caverns below, that he had recently climbed down to get to the bottom of the hill without altering anything on it.

As he began to open the door to this room, Windry grabbed his arm. “What does that mean?” she asked, looking above the door.

Efran paused to look up. There was a framed inscription in ornate lettering above the door—just two words. “It looks like someone’s name,” he said.

He turned the handle to begin opening the door again, but she clutched his arm. “I don’t want to see what’s there!”

Confounded, he asked, “Why is this personal to you?” It finally dawned on him to wonder, *Why am I able to think and talk here?* He didn’t know.

“I don’t know,” she gasped, lying. On the off chance that something of the shaft remained in the closet, he opened the door to the room anyway. And they both stared at the display before them.

It was the effigy of a woman in gorgeous robes laid out on a funeral bier. On the wall behind it was an array of exhibits—lines of text with numbers, drawings of tortures and executions, and at the front and rear of the bier, two large pictures of grinning devils that were pointing to the effigy with their spears.

Efran, hearing something in the corridor, looked that way. So he did not see the face of the effigy. Windry did. And it was a hateful caricature of her own.

She started screaming. Efran grabbed her. “Wha—Hush!” he hissed, suddenly realizing what those red-to-black dots meant. But the harder he tried to make her be quiet, the more she screamed.

They both wheeled to the door as something appeared at it. She stopped screaming to stare at a metallic gray orb about 18 inches in diameter that seemed to roll of its own volition. It stopped in the doorway for something to emerge from an opening in the top with a hiss of compression--

Efran instinctively shoved Windry in one direction while he fell in the other, and something almost invisible shot from the orb to burn a hole in the effigy behind them. When the orb began repositioning, Efran scrambled up to kick it against the opposite wall of the stone corridor. It cracked when it hit, falling to the floor and rolling away erratically.

Efran grabbed Windry’s hand to begin running up the corridor, so he didn’t see what happened to the orb next. It stopped for internal lights to begin flashing in a distinctive pattern. The light paused underneath a panel that had been dented. Slowly, the panel was reformed into its previous shape, and the erratic lights underneath resumed their former pattern before moving on to the next injured area.

At the head of the corridor, Efran slid to a stop, seeing two more orbs emerge from the foyer. He swung in the

opposite direction, dragging Windry toward the back door. When he heard that hiss again from behind, he flung her against the corridor wall, flattening himself beside her. And two burning holes appeared in the back door five feet away, causing the door to bang open.

At least Windry was cooperatively running now, so Efran leapt down the concrete steps to lead west on the back grounds. He barely noted in passing the derelict playground sculptures inside that metallic gray fence that enclosed a small portion of the back grounds. Behind the fence were a few remaining apple and peach trees, long untended, beyond which the cliffs stretched out for a few hundred feet more. Efran found himself thinking, *Well, if we're stuck here waiting for the tide to return, at least we'll have something to eat.*

When they reached the fence on the western edge of the grounds, he glanced back to see that the orbs had apparently not followed them out. "What are those?" Windry breathed.

He turned to look where she was looking, and saw that the whole western grounds were covered with flat black panels. "Not something that we'd better try to cross," he muttered, reaching out to grab the fence.

But when he touched it, it sparked so that he jumped away with a yelp, cradling his hand. Windry backed off while he shook his lightly burned fingers. Collecting himself, he checked to see that, yes, the fence enclosed the entire back grounds.

"It didn't spark like that when you opened the gate," she said in a monotone, as though in shock.

He replied, "No, and I left it open." Looking toward the west side of the fortress confirmed that the fence blocked their reaching the western door into the foyer. "So this is what we have to do: we have to go back up the corridor to the foyer. That's the only way out." And he remembered Marguerite saying, *If she is injured, you will be injured. If she dies, you will die as well.* "So, stay behind me," he added.

She looked at him blankly, then said, "I changed my mind. I don't want to be queen anywhere."

"Glad to hear it," he said dryly. He was scanning all around as they approached the steps to the rear door. Not seeing any of the orbs, he told her, "I'm going to look quickly down the corridor, and then I'm going to run. Keep hold on my hand, because we can't stop for anything." She made an effort to nod.

On the top step, Efran eased the blown-out door open to look, then tightened his grip on her hand to start running through the corridor. She almost fell right away, but he jerked her up to continue running.

He was almost at the foyer when two orbs appeared at the head of the corridor as before. At full speed, Efran kicked one and then the other, dragging her barely on her feet out the doors and down the fortress steps. The courtyard gates were still open, but not enough for either one of them to get through.

"Efran!" she gasped. He looked back to see an orb rolling down the fortress steps toward them. Letting go of her hand, he quickly circled behind it to kick it hard toward the outer edge of one gate.

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Chapter 18

When Efran's foot hit the orb this time, he received a painful shock which caused him to bounce on his other foot, still watching the orb sail toward the gates. The instant it hit, there was a crackling bright flash with a shower of sparks. The gate opened wider while the smoking orb began rolling down the switchback. With a cautious glance behind them, Efran took Windry's hand to follow. But the orb stopped against the outer edge of the first incline for the internal lights to begin assessing the damage.

So Efran kicked it again, straight down over the retaining wall. They both watched it bounce down from level to level. Efran glanced over his shoulder to see more orbs rolling down the fortress steps. Not waiting to see what they would do, he slid down over the retaining wall to the second level, in the path of the bouncing orb. He turned to help Windry over the wall, then hopped down the next, all the while keeping an eye on the orb in front of him and those behind.

By the time he and she got down to the last level exiting onto the main street, the descending orb had come to rest against the fence, a few feet from the entrance to the switchback. So Efran circumvented the orb to walk out onto the street, then they both looked back up the hill. No more orbs were following, that they could see.

Efran walked up the street a ways, looking at the deadness, the silence, the emptiness. Then he turned to her to say, "All right, time to call the return tide."

She blinked at him. "What?"

"You brought the tide that landed us here, so I'm thinking that you can call it back again," he said.

Windry looked off vaguely. "Did I do that?"

"Yes, I have it on solid authority that you did," he said.

She closed her eyes, then sighed, "I can't. It's gone. I had power then, but it's gone." He looked up the street, calculating, and she added, "I'm thirsty."

Turning west, he said, "Let's see what's out this way." He began walking, then looked back expectantly. She followed, drooping.

They walked over several miles of pavement, all marked with white paint, until it abruptly gave out to grassland. Bending to pull up a clump, Efran noted, "We're getting somewhere. This is real grass."

"Does that mean there's water nearby?" she asked wearily.

"If we're anywhere near Nicarber, yes," he said, tossing down the clump. He looked over to the line of trees that he had seen from the main road to the hill. Why did they look different? Then he realized he was comparing them to what he had seen when he, Minka, and the boys had come out here. "It's ahead," he added distractedly, picking up his stride.

"I can't keep up with you!" she complained, as she kept having to realign her shoes. But he had stopped again, looking down around his feet. Catching him, she noted, "This road's paved."

“And not recently, either. In fact, it needs repair. It’s just . . . crumbling,” he said. Increasingly uneasy, he continued walking west on this road.

“Where are we now?” she asked, as though it would be his fault if they were lost.

“Near Nicarber, I think,” he said.

“You don’t look very excited. I thought they had water,” she said.

“Let’s see.” He continued walking.

In another half hour, they reached the intersection of this road with the main street of Nicarber. Efran knew this because of the large signboard in the unknown language that he, Minka, Jehan and Coish had seen here after almost getting caught in the tide of Time that had washed over this street.

With knots in his stomach, Efran looked up to the sign. It was very old, very faded, almost falling down. Apparently, Nicarber was in the same state of abandoned ruin as the Lands. Walking down the street, everything he saw confirmed that. The shops that were newly constructed when he, Minka and the boys had been here were now derelict. He didn’t see evidence of a storm like the one that had destroyed Nicarber in ’52, it was all just—deserted.

He looked up with a start, glimpsing himself and Estes moving the fragment of signboard to access Awfyn’s hiding place. He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head, then looked again. There was nothing.

Blinking, he looked aside for the community well, but it had been torn down and built over so effectively that he couldn’t be sure where exactly it had stood. But another short pillar caught his eye, though it was cracked under the peeling white paint. He crossed the street to look down on the dirty, chipped glass case which held Minka’s flat cap. The placard describing it and the booklets enlarging on it were long gone.

Efran uttered a hoarse laugh, kicking over the pillar. The case fell away, unbroken, and he reached down to reclaim the cap. As he stuffed it into his pocket, Windry came up, frowning. “What are you doing?”

“Taking back something of mine,” he said in heartache. He suddenly heard Minka cry, *My cap! I lost my flat cap!* Spinning to look, he saw her pointing from under the signboard. But when he took a step toward her, she was gone. “I’m seeing things,” he realized. *Why?* He was afraid that it meant further upheaval of Time.

“Stop playing around, Efran! Where is the water?” she cried.

He exhaled, “I don’t know, but maybe we can get some sea lettuce.”

“What’s that?” she asked dubiously.

“Down this way.” He turned south on the street to head for the Sea, specifically, the rock pools. Windry followed.

But when they got to the foreshore, Efran looked down in dismay at the brown sludge covering everything. The tide hadn’t completely ebbed yet, but whatever had happened to Nicarber had left this deep residue that looked to have choked out all the intertidal life.

Finding a piece of driftwood, Efran used this to sweep away the scum and probe down into the sand. He did this

several times, bringing up nothing but dead and decayed matter. “What happened here?” he breathed.

“Efran. What are you doing?” she asked in exasperation.

He raised his eyes, seeing nothing but the dead Sea before him. *Something very big and bad killed everything in the Sea here*, he realized. Out loud, he said, “We need to get back.”

“Wait! Where is the sea lettuce?” she asked anxiously.

“Not here,” he said, hefting himself up. “We have to get back to the real Lands.”

“How?” she asked.

He turned to start walking north up the street. “We have to go back to where the tide dropped us, because that’s where it will flow again.”

“What? Back on that empty street?” she demanded, following him.

“Yes, we have to be in its path again for it to pick us up,” he said, walking a little faster.

“Efran, I’m thirsty,” she said as though he didn’t believe her.

Glancing to her, he remembered the four days that he and Detler had gone without food or water waiting for the tide. To encourage her to keep walking, he said, “We didn’t look in all the buildings. There may be water or some supplies we overlooked.”

“Oh. But it’s such a long way,” she groaned.

“That’s the best I know to do,” he said.

Looking at the trees off the road, she suggested, “Couldn’t there be a brook or a stream in these woods somewhere?”

Glancing at the woods, he remembered the clearing and the smoke he had seen from the hilltop. But this was not the time to explore. “Not that I know of. And before we found anything, the tide could have come and gone on the Lands,” he said.

“All right,” she grumbled.

After they had walked silently for a while, he asked, “Windry, why . . . did you want to come back here?”

“To be queen!” she said, as though it were evident.

“But . . . *why*?” He screwed up his face in bafflement.

“Oh, it was so much fun being rich and important. But I didn’t do any of those things they said—torturing people or throwing them to the wolves. That was all ridiculous lies!”

He paused in astonishment. “You mean, that evil queen in effigy was *you*?”

She looked uncomfortable. “I was strict about some things, but I certainly didn’t do all that!”

“And what did Gnecco do?” he asked, continuing to walk.

Following, she looked even more uncomfortable. “He just made sure I could keep ruling, and had all I needed.”

“So maybe he tortured people and threw them to the wolves?” Efran asked, glancing aside at her.

“If he did, I certainly didn’t know about it,” she protested.

“But you would be blamed for it. How was it that you stopped ruling?” he asked.

“The tide swept me out!” she cried.

“From here?” he asked dubiously. “Windry, this Lands isn’t anything like the Lands you and Gnecco were ruling when I came and killed him. But you remember it?”

She stopped in shock, thinking. “This was . . . before Minunni. Yes, we left here to try again. . . .”

“How many realms did you rule in?” he asked, bewildered.

She was walking blankly. “They were just . . . tests that . . . didn’t work out right.”

“Then why did you want to go *do it again*?” Efran laughed in dismay.

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Chapter 19

“Heroux told me . . .” Windry faltered here, then went on, “Heroux told me that we would arrive back at the beginning, when the people were glad to have me, and since Gnecco was dead, he couldn’t mess everything up again.”

“Heroux would do that, instead,” Efran said flatly. He was looking all around as they passed the end of the trees. Someone else was here; he was sure of it.

Finally gaining the pavement with the white lines, they walked in silence toward the main street with the ghostly buildings. He kept his eyes moving as they went, particularly watching the switchback. He was getting thirsty himself, but that was a secondary concern. His first concern was the orbs—would they follow them down the switchback? They would be much harder to evade in this wide-open nothingness.

Also, he had the uncomfortable feeling that just stomping Heroux didn’t do anything to him.

When Efran and Windry reached the main street, he returned to the approximate location that he had seen the lizard. There was no sign of it anywhere. He looked over to the west, where the sun was descending to the trees. Neither Heroux nor the orbs would sleep. Evading them both was impossible.

Windry plopped down in the middle of the road, looking up at him in dismay. “Today when I saw how much they hated me, I realized how—blind I had been about Gnecco, and how—bad a queen I was, to let him do that. But he had the power; I was just a figurehead. And you’re right; Heroux would do the same, if he could. But now I don’t know what happened. He told me I could call the tide of Time, and have it bring us back here at the beginning of my rule, only with him helping me instead of Gnecco. I don’t know why we came to this time.”

“Did you have anything to do with the tide rolling over Nicarber?” he asked, sitting beside her.

“That was an accident. I was just getting the feel of it,” she said dismissively.

“So you’re still learning. But now that we *really need* to go back, you can’t do it,” he summed up.

She nodded glumly, then straightened in anger. “You called me an airhead!”

“Me?” Efran asked, wincing.

“Yes, a half dozen people told me they heard you tell Estes that I was an airhead, and that was when you were sleeping with me!” she flung at him.

“That was rude. I apologize,” he said, trying to sound sincere.

She grunted, unforgiving. She had nothing more to say for a while, then murmured, “You were a wonderful lover.” He grimaced slightly, eyes darting away, so she added, “Oh, don’t worry, I’m not after you, still. It’s just—you were kind. You were nice to me, and especially to my children. I guess that’s why I didn’t care that—that--”

She burst into tears. “Oh, that was so horrible, what Gnecco did to her; it was horrible. I was—so angry and frightened, but by that time I couldn’t say a word to him, because then I knew what he was capable of! Oh, I’m sorry, Efran, I really am sorry for the whole thing, and I’m so glad she’s whole again, but I still can’t believe—oh, I’m truly sorry, Efran!” She put her head in her hands to cry wretchedly.

He reached over to pat her back, and she wiped her face with her dress sleeve, sniffing, “In a way, landing here has been good. It was a terrible shock to see how much they hated me, but a worse shock to know that I deserved it. I’m not a good enough person to be a queen; I can’t even be a good wife or a good mother,” she said miserably.

As she was leaning on his arm, he withdrew it. “That’s the beauty of a fresh start. Lilou and Calix don’t remember anything of that, and Surley wants you back. You got married again, didn’t you?”

“That was just to give us leverage in Minka’s trial,” she said dully.

“So?” he laughed. “Now it’s for real. When we get back, you can make it good.”

Considering that, she said, “Racheal offered me a job designing dresses for their shop.”

He turned his beautiful smile on her. “What more do you need? Minka hates the dresses that are coming out of Elvey’s now.”

She nodded. “I can’t believe what a fool I’ve been.” She rolled her eyes at her next thought: “And Heroux--”

“--Is here!” He leapt onto the street in front of them, dancing so that his long tail twined around him. Only, it was not brown, it was blue—bright blue, striped. “Now we do what we meant to do! For Heroux isn’t through with you!” His face was exceedingly reptilian and his ears had disappeared.

Shaking a little, Windry said, “I can’t do it any more, Heroux. I’ve lost the power.”

Swaying back and forth, he said, “No, you haven’t! You see--

“Now that I’ve got you here,
Your power is in my hands!
And here I’m not constrained
By the lord of the Abbey Lands!”

The words shot out of him like golden fireworks into the early twilight. Efran’s brows lowered as he processed the rhyme, and Heroux laughed, “Lord Efran seeks to understand! Here is the mystery unveiled, good man:

“Windry was a vessel
To carry power for me
That I could not employ
On lands belonging to thee.
But now that she’s in the ruins
Of what had been your domain
She shall offer that power
Up to me again!”

She sighed, “Heroux, I don’t have it anymore. It’s useless.”

His lizard-like face grinned at her, and his tongue flicked out.

“No, you have it.
You just can’t use it.
But when you are dead,
It is then to be fed
To Me!”

Her face paled. “You’re going to kill me.”

“No, I can’t do that,” he said, irritated. Then he recited,

“That would render it useless.
Lord Efran will make you lifeless.
That power to me is priceless
As he lives no more on his Lands.”

He twirled his hand in the air as though winding yarn on a spindle. Those same golden streams emerged from his hand, some floating up into the air, but most curling around Efran’s head and arms.

Windry stared at Efran, who was trembling, jaw clenched. “Oh, look at him fight—like a woman who doesn’t want to be taken. Delicious,” Heroux murmured, tongue flicking. Windry watched helplessly as Efran’s strong hands were raised to her throat.

Then there was a hiss behind Heroux, and he fell forward onto his face. Efran, released, stared at a metallic orb that was realigning for another shot as Heroux sprang up again, whirling to face this new enemy. “That stung, you little tin bucket!” he spat, shooting a golden burst that caused the orb to explode.

Efran grabbed Windry’s hand, scrambling up to run her toward the nearest building. Heroux wheeled to extend a forbidding hand, and the golden thread wound around Efran’s legs, dropping him into the street. Windry fell on him.

But two other orbs were blasting at Heroux, one from his left and the other on his right. Caught in the crossfire, his aim at either of them was unreliable. So he brought down the corner of a building on one before spinning to search for the other, which had concealed itself behind a building across the street.

Meanwhile, the exploded orb still displayed the capacity to fire even in immobility—which it did. Caught on the knee, Heroux began jumping in fury, winding threads around the demolished orb until it was a golden mummy. However, with a hiss, a beam began cutting through the threads from the inside.

Again released, Efran swung north, feeling something build. Yes, he saw the distant mountains, sky and clouds ripple in the returning tide. So he began pushing Windry before him up the street. “Here it comes. Run to the tide,” he gasped.

She began running as Efran glanced behind him. At this moment, Heroux was still fending off the orbs, so Efran ran as well. But he was careful to keep behind her, hoping to shield her from any shot, stray or aimed.

The tide bore down on them quickly; Heroux turned to see it coming, and shot out a golden thread toward them. At the same moment, he was hit from behind by the blast from yet another orb. This caused him to fall so that his thread fell inches short of Efran’s boots. The tide was almost upon them.

But in the next instant, another orb fired at Heroux as he was falling. The blast passed him by to hit Efran squarely in the back. While Windry leapt into the tide, Efran fell on his face, suffocating on the blood that filled his shattered lungs. As she vanished, he looked up to gasp, “Tell Minka—I will love her--for--” That was all he could get out. Having reclaimed the agent of its appearing, the tide stopped before reaching him. It withdrew soundlessly as he futilely stretched out a trembling hand.

From somewhere above, he looked down on Heroux furiously battling the nuisance orbs that grew in number to blast at him in coordinated movements before rolling away to shelter. Efran did not know that he was witnessing the beginning of the hundreds-years war between the King of Skinks and the solar-powered Mobile Defense Operators A03sfu. While they battled on, the Abbey Fortress waited quietly for the appointed time of its renewal.

Efran then looked down on the Gray Lands, where Quilicus, one of a long line of Eurasian Surchatians, looked up at him to shout (faintly), *Tell them I could have done more had I lived!* Oslac, another Eurasian, ran over to shake his fist up at Efran, bellowing (hollowly), *I was only joking about the infernal trees!* Gaea, former Surchataine of Crescent Hollow, asked, *Can you tell me what happened? I can’t remember. Nothing is clear.*

Then the gray mists faded away so that Efran was looking up at light and glory, the splendor of lives perfected in beauty. To the One, he cried, “Receive me!” But this was denied, and he felt himself falling.

He landed on his back in the midst of twining branches covered with leaves. Since they were thick and deep, he had trouble finding his feet, much less standing on them. But directly before him was the hill with the white fortress atop it, crowned in shimmering green and copper leaves. The hill was inhabited and alive, with carts and

riders ascending and descending both switchbacks to his left and to his right. The courtyard gate guards wore deep red uniforms with black flat caps. One of them suddenly pointed to him, and reached over to clang the alarm bell.

Wherever Efran was sitting was elevated, somehow, and his attention was diverted to a swarm of angry faeries who stung him, trying to make him get up. When he was able to untangle his feet from the branches on which he sat, he crept forward on his hands and knees to look down over the edge of the flowing greenery.

He was on top of the chapel. His head was clear and he was feeling no pain. But the front walk was filling with people who seemed surprised that he was up there and rather excited about the idea of getting him down.

As he turned to begin climbing down the trailing greenery, he caught sight of Windry up the street in front of Firmin's. She was falling on Lilou in an outpouring of repentance. While Efran was too far away to hear the words, Windry was crying, "I'm so sorry, Lilou, I'm sorry; you're doing wonderful work and I'm so proud of you for it; I won't burden you further because Racheal has offered me a job--"

"That's all right, Mum; it's all right," Lilou said, shaken. "Sit down here and I'll bring you a plate and ale for you to wait until the midday rush is done."

"I can pay for it," Windry gasped, checking her pocket.

"That's all right for today, Mum. We were a little worried about you," Lilou said.

Windry moaned, "Oh, I know; I've been such a headache for you--"

"No, mum, we just didn't know where you were for these past three days," Lilou said, holding her arm.

"Three days . . . ?" Windry murmured, blinking.

"Yes, Mum. Today's the twentieth. Of February. Go ahead and sit down," Lilou said, steering her gently to a chair.

By this time, Efran was halfway down the front façade of the chapel. Below him, a number of red Abbey arms were reaching up to him. Dropping to his feet in the midst of them, he glimpsed Gabriel pushing his way through the throng. Efran told him, "The tides are done. There won't be any more."

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Chapter 20

Gabriel said, "That's good to know, Captain. As long as you're here--" But a girl had thrown herself on Efran to clutch him around his lower ribs.

With a quick breath, he took her in his arms to rock her. "It's all right, Minka; it's done. The tides are done. I'm not dead," he suddenly perceived. Glancing toward Firmin's (which was now blocked from view), he added, "I knew Windry would make it; I saw her. But—I was hit, and I fell."

He reached to feel his back while Pleyel turned him around to look, running a hand along the muscles against his spine. “Lady Minka might notice that your shirt’s dirty, Captain, but I don’t feel anything. Where does it hurt?”

“It doesn’t,” he mused.

But Minka’s hands had stretched up to his head, which she was feeling in concentration. She drew away to take his fingers. “Come. I want Wallace to look at you.”

“As long as we’re at the chapel, can we step in for an ale? Maybe a plate?” he asked. She turned back to him, and he added, “If it’s convenient. But—how long were we gone? It feels like a week.”

“Three days, Captain,” Gabriel observed, adding, “You don’t seem to have any difficulty telling us that.”

Efran’s head jerked up. “I’m talking here, too.” This seemed to surprise him.

“That’s what I hear, Captain,” Shane said pensively. They were all watching him.

Telo stopped in front of him to salute. “Captain, Lady Marguerite requests you come to her table for the midday meal, as the Commander will be here shortly.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Efran said.

“Come, then,” Minka said, leading him by the fingers toward the chapel steps as the men parted. She didn’t have to pull; when she had a grip on his fingers, he followed docilely. She did pause to tell Suco, “If they don’t already know, tell DeWitt and Estes that he’s at Marguerite’s. Also, we need Wallace to come down, if he’s free.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Suco said. Then Efran watched him commandeer a horse to ride up the old switchback, one of two, both of which were carrying residents, soldiers and merchants up and down from the white fortress, vibrant with life. Efran was dropping tears, now.

“Wait to sit down to cry,” Minka instructed.

“I’m not crying,” Efran insisted, wiping his face.

Hartshough met them at the doors with a bow. “Good afternoon, Lady Minka, Lord Efran. Please come in with your guests. May I offer you refreshers before the meal is ready?”

Minka said, “That would be wonderful, Hartshough.” She led Efran in to stand at the dining table as though he couldn’t find it by himself, and a throng of soldiers followed. They stood back from the table, watching.

Wendt and Gabriel entered, as well as the lower barracks Captains Towner and Stites. Justinian quickly pushed his way through the men to grasp Efran by the shoulders and then step back, exhaling, “Someone please tell me that Hartshough has bracers on the way.”

Marguerite, approaching from the kitchen, said, “Yes, Justinian, he’s working on them. For now, he has help passing around the waters.” She indicated several soldiers placing water goblets around the table.

Then she turned to Efran with a glimmer. “Good to see you, dear. You and Minka sit here.” She indicated the two chairs to the right of the head.

Minka pushed him down to the first chair before sitting beside him. He emptied his water goblet to be given another. Justinian sat across from them, then the rest of the seats began filling as Gabriel, Towner, and the hilltop Captains Rigdon and Chee sat. But the captains moved down when DeWitt, Estes and Koschat appeared. Efran tried to get up, but they had sat before he could.

“How are you, Efran?” DeWitt asked, remarkably casual.

“I’m alive. I can’t believe it; I should be dead. I was hit in the back watching Windry taken by the tide, and I thought I was dying. I knew I was dying. I saw the Gray Lands, again—Oslac insisted he was just joking about the faerie trees. And then I caught a glimpse—of--” He looked at Minka, overcome. “It was Him—I know it was, but I could never describe--have never imagined--He was--was--Am I rambling? I don’t even know,” he complained to a silent table.

DeWitt murmured, “Sounds as coherent a description as it could be.”

Puffing slightly, Wallace appeared in the hall, and Minka jumped up from the table to speak quietly to him. He looked to Efran, who started to get up, but Wallace told him, “Stay seated; that’s more convenient.”

“All right,” Efran said uneasily.

He stayed in his chair while Wallace came around behind him. Efran tried to look over his shoulder, but Wallace repositioned his head to make him look straight on. Then he began feeling Efran’s head while everyone in the hall watched without breathing.

Wallace spent several minutes pressing his fingers at numerous points around his head, especially in one area along the back. Parting Efran’s hair, he murmured, “Lower your head, please,” and Efran did so. Then Wallace felt the back of the parietal bone and the upper occipital bone with great care.

Finally, he stood back. “What medical treatment did you receive in these last three days, Efran?”

Turning in his chair, Efran said, “None. I was aware of only one day, and, Windry and I spent that day running, mostly.”

With highly arched brows, Minka looked at Wallace, then Marguerite. Wallace said, “I do not understand how this is possible, but the plates in your head are gone. You have healthy bone covering your brain.”

Efran shot a hand back to feel his head. “I knew there was something different, but I--” He looked suddenly to Marguerite. “How? How is that possible? What happened?”

Smiling, she said, “First, tell me about Windry. I assume, since you’re here, she came back on the tide as well. And, Doctor, I must insist that you sit and join us.”

“Thank you, Lady Marguerite. I need to hear this,” Wallace said. Captain Rigdon quickly got up for him to have his seat toward the head of the table.

In response to Marguerite, Efran said, “Yes, Windry’s here; I saw her go on the tide. But I was shot in the back, and, somehow came around the long way.”

“How was she physically?” Marguerite asked.

“Ah, hungry and thirsty,” Efran said, looking over his shoulder for the promised bracer.

“But how was she healed?” Marguerite asked.

“Healed? She wasn’t injured. I made sure of that,” Efran protested.

“She was healed of something,” Marguerite insisted.

“She--” Efran looked off, thinking. Then he said, “We arrived at the Lands at some point in the—future? It had to have been. I don’t understand it, but, it was *another* time that she and Gnecco ruled the Lands, only, it was deserted. We got in the fortress, where we saw—pictures and drawings of her reign as queen there, and a mannequin of her lying dead surrounded by devils. She was horrified to see how she was remembered as an evil queen, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized that Gnecco had taken over to rule very harshly in her name. She was particularly upset about how you had suffered,” he told Minka, who had sat beside him again.

She merely listened as he continued, “So she decided she didn’t want to rule again. And then, she went from there to grieving how poor a wife and mother she had been. So, when she came back, I saw her just now apologizing to Lilou, and, Lilou set her down to get her a meal.” At this point, he looked hopefully over his shoulder for Hartshough again.

Marguerite sat back with a satisfied smile. “There it is,” she said.

“Where?” he asked, looking for plates arriving.

“Remember how I told you that if you were touching Windry when the tide came, then you would share whatever happened to her?--that if she were returned, you would be returned, and if she were injured or killed, you would be likewise?” Marguerite asked.

“Yes,” Efran said, brows lowered. “That must be why I was returned with her, even though the tide didn’t take me. It didn’t take Heroux, either. I made sure he wasn’t touching her when the tide took us from her house.”

“That’s good to know,” Marguerite said. “But my explanation of your bond to her was insufficient. It never occurred to me that Windry might be healed instead of injured or killed.”

“Healed?” Efran said in confusion, but Minka drew a long, quiet breath.

“Spiritually, Efran. It sounds as though Windry experienced some deep healing in her heart. And the spiritual must affect the physical. Her spiritual healing was shared with you as physical healing, because that is what you required most at the moment,” Marguerite said.

Efran sat transfixed. “More than you know. I was shot in the back; I was dying. And—I’m talking now.” He looked again at Minka in bewildered gratitude. She regarded him in vindication.

Wendt said, “The only reason I can believe it because of the healing I’ve seen myself. But now, Efran, we need to hear everything from the start, especially about this skink.”

“Yes,” Efran said, collecting himself. “The first that I heard of the skink, this Heroux, was when Justinian noticed him for his—tail. I don’t remember much from when he told us about that, because I was still not understanding much of what I was hearing. But then, on the seventeenth, Madgwick told me to bring Windry to

talk to you,” he said, nodding to Marguerite. “And that was when we realized how dangerous he could be. Well, we didn’t know the half of it.”

From there, he told them as concisely as he could about his and Windry’s exploration of the deserted Lands and the fortress, and their foray into Nicarber. When he mentioned the little harbor town, and the dilapidation of the new buildings they had seen being built, Efran suddenly stood to dig in his pants pocket. Then he pulled out the crumpled flat cap and tossed it to Minka.

“My cap!” she cried. As she opened it up to put it on her head, something fell out of it. Leaning over, she picked up an old paper booklet. She held this up to Efran, gasping, “You did it! You brought out a whole book this time! This is the same as the book I was trying to hold onto!”

His jaw dropped as he took the booklet to gently flip through it. “It is. I can’t believe it. It was stuffed in the cap on display. Ryal had asked--” He suddenly looked up. “Someone go get Ryal, please.”

One of the men ran out the front doors. Meanwhile, Minka put the cap on her head and then looked around in astonishment at the laughter. Tourse assured her, “The ladies will get you a new cap, Lady Minka.”

“I don’t want another one. I don’t care if it’s wrinkled; its been on an adventure,” she declared.

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Chapter 21

“Well said, Minka,” Estes smiled, and she wore it constantly thereafter. (Although, to be honest, part of the reason she wore it was that her brown roots growing in under her light blonde hair vexed her terribly. So she wore the cap while having the blonde hair trimmed off a tiny bit at a time. And since her hair was curling more, Efran never noticed.)

As Efran began trying to describe the orbs, Ryal came in under compulsion, looking around until he spotted the guest of honor. The moment Ryal opened his mouth, Efran extended the booklet. So Ryal had to come around to take it in wonder while Marguerite was ordering Efran’s men to bring Giardi and Soames, and have them close the shop while they were all eating here.

Ryal gaped at Efran. “You went back to the same place in time to get this book?”

“No, that’s just how it worked out. Sit down and I’ll tell you,” Efran said. “Oh, by the way, Marguerite, you and Hartshough were right about the skink. He channeled to Windry the power to raise the tide of Time until he could get her to another realm where he could have someone else kill her—in this case, me—so that he could acquire the power himself. It didn’t work out that way because he had to fight the orbs while the tide was returning Windry here.”

He finished disjointedly for watching Hartshough and several soldiers begin serving hors d’oeuvres. After Efran had received his serving to wolf it down, Justinian asked, “Well, Efran? What are all the ingredients?”

Drawing a decisive breath, Efran said, “I don’t know.”

There followed a robust round of laughter, then Justinian said, piqued, “Come now, brother, that won’t do. It’s an insult to Hartshough if you can’t pay attention to what you’re eating.”

Efran muttered, “I apologize to Hartshough; all I was aware of was the steak, garlic butter and parsley.”

“That is correct, Lord Efran. I had to keep it simple today,” Hartshough said, placing his bracer before him. There was light laughter and a smattering of applause while those around Efran received their bracers almost as quickly.

After taking a sip, Justinian said, “Well then, now that you’ve got the easy one out of the way, let’s hear what you think of the bracer.”

Except for Ryal, who was intently perusing the booklet, those at the table sat back to watch Efran hold up the glass with its frothy top and observe, “Hartshough’s taken a liking to the beaten egg white.”

“It does add body, Lord Efran,” Hartshough admitted with a bow.

Justinian began pensively, “Bitters. Gin.”

Hartshough said, “As far as it goes, that is correct, Lord Justinian.”

Efran added, “The rosemary sprigs are a nice garnish.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said with another bow.

Then Justinian and Efran were both silent, sipping. “The deep red is inexplicable,” Justinian observed, peering into his glass. Efran took a third sip, then lowered his head. “Well? What is it? I haven’t a clue,” Justinian said.

Efran looked torn. “It can’t be.”

“Who can say what Hartshough would put in a drink?” Justinian posed.

“Spit it out, Efran,” Wendt ordered.

Upon this command, Efran said in agony, “Beet juice, Commander.”

Everyone laughed until Hartshough said, “That is correct, Lord Efran.” And then they laughed at his relief.

The homecoming party continued for another hour, during which DeWitt caught Efran for a quick update: “We brought back two wagons of lumber from Eviron, and Venegas has restarted their sawmill, as well, so we’re being supplied. Also, Tourse has been keeping an eye on Choules’ group, and they’re behaving themselves. This is important, because they have so many highly trained craftsmen. Tourse tells us that a number of them were riled by Wolverson’s exalting himself—said that was just what they left Eurus to get away from.”

“That’s good to hear,” Efran exhaled.

But Minka was anxious for him to come see the children. So with much hugging and handshaking, she finally got him out the chapel doors—to be met on the steps by Kraken. He had been standing there so long waiting for his human that he had left a pile of droppings next to the steps.

Efran muttered something about baby wraps, but stroked his nose anyway. He had on a bridle, but no saddle, so Efran looked back at her to ask, “Will you ride up with me?”

“Behind you, yes.” She grinned at him from under her wrinkled flat cap, and he expelled a laugh. So he hefted himself up onto Kraken’s back, then Cyneheard lifted her to sit behind him.

As Efran turned Kraken’s head to the new switchback, she warned, “If you lope him up, I may slide off, and if I do, I’m taking you down with me.”

“I’ll go anywhere with you,” he said, his hand covering hers that were clasped around his waist.

While Kraken walked sedately up the levels, she asked, “Was it scary? The fortress in that realm?”

He thought about that. “For Windry, yes, because of all the pictures she was seeing about how much they hated her as queen. For me, it was just—sad, seeing the emptiness. I wish I could know that after we’re gone, the Abbey will continue taking in children.”

“I know,” she whispered, her arms tightening around him. “So did you really get a peek at Jesus?”

“Yes, I think so,” he said dubiously.

“What did you see of heaven?” she asked eagerly.

“I don’t know. I have no idea. It was just a glimpse of, overwhelming beauty, and joy. The joy was like, like golden honey streaming down. I think there was laughter, and talking, but everything was suffused with it so, that’s all I remember,” he said.

“Like the children at Christmas,” she offered.

“Yes,” he said, pressing her hands on his stomach. “Yes, and God willing, I’ll see that again next Christmas.”

When they got to the back grounds on the hilltop, the first thing they saw was Isreal, Toby, Chorro, and Hassie practicing at archery. The men were not only closely supervising, but encouraging them with praise. Efran and Minka stood off to watch without distracting them. After the first few minutes, Minka said, “They’re all doing well. Isreal is farthest along, I think, but Hassie is almost as good. Don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Efran smiled. “She seems determined to prove herself.” He noticed, but did not say so, that they were shooting by the regular method, not *aike*, in which the archer shot intuitively, without aiming. Even Isreal had slowed his *aike* shooting down to not outpace the others.

At the sound of his voice, several heads pivoted toward them, and Efran took Minka’s hand to walk her over to the archery lines. The children, especially Hassie, clamored for him to watch them, but Efran said, “I have been watching; you’re all doing very well. I’m very proud.” Then he knelt to give each of them congratulatory hugs. Joshua, growing jealous, stalked over to pound on Efran’s knee.

Chorro said a little despondently, “Isreal’s still the best. We need to touch your eyes again, Efran.”

“Gently,” Efran instructed, closing his eyes for them all to touch his eyelids—except Isreal. When Efran opened his eyes again, Isreal pointed to his own eyes, and then Efran’s.

“What does he mean by that?” Chorro asked.

“That he gets all he needs by watching now,” Efran smiled.

“That’s how we’ve always learned from you, Efran,” Toby said. Which was true.

When Efran stood again holding Joshua, he had to be greeted by all the men, many of whom did not know that he had been gone, and more who did not know that he had fully recovered his comprehension and speech. He greeted them all in return, and thanked them for their attention and concern during his rehabilitation.

Seeing Earnshaw trot over, Efran told him, “You’re good to go with Ecclesiastes and Romans for Dominica, Earnshaw. I liked your commentary on both.”

He grinned and the men congratulated him, promising to attend, but Efran went on: “The verse in Ecclesiastes about God putting eternity in men’s hearts . . . what was that again?”

“That verse. Eternity. Yes, Captain,” Earnshaw said, intently trying to remember. When the men started ribbing him, he said, “Shut up, and I’ll recall it.” They did, and a moment later, he said, “Oh, yes: ‘He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man’s mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.’”

“That’s it,” Efran said. Tentatively, he added, “And you said . . . we were made to seek something that we won’t fully understand in this life.”

“Yes, Captain. I believe that’s because the whole point is to seek. If we want to grow into our full life, we have to keep seeking what is above our understanding. If we stop seeking, we stop growing,” Earnshaw said.

“That’s what I needed to hear. Thank you, Earnshaw,” Efran said.

“You’re welcome, Captain,” Earnshaw said, full at heart over the praise, but moreso to see the Captain whole again.

Dinner was an enlargement of the welcoming ruckus, but by then, Efran was exhausted; he only wanted to go to bed and take Minka with him. So that is what happened.

After Law class the following morning (February 21st), which both Efran and Minka attended, he had Kraken and Rose saddled so that they could ride around the Lands to see everything he had missed while being bounced around realms. The first thing he noticed was the number of men sporting new black flat caps, which did look good on them. Grinning, Minka patted her own slightly wrinkled cap, and the men hailed her.

Other men who had not yet received their caps were content to wait, as some were growing out their hair while others pulled duty with haircuts previously unimagined on an Abbey soldier. Efran smiled tightly at them. Desiring to see the progress of caps to cover the heads of those men, Efran took Minka to The Lands Clothing Shop.

Here, he was gratified by the organized bustle of incoming materials and outgoing caps. Without attempting to enter the overly crowded shop, he and Minka dismounted to greet the original maker of the cap that started the storm, Pelagatti. He paused to wring Efran’s hand with great feeling, then had to address another question about something pertinent.

Efran directed a wry smile to Minka, but she nodded to the entrance of the shop. He turned to see Racheal exiting with Windry, who was talking excitedly over a large bundle of fabrics in her arms. Racheal was nodding agreeably without attempting to interrupt the flow of words.

Catching sight of Efran, Windry came over hesitantly, but he and Minka were smiling. He said, “You seem to have jumped in right quick to the job.”

“Yes,” Windry exhaled. “I have so many ideas for new styles on old lines, and Racheal has promised to look at samples of them all. This is so much better than trying to do it all myself, and—so much better than trying to make everyone do what I say.”

Minka was thumbing through her armload of fabrics. “I like this one,” she said, pulling out a corner of fabric that had sunset colors rising out of black shadows. The black gave the colors depth and definition without appearing misplaced. And anything made out of that would look good with her black cap.

Windry thrust the whole bundle onto Efran so that she could pull out Minka’s selection to place it on top. “That will be the first one I make,” Windry promised. Efran crinkled his eyes at her, and she reclaimed the bundle to walk away swiftly, gesturing to her new assistant.

Efran and Minka watched her a moment, then she said, “She looks so much better.”

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Chapter 22

Efran agreed. “I’ve never seen Windry so happy.”

“Not even when she was with you?” she asked dubiously.

He shook his head. “Neither of us were happy.”

He abruptly looked to the west, as though he had heard something. But Minka was saying, “Oh, Ryal said that he and Oulton have had so many applications for new shops in the east Lands—can we ride out to see a few?”

“Yes, of course. It’s nice that we still have room to grow in the east,” he said, wondering what he had just heard.

So they rode that way, where they quickly found a new spice shop, Old World Spices, which they entered. Minka inhaled the mixture of aromas in ecstasy. “Oh Efran, this is heaven,” she declared.

He grunted, “Don’t tell Hartshough about this shop; I’ll never be able to identify all these.”

The owner, Dionigi, bowed. “Pardon, Lord Efran, but Lady Marguerite’s butler has already visited us, and promises to be a steady customer.” (It always surprised Minka to see the number of new people who recognized Efran, but he was used to it by now.)

“Hartshough would,” Efran groaned.

Minka said, “Well, fight back! Get samples of what you don’t know; we’ll have them brewed up so you can taste them.”

He stared at her and the owner smiled. Then Efran began scanning the shelves. “Get me—what?—an ounce of—this, and this, and this. Oh, and this--”

So Dionigi packed up samples of Annatto seeds, Peperoncino, Cubeb pepper, and dried Enoki mushrooms. While doing so, he made suggestions as to how to prepare samples for tasting: “Sniff it first, to give you an idea of its potency and flavor. The teas you simply brew and drink, of course. But sprinkle the spices on something bland, like white rice or flatbread. Then you may drizzle it in a bit of heated oil or butter, which you then spread on bread. The flavor you get will be considerably affected by how it’s prepared.”

“Preparation is key to everything,” Efran said, pulling out his money pouch. Then he froze with his pouch out. “Tell me what Hartshough bought.”

Dionigi hesitated at the possible indiscretion, but with further sales on the line, he consulted his receipts to divulge, “Master Hartshough purchased pistachio flavoring, mango tea, granulated lime peel, Kukicha twig tea, ground pink peppercorns, and Tandoori spice, Lord Efran.”

In grim determination, Efran said, “Get me samples of the Kukicha twig tea and the Tandoori spice. Oh, and, better add the ground pink peppercorns, just in case. Also, I will pay you for samples of Hartshough’s future purchases. Just send them up to the fortress.” Swinging to Minka, he told her, “Remind me to tell Doane that those are authorized.”

“All right,” she grinned.

As Dionigi was packing the additional spices and teas, he remarked, “This Hartshough must be a culinary master, to arouse such interest in his choice of flavorings. A Lord Justinian was just here day before yesterday with the same request.”

Efran looked at Minka in alarm, and she laughed. “Yes, he’s famous as well.”

They stopped at a few more shops after that, but since Efran’s money pouch was now empty, they turned back to the fortress. But he promised to bring her out again to explore further.

As they rode back at a walk, Efran heard it again, something from the west, like a . . . bubbling? And he thought, *Where did he come from—this royal skink? It wasn’t Crescent Hollow, that’s for sure.* But what Efran said was, “After seeing the run-down, ramshackle shops in Queen Windry’s realm, and then the abandoned buildings in the ghost realm, it’s such a blessed sight to see all this.”

“Oh, I can imagine,” she murmured.

He looked at her with a quick breath. “Do you remember the—the--?” He was thinking of her being blinded and tortured, though he couldn’t bring himself to say it, nor did he want to remind her of it.

She looked at him inquiringly, then asked, “My blinding?” He winced, and she said “No. I half don’t believe that it happened. But I do have, just, flashes of your picking me up, telling me you can’t leave me, and, your being hit, and falling beside me. That’s all. Oh, and something about Smaha, as well!” she laughed.

“Smaha?” he asked, brows drawn down.

“Yes. Estes said she owned a shop in Westford,” Minka said. Efran looked off, vaguely shaking his head in denial of knowing anything about her or her shop.

When they arrived back at the fortress courtyard, he gave her the bag of spices and kissed her head. “I’m going to ride around a bit more, but it won’t be fun because I’m all out of coin.”

“All right,” she said, and just held him a moment in gratitude. Pulling away, she asked, “Which sample do you want me to prepare when you get back?”

“Oh, the Tandoori spice, for sure, then after I wash out my mouth, the Kukicha twig tea,” he said firmly.

“That’s what I’ll do, then.” She skipped up the fortress steps happily, and he briefly experienced the stabbing memory of mounting those steps to enter the fortress’ dead, deserted remains.

He turned back to Kraken, contemplating the white smoke coming from the clearing in the trees north of Nicarber. He murmured, “I’ve seen that enough from a distance; time to go see it up close.”

As he put his foot in Kraken’s stirrup, he saw Hawk standing before him. “Permission to accompany you, Captain.”

Efran experienced the flash of a mercenary’s knife plunging into Hawk’s unprotected chest during Gnecco’s attack on Venegas. Pulling his foot out of the stirrup, he said, “Get a horse; arm up with a sawtooth knife and bring me a bow.”

“Yes, Captain.” And Hawk was off like a shot to the stables and the storeroom on the western side of the fortress. Meanwhile, Efran looked off, wondering how to put to rest those unwanted flashes from the other realms.

When Hawk returned with his horse minutes later, Krall was walking a horse alongside him. Extending a bow and quiver to Efran, Krall said, “Permission to accompany you, Captain.”

Both these men were of the Forty, and Efran saw no reason to turn either of them down. “Let’s go,” he said, swinging up on Kraken.

They took Main past the old stone bridge toward the coastal highway, which they took west to cross the new bridge over the Passage. When they slowed their horses to walk through the woods, he told them, “I just want to look around Nicarber one more time.”

“Yes, Captain,” Hawk said.

“Yes, sir. Are you . . . picking up on something, Captain?” Krall asked.

“Yes,” Efran said, turning to him. “But I don’t know what or where. Tell me if you hear anything strange.” His men acknowledged this, and they rode down the various trails leading southwest to Nicarber.

When they reached the intersection with the main dirt road of the demolished harbor town, Efran trotted down it, looking to the right and left, until finally approaching the foreshore. Without bothering to dismount, he looked down at the clear, shimmering water, with the algae, kelp, sea stars, crabs, periwinkles, sea urchins and small, darting fish.

Turning Kraken's head, he trotted back up to the intersection, still looking. His men kept with him, scanning occasionally for a clue as to what they were looking for. Finally, Efran said, "I don't see anything here that shouldn't be. Everything is just as it was."

Hawk and Krall waited, watching while he turned to scan the trees to the north of the dirt road. Live oaks were dominant here, but there were also a few hollies, cypress, ash, and black pines. Krall turned his head as though listening. "Does a brook run through here?"

"Not that I know of," Efran said thoughtfully. "Let's have a look." He nudged Kraken forward, his men following on their horses.

They crossed the road, then climbed a gentle incline into the trees. Passing under great live oaks with moss-covered branches, they listened intently for something they could barely hear.

After meandering through these trees for about a half hour, Hawk pointed to their left. "It's coming from over there."

"Yes, I hear it, now," Krall said.

"That way, then," Efran said.

They rode toward the sound, listening hard. "How would you describe that?" Efran asked. He was wondering how he could have heard it halfway across the Lands when it was still barely perceptible this close.

"Like a—pot boiling," Krall said.

"Of something thick, like a stew," Hawk offered.

"Full of grease, that pops," Krall agreed.

"And the smell!" Hawk said. "Someone left the eggs out too long."

"Trees are thinning out," Krall observed. "We had a good showing of pine, spruce, juniper up till this area."

They entered a very large clearing, then, and looked around in stupefaction. Immediately before them was a bubbling pool of mud that looked like a thin flour paste left to boil on the fire. Beyond it was another pool from which steam wafted up. The edges of this pool were reddish-orange just below its water line, but the interior was a deep blue.

Other pools or basins bubbled in the distance, and steaming water shot up from a few of these. There were piles of rocks in another area from which water boiled furiously, jumping over the rocks into smoky basins downstream—the smoke of which Efran had seen from the hilltop several times. The colors of these varied from yellow to orange and red, and one pool that was pitch black. Some pools looked so deep as to be limitless; others were shallow, burping basins.

The men dismounted, leaving their skittish horses on the perimeter of the area—even Kraken shied away. "What's wrong here?" Efran asked him.

The water's too hot! Kraken snorted with a shake of his mane.

“Well, at least you’re smart enough to stay out of it. We’re going to look around a little,” Efran said, dropping the reins. He still had his bow and quiver slung over his shoulder. Hawk and Krall had their knives sheathed on their belts.

They split up as they walked around, looking. “Sure no fish here,” Krall observed.

“No, really?” a voice said sardonically.

They quickly looked around, seeing no one. Efran called, “Who’s there?”

“Who are you?” another voice called back.

Efran raised his hands in a conciliatory manner. “I am Captain Efran of the Abbey Lands. These are my men Krall, who likes fish, and Hawk. We’re just looking around.”

“What does Hawk eat?” someone else asked quickly.

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Chapter 23

Efran gestured to Hawk, who said hesitantly, “I like steak, ham in any form, chicken when there’s no steak or ham, and, uh, venison, and fish, sure.” Having run through his list of favorites, he raised his shoulders at the Captain.

“Not lizards?” the last voice demanded. “Hawks usually like lizards.”

“Ah, no, no lizards,” Hawk said. “I’m called ‘Hawk’ because I have good eyes.”

“What’s your real name?” another voice asked.

Hawk looked at his Captain in pained reluctance, but Efran, having a clue as to whom they were talking to, gestured him to answer. So Hawk sighed, “Conybeare.”

“Do Conybeares eat lizards?” someone else asked.

“Not that I know of, but I don’t know anyone else with the misfortune of bearing the name,” Hawk said with deep feelings on the matter.

“Then Conybeares MAY eat lizards,” another said.

“But he says he doesn’t, so we should give him that,” yet another said.

“Are you *sure* you don’t eat lizards?” someone pressed Hawk.

“Yes, I’m sure that I don’t eat lizards!” Hawk insisted.

When there was no immediate reply to this, Efran said, "As long as we're talking, I want to ask you about Heroux."

There was some hissing from behind the rocks around the pools, then another voice said, "Throw your pointy things in the water."

"Pointy--" Krall began, then protested, "It's my best knife! I had to pay a month's salary for it! Can I just lay it down here?" He withdrew the knife from its sheath to lay it on the ground behind him.

Likewise, Hawk unsheathed his knife to place it out of reach on the ground. Efran took his bow and quiver off his shoulder to hang them on a dead branch nearby. One voice objected, "That's not on the ground."

"I don't want to get them wet or muddy," Efran explained. "Besides, we're not going to attack you, especially since there's more of you than there are of us."

"How many of us are there?" one asked.

"Yes, tell us!" another urged.

"Umm," Efran began, looking around at the rocks. "There are at least three of you behind that grouping there," he pointed. "And another three or four behind the one next to it. There's one of you behind that dead tree, and another couple behind the live tree off a ways. Then there are least two behind the large rock over here. Since I can't know how many of you haven't spoken, that leaves at least twelve, probably more.

"We're outnumbered at least four to one here, and I'm willing to trust that you're not going to hurt us, either. I just want to ask some questions, because we had a bad experience with Heroux, and we'd like to know that the rest of you are better than him. So, can you come out from hiding so we can talk like friends?" he finished.

There was a bit more hissing, then the Landers looked quickly as a large lizard, the size of a man, climbed up to lie on top of the first rock grouping that Efran had pointed out. The Captain said, "Hello. I'm willing to bet that you are the first or the second who spoke. What's your name?"

"You are wrong, but well-intentioned," the lizard said in a deeper, more mature voice than the others. "I am Oldknow. I'll let the others tell you their names if they choose. Come out now, boys."

Other lizards appeared from behind the rocks and the trees as Efran had said, and a quick count put their number at 13. They were not all alike, nor the same kind of lizard, but were all close to Oldknow in size, although he was clearly the largest. And, as most lizards are, they appeared to be nonlethal.

"Thank you," Efran said, sitting on a rock at the edge of the blue pool. Krall and Hawk likewise sat, Krall on the grass and Hawk on another rock. Efran continued, "How long have you lived here, Oldknow?"

"Longer than your kind have existed on this great Rock," Oldknow replied. "But our gens was almost destroyed by the flood that came from the Sea, so this is all we are now, but for the bearers who stay with the eggs. The one you call Heroux was an outcast, for he wished to be other than what he was. So he ventured beyond our rocks and pools, and met one of your bearers, who had a black head and a black heart, and told him that he could be a man like you, but he was not, only a halfling.

"But she with the black heart gave him power that no creature should have, and he used that power to move the

Sun forward and backward, until he was caught in between Forward and Backward himself, and there he hangs,” Oldknow said.

Efran considered this silently for a little while, then asked, “Was the woman with the black heart named Cocci?”

“I do not know names of your people, but she has become as the ash left from the burning,” Oldknow said.

“Yes,” Efran said, thinking that was confirmation enough of who she was. “So, was this Heroux king of you, with the blue tail?”

That provoked a chorus of derisive chirps and barking from the undisciplined juveniles. Oldknow cut it short with an authoritative growl. “His name was not ‘Heroux,’ which is what the Black Head named him. Nor was he a Blue Tail, but a common brown skink. He wished to exceed his nature, to be above us all, so he went among you, to entrap the weak. This caused his fall into nothing.”

“That’s quite profound, and just what happened,” Efran said in admiration. “Why did he speak in this--rhyming singsong?”

“He began doing it for show, then found he could not stop it,” Oldknow said, with a hiss of disparagement.

“Ah,” Efran acknowledged. “Do other people know of you?”

Oldknow replied, “Few come this way, because the pools are traps for the careless. And we hide, to give them nothing to see.”

“What do *you* eat?” Hawk asked.

Oldknow turned his ponderous head to him, tongue flicking out. “You call them bugs.”

Krall breathed, “Shiminy, how many do you have to eat to stay alive? You’re as big as one of Lwoff’s sows.”

“The ones we eat, back deep in the trees, are as big as the sow’s piglets,” Oldknow said.

Krall grimaced. “That should keep the people away.”

They were silent for a while, considering all this. Then one of the youngsters, which happened to be a red-eyed crocodile skink, clambered down from his rock to cautiously approach Efran. He put his hand out, fingers curled back. The skink nosed it briefly, then clambered up on the rock behind him. Being about six feet long, including his tail, he wound around the human to lay his head on his thigh. “He’s warm,” the skink muttered as an excuse. The day had turned cloudy.

“That’s what my wife says,” Efran said, tentatively placing a hand on the skink’s back. This was permitted.

“That is Holer. Still at the curious age,” Oldknow noted. Efran half-smiled; Holer placed his clawed foot on Efran’s leg. But that was just to get closer contact with the warmth all along his body.

Then Efran asked, “Were you here when there were people in Nicarber?”

“Yes,” Oldknow said. “They saw no reason to come to these pools, as the Sea gave them everything. But then the great waters rolled over them, and they were gone.”

“I want to see Nicarber rebuilt. But I want the people to leave you alone,” Efran admitted.

“We hide. Once they see that the water burns and makes them sick, they leave it be,” Oldknow said.

Efran nodded, then looked back as Kraken, ears pricked and head down, approached the trespasser on his human. Holer turned to hiss at him. “That’s just my horse. He won’t hurt you, either,” Efran explained. Disliking the proximity of the snuffling nose, Holer skittered down from the rock.

Standing, Efran said, “We found out what we needed to know. Thank you for explaining so much. I’m wondering—how are you able to talk to us?”

“We are of old. And we have watched your kind for a long time,” Oldknow said. The other lizards began to withdraw from sight.

“Oh.” Efran remembered not too long ago when he couldn’t even communicate with his own kind. “May I come back to talk to you again?”

“I have told you almost all,” the old one said, then disappeared as well.

The men retrieved their weapons and remounted their horses. Walking them back out of the woods, they were quiet at first, then Krall looked up at the sky in displeasure. “Eh, with the cloud cover, I can’t tell which way we’re going.” Huffing at him, Kraken headed in a definite direction, so Efran gave him his head and the others followed.

On the way back, Efran told them, “It would be best to keep quiet about this.”

“Yes, Captain,” Krall said, and Hawk agreed. So, when they returned, they told only their closest associates, who told only their most confidential friends, who embroidered only a little bit on what Hawk and Krall had found at the smoking pools.

While they were gone, Minka had gone down to see Marguerite. But since she was about to go see Madgwick, Minka decided to go with her. Before leaving, Marguerite showed her a booklet. “Madgwick has been kindly helping me with the Old Testament stories. They’re interesting, but hard for me to grasp. The culture was so different.”

“From Eurus? I suppose so,” Minka laughed. She was embarrassed to admit how little she knew about the Old Testament.

When they arrived at Delano’s, they found Madgwick’s son Wystan running the counter, so Marguerite and Minka went on to the back room where Madgwick kept Ruth. Entering with a quiet knock, they found Madgwick on the floor playing with the baby, who was sitting up. Ruth looked up to smile and clap for the visitors.

Minka and Marguerite quickly sat on the floor with them. Minka could hardly tear her eyes away from the beautiful baby who looked so happy and content. Marguerite said, “Madgwick, she changes every time I see her! How old is she now?”

Beaming, Madgwick said, “She’ll be one year old in about a week.”

“I can’t believe it,” Minka whispered. She put her hand out to the baby, who grasped her finger happily.

“She’s precious,” Marguerite said with a quiet sigh. Handing Madgwick the booklet, she said, “Thank you for the loan. It did help; I’m just struggling with all the details about the tabernacle construction and furnishings.”

Madgwick laughed, “Yes, that’s important to scholars, not so much to us laypeople. But there are interesting passages, especially when the Israelites get past their forty years’ of wandering in the desert. Here, I just read this today--” She pulled her big book off the table to open it on the floor around them. “This is wonderful. This group of several million people and their livestock are passing through the wilderness where there’s no water. So this is what happens--” And she read:

“From the Arnon River, the people of Israel continued to Beer, that is the well of which the Lord said to Moses, “Gather the people together, and I will give them water.” Then Israel sang this song:

“Spring up, O well! Sing to it!
The well which the princes dug,
Which the nobles of the people delved,
With the scepter and with their staves.”” [Num. 21:16-18]

Madgwick looked at them, grinning, and Minka asked, “They—sang to the well?”

“Yes, and the fact that it gave them water is so evident, the passage doesn’t even mention it. It just continues to recount their journey,” Madgwick said.

“That’s interesting,” Minka murmured.

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Chapter 24

After an hour’s meandering ride attempting to return from the smoky pools, Efran, Hawk and Krall spotted the wire fence encompassing the five-mile stretch west of the Passage—which meant that they had been riding west instead of east. On the fence, Efran located the sign that announced the area as belonging to the Lands, and not to Minunni or some other unknown realm.

He tossed off to his men, “I’m still jumpy to think that we might not be where we’re supposed to be.”

“The bits and pieces I’m remembering are like burs in your socks,” Hawk muttered. But now that they knew which way to go, they passed through the wall gates in time for Efran to report their findings to Wendt and Estes before the dinner bell rang. And then he had to tell Minka about talking to the big lizards around the smoke pits who had been there for millennia, probably.

After attending Law class with Minka the following morning (which class was taking up an ever-larger corner of the dining hall), Efran showed up in the workroom to see DeWitt lean back and take off his glasses to clean them. “Uh oh,” Efran said. “That’s a clear sign of trouble I’m in with him and Ryal, when they take off the spectacles. What have I done? What have I forgotten?”--as the latter was the most likely source of displeasure.

Laughing, Estes looked at DeWitt, who replaced his glasses. "Or, Efran, it could mean that they're dirty."

"No," Efran said flatly. "What is it?"

"Just this," DeWitt said, "four of the five test wells the men dug in the far eastern Lands proved productive enough for us to build walls around them with drawing apparatus. That was about a year ago, and they've been in use since then. But the last few times anyone's tried to draw from three of them, they've come up dry. We want to see if we can find the problem."

Efran asked, "What does Thrupp say?"--the fortress' senior structural engineer.

"That he has his hands full at the moment, and would appreciate someone less burdened with routine duties to go see if there's an obvious problem," DeWitt said. Estes, recording recent adoptions in one of several ledgers, smiled.

"Which wells?" Efran asked.

"Numbers two, three and five are the problem wells," DeWitt said.

Efran hesitated. "Isn't number five close to the east Passage?"

"Yes, actually, within a couple miles of it," DeWitt said.

Efran objected, "Then that's in wolf territory, that I promised them. We're not going to make any improvements to encourage people to encroach on them again. But Minka and I'll go check on the other two."

Head down, Estes said, "Take a bodyguard."

"All right," Efran said, then thought about how casually they all accepted that after getting his skull broken a second time, he was not only alive and functioning, but thinking and speaking normally, with solid bone covering his brain instead of a steel plate. Strangest of all, he had Cocci to thank for that, indirectly. Windry's getting caught up in Cocci's puppet's scheme is what led to Windry's healing, thus his as well. But Efran knew that was primarily due to God's hand shaping the outcome of everyone's actions, selfish or accidental.

Thinking on this, he went to find Minka. He would have taken Joshua, too (since the compost hauling had been paused while the garden crew spread what they had), but the children were still in class at this time. Mistress Hazeldene was doing such a good job with them, Efran was reluctant to irritate her. There were not many people that he was reluctant to irritate.

He found Minka looking dismally over her barren flowerbeds. "None of the plant shops has seedlings yet"--in late February--"they think it's too early, even though it's never too early on the Lands, but I haven't planted seeds yet, either, and now I'm afraid it's too late."

"Well," he offered, "come with me to check dry wells on the east Lands."

"All right," she said, cheerfully turning away from the empty beds. But she stopped by their quarters to get her black flap cap, still wrinkled. This she placed proudly on her head to identify with Efran's men (and cover her brown roots).

He had Kraken and the dun mare saddled, then summoned Lambdin and his son Henris to ride out with them. On the way, he told them about his, Krall's and Hawk's conversation with the giant lizards around the hot pools north of Nicarber. This the men heard with surprisingly little skepticism, given what they had seen in the year that they had been here.

Henris asked, "How do you account for their being able to talk to you, Captain? And your being able to understand them?"

"I would just say that it's the Lands—because things like that happen here--but Oldknow said something about their being here before humans were. So, they're an advanced species that's been listening to us talk for a long time," Efran mused.

Kraken said, *Imagine that.*

"Shut up," Efran said.

"Yes, Captain; I apologize," Henris said quickly.

Efran moaned, "Not you, Henris; my horse is mouthing off at me."

"Yes sir," Henris said, glancing wide-eyed at his father, who was quietly laughing.

They rode past all the shops, of which Minka saw more new ones that she wanted to visit, then Choules' group of specialized craftsmen. Beyond them were the grain fields and livestock pastures on which the cattle, sheep and goats grazed. Here, the bodyguards Lambdin and Henris were watchful, having heard about Wolverson's self-anointing, but everything appeared peaceful and orderly. They did pass a few of Tourse's enforcers on the way, which probably accounted for much of the order and peace.

They passed well #4, that under the once-colorful tent. Given that it was in use, they rode north of it to well #1. No one was here at the time, so Henris was elected to dismount and see if he could draw water. He could, so while they were there, he went ahead and filled the water trough for the horses to drink. Efran discouraged Kraken from playing in it until all the horses had gotten a drink.

Meanwhile, he looked around at the tranquil, empty grasslands, with the wind lightly ruffling the meadowgrass. The oak forests were to the north and east; the Sea to the south, and the wolves secluded somewhere near the lazy east branch of the Passage. While Efran was glad, again, to have the space, he was also very glad to know that a thriving township was nearby. The ghost lands around the deserted hill and empty fortress had deeply rattled him.

From there, they rode south again to well #2. Here, Henris lowered the bucket as far as it would go, but it came up dry, even on the bottom. "That's not good," Efran said. This well had been productive at one time, else the wall and shelter would never have been built around it. "Is there—yes, get one of the rocks and drop that in; see if you hear anything," he instructed Henris.

"Yes, Captain." Henris found a suitable loose rock at the base of the wall, dropped it, and leaned over the wellhead, listening. Then he drew back to say, "I didn't hear anything, Captain."

"Well then, mount up. We'll ride over to number three. It's within view to the southeast, there," Efran said.

"Yes, Captain." Henris remounted and they turned to lope toward the last well. Minka was just enjoying the ride,

and the view. They were close enough to the cliffs for her to look over the glorious, seemingly endless Sea.

At well number three, Henris dismounted again to see if he could draw water, which he couldn't, or hear anything from a dropped rock, which he also couldn't. Efran said sourly, "That's disturbing, that both should go dry so quickly. Our livestock need the water."

"Oh!" Minka came to life. "While you were gone yesterday, Auntie and I went to see Madgwick, and she showed us in her Scriptures where the people of Israel came out of the wilderness to a well where God had promised to give them water, but there wasn't any, so they sang to the well! They sang for water, and it came!"

Efran murmured fondly, "My Minka," and the men smiled at her. Then they turned to discuss what could be done with two dry wells.

Flustered at being discounted, although kindly, Minka's face burned. But she thought, *Why should that be a silly idea, after everything we've seen here? Although I don't know that God promised this water to us, it's needed. Why shouldn't I just try it? I don't know the song. Does it matter what I sing? I'll embarrass myself again. Don't I do that all the time anyway? Isn't the chance of getting water worth being embarrassed?*

So she dismounted to lean over the wellhead and sing quietly,

"Spring up, O lovely well,
With water deep inside.
Don't hold it underground;
We need it to abide.
Our men worked hard to make you
A blessing to our stock,
A lifeline from below us
Of water from the rock--"

Water gushed up so suddenly that it caught her in the face and knocked her to the ground. It pummeled the underside of the roof above, which simply channeled the torrent of water back down on her head as she sat on the ground.

Efran ran over to pick her up and carry her away from the rolling tide now flowing downhill across the meadowland. Wiping water from her eyes, she gaped at the rampaging stream. Efran demanded, "You sang to the well, didn't you?"

Before she could answer, Henris pointed to the northwest. "Number two's about to blow its cover!" And they looked at the gushing fountain from that supposedly dry well.

"What did you sing?" Efran demanded of her, laughing.

"I don't know, I just made it up!" Feeling her soaked head, she cried, "My cap!" It was nowhere to be seen.

The four of them looked at the mighty stream flowing toward the Sea from the revitalized Well #3. "I'll get you another, Minka, just like it," Efran promised.

"That would be nice," she said, then sneezed the water from her nose.

She rode back to the fortress soaked but happy, with Efran laughing every time he looked at her. Lambdin and

Henris were quietly thrilled to have something fantastic but verifiably true to report.

As they got back just in time for the midday meal, their bodyguards spread the word of the newly resurgent wells number two and three. A few skeptics among the soldiers promptly rode out to look. Before the meal was over, they returned to report that the water was no longer gushing, only overflowing both wellheads to create a temporary oasis on the east southeastern meadowland. And when she bemoaned the loss of her cap, a dozen men offered her theirs. She didn't want to take one, but they insisted, so Milo was the honored donor.

Minka, in dry clothes and a new flat cap, absolutely refused to repeat her song for the dining hall, protesting that she just made it up on the fly—which she had, but she not only remembered the words, but the melody, as well.

When she and Efran were alone in their quarters, he asked her again to sing it just as she had sung it at the well. So she did. He listened appreciatively, then quickly looked over to see if the washbasin were overflowing. But it was behaving itself. After all, it wasn't a well.

Of course, they had to take Joshua and Isreal down to the chapel to tell Auntie and Hartshough about it. (These were the only two children that Efran could make come with them when they were busy with their own play.) Efran urged Minka to sing her song, which she agreed to do, only-- "This is the *last time*." Unseen, Justinian and Eryk were watching from the loft.

When she finished the short song, Marguerite looked at her with moist eyes to say, "That's lovely, Minka." She blushed, then. Upstairs, Justinian had just rushed into his bedroom. Emerging again, he put a finger to his lips; Eryk nodded, and Justinian loudly opened and closed the door to the washroom.

Appearing at the loft railing in his luxurious bathrobe, Justinian said to those downstairs, "Excuse me—Hartshough, the hip bath is overflowing! I can't imagine--" He couldn't get out the rest because four people were rampaging up the curved stairway. Eryk stood out of the way. Perhaps smelling a joke, Isreal and Joshua remained on the floor of the sitting area with their toys.

While the adults crowded into the washroom, Justinian remained at the loft railing to calmly remove his robe and roll down his sleeves and pants legs. Then four people with pursed lips came out to survey him. "That was fun," he remarked in Efran's voice.

Then it was Efran who had to restrain Minka from throwing Justinian over the railing.

In the twilight, Efran and Minka sat on the bench under the walnut tree to watch the Abbey children run amok before going in to clean up for bed. Joshua, however, was already on Efran's shoulder, blinking sleepily at Hassie and Noah arguing loudly over the theoretical ownership of a frog they both claimed.

"It's mine because you can hear him singing, 'HassIE, HassIE!'" she insisted. In fact, most or all of the frogs croaked loudly at night. The only reason they were still alive was that their pond was far out on the back grounds, nowhere close to the fortress sleeping quarters.

So Noah accurately countered, "They all sing! And it sounds like, 'Bluorrr GAK! Bluorrrr GAK!'" Besides, he's mine because of the spots on his belly."

"They all have spots!" she shouted. Joshua then lifted up minimally to watch her chase her antagonist around the pond. She was getting closer to catching him every day. Nakam, his head on Efran's leg at Joshua's feet, was already asleep, else he'd be in the middle of that chase.

Isreal came over to lean against Efran's arm that held Joshua. The older boy couldn't get any closer, because Minka was wrapped up tightly on Efran's other side. This didn't bother Isreal, as long as he was beside his father to watch the sky turn purple. He never got tired of looking at the sky. Shortly, all of the children were called in to get ready for bed, and Nakam woke up enough to go with them. Efran and Minka told them all goodnight, but remained on the bench.

A few minutes later, in the quiet of the evening, Minka murmured, "There it is again."

Efran looked at the faint frame spreading before them. "Um hmm. It looks like a—doorway. Or, a page." Squinting, he added, "There's the face."

She lifted minimally. "Can you see anything about it?"

"No," he murmured. "Just the gray hair."

"Is it the one we usually see?" she asked, peering.

"The one that keeps taking off the spectacles and wiping their eyes?" he asked, glancing over to the chorus of frogs in the pond.

"Oh, don't worry," she said, sitting up. Efran looked at her in mild confusion, but she was speaking to the dim face in front of her. "I understand that you want to see more, but there are other things you have to do. We'll still be here when you get back. We're enjoying the adventures, too, and I appreciate your staying out of our bedroom, mostly."

Both looking at the soft outlines now, Efran grinned, "It's all right by me." Minka squirmed, protesting, and he argued, "I have a reputation to keep up."

"Efran!" Although she tried, she couldn't pull away. Laughing, he lifted his hand from her shoulder to take off her flat cap and cover her face from view while he kissed her.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on February 22nd of the year 8156 from the creation of the world.

YET MORE NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR:

Again, I've borrowed the concept of the Gray Lands from numerous sources. While it bears a certain resemblance to *Sheol* of the Old Testament, there is nothing in Scripture that confirms it or rules it out entirely before the Judgment. So let's just roll with it as a literary device and not a statement of reality.

Also again, *aikē* shooting is [real](#).

Regarding Efran's experience in the [Firmament](#) :

“*Musica universalis*—which had existed as a metaphysical concept since the time of the Greeks [was an] intriguing connection between music and astronomy [that] stimulated the imagination of Johannes Kepler as he devoted much of his time after publishing the *Mysterium Cosmographicum* (Mystery of the Cosmos), looking over tables and trying to fit the data to what he believed to be the true nature of the cosmos as it relates to musical sound. In 1619, Kepler published *Harmonices Mundi* (literally Harmony of the Worlds), expanding on the concepts he introduced in *Mysterium* and positing that musical intervals and harmonies describe the motions of the six known planets of the time. He believed that this harmony—while inaudible—could be heard by the soul, and that it gave a ‘very agreeable feeling of bliss, afforded him by this music in the imitation of God.’ In *Harmonices*, Kepler—who took issue with Pythagorean observations—laid out an argument for a Christian-centric creator who had made an explicit connection between geometry, astronomy, and music, and that the planets were arranged intelligently.”

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran in the Tide of Time*
Book 31

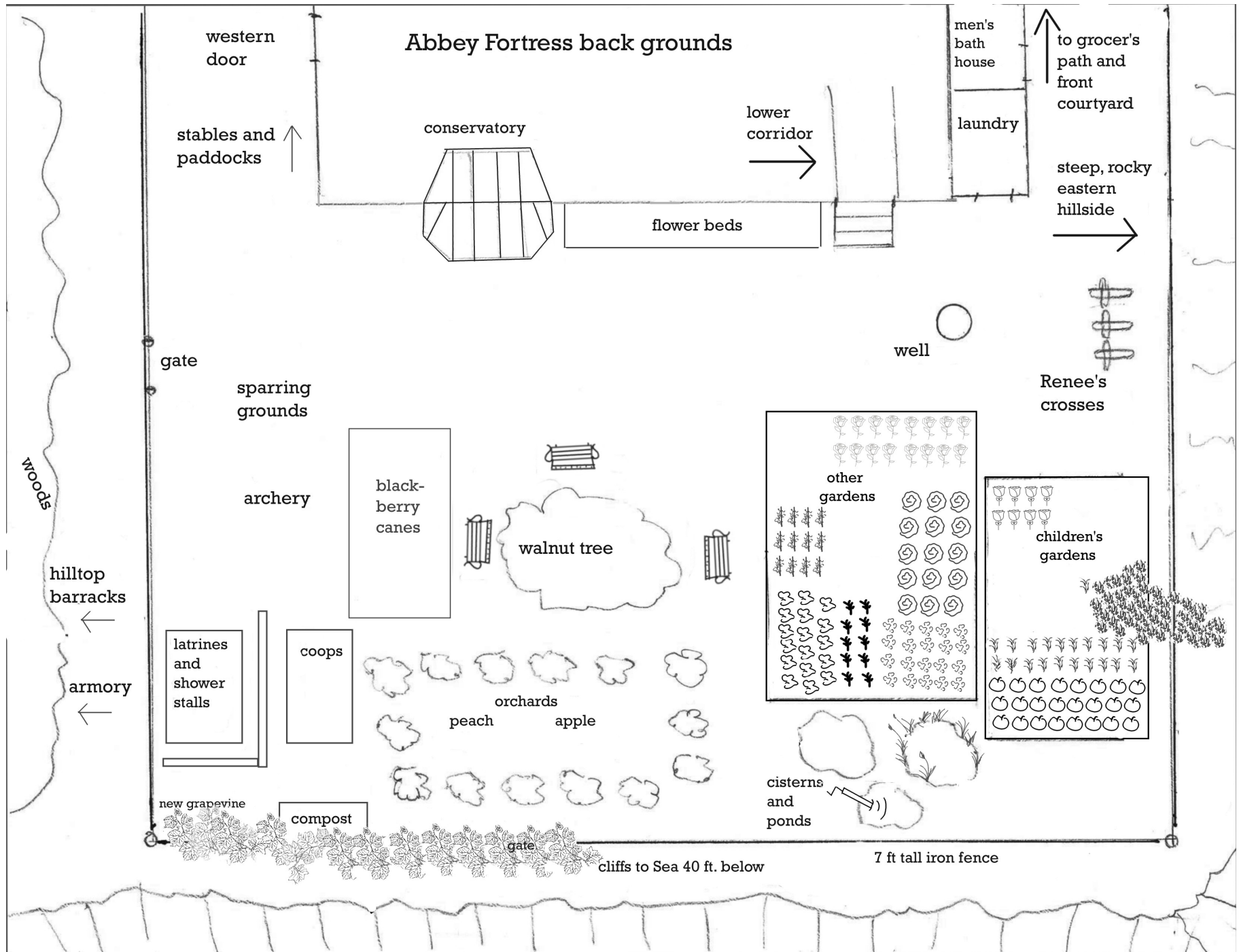
© Robin Hardy 2024

Aceto—ah SEE tow	Fiacco—fee AH koh
<i>aike</i> —AY kay (shooting by instinct)	Folliott—FOH lee uht
<i>aina</i> —AY nah	Gaea—GAY uh
Alberon—AL ber on	garderobe—GAR de robe
Allyr—AL er	Gevorgyan—geh VOR geh yan (hard g's)
altior—ALL tee or	Ghio—GEE oh (hard g)
amanuensis—uh man you EN sis (plural: <i>-ses, -sees</i>)	Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
Arenado—air en AH doh	Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
Arenivas—air en EEV us	Gnecco—NECK oh
Ares—AIR eez	Graeme—GRAY em
Arne--arn	Guillalme—gill ALM
Atticitian—at eh SISH un	Hartshough—HART soh
Auber—aw BER	Heroux—heh ROW
Aurelius (Marcus)—ah REE lee us	Heus—rhymes with the noun <i>use</i>
Averne—ah VURN	hors d'oeuvres—awr durvz
Awfyn—AWE fin	Iliffe—EYE liff
Barese—bah REESE	insigne—en SIN yeh
Baroffio—bar OFF ee oh	Jasque—JAS kee
Barthelemon—BAR thuh luh mon	Jehan—JAY han
Besiana—BES ee an ah	Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
Bullara—bu LAR ah	Justinian--jus TIN ee un
Calix—KAY lix	Kelsey—KELL see
Canis—CANE iss	Koschat—KOS chat
Capur—KAH pir	Kraken—KRAY ken
Cennick—SIN ick (cynic)	Kukicha—koo KEE ka
Clough--chloh	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
Cocci—COH chee	Lilou—LEE loo
Conte—cahnt	Loghry—LOW gree
Conybeare—CO nee bear	Loizeaux--lwah ZOH
Cubeb—KYU beb	Marguerite—mar ger EET
Cyneheard—SIGN herd	Meineke—MINE eh kee
De'Ath—dyath	Milo—ME low
Delano—deh LAN oh	Minka—MINK ah
Dileonardo—dee lee on ARE doh	Minunni—meh NEW nee
Dionigi—dee on EE jee	Nephilim—neh FILL em
Doane—rhymes with <i>own</i>	Niça—NEE kah
Dominica—dah MIN ee ka	Nicarber—neh CAR bur
Ecclesiastes—eh klee zee A steez (A as in <i>at</i>)	Nomus—NO mis
Efran—EFF run	Occitan—AWK si tan
Elvey—ELL vee	Occitania—awk si TAIN yah
Enoki—uh NO kee	onerous—AWN er uhs (burdensome)
Estes—ESS tis	Ori—OR ee
Eurus--YOUR us	Paillon—PAY yan
Eurusian--your uh SEE un	Pelagatti—pell ah GOT ee
Eustace—YOUS tis	Peperoncino—peh per un CHEE noh
Eviron—ee VIRE un	Pia—PEE ah
Faciane—fah see ANN	Pieta—pie ATE ah
Fazakerley—faz eh KAIR lee	piqued--peeked
Fenolheda—fen ol EE dah	Pleyel—PLAY el

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran in the Tide of Time*
Book 31

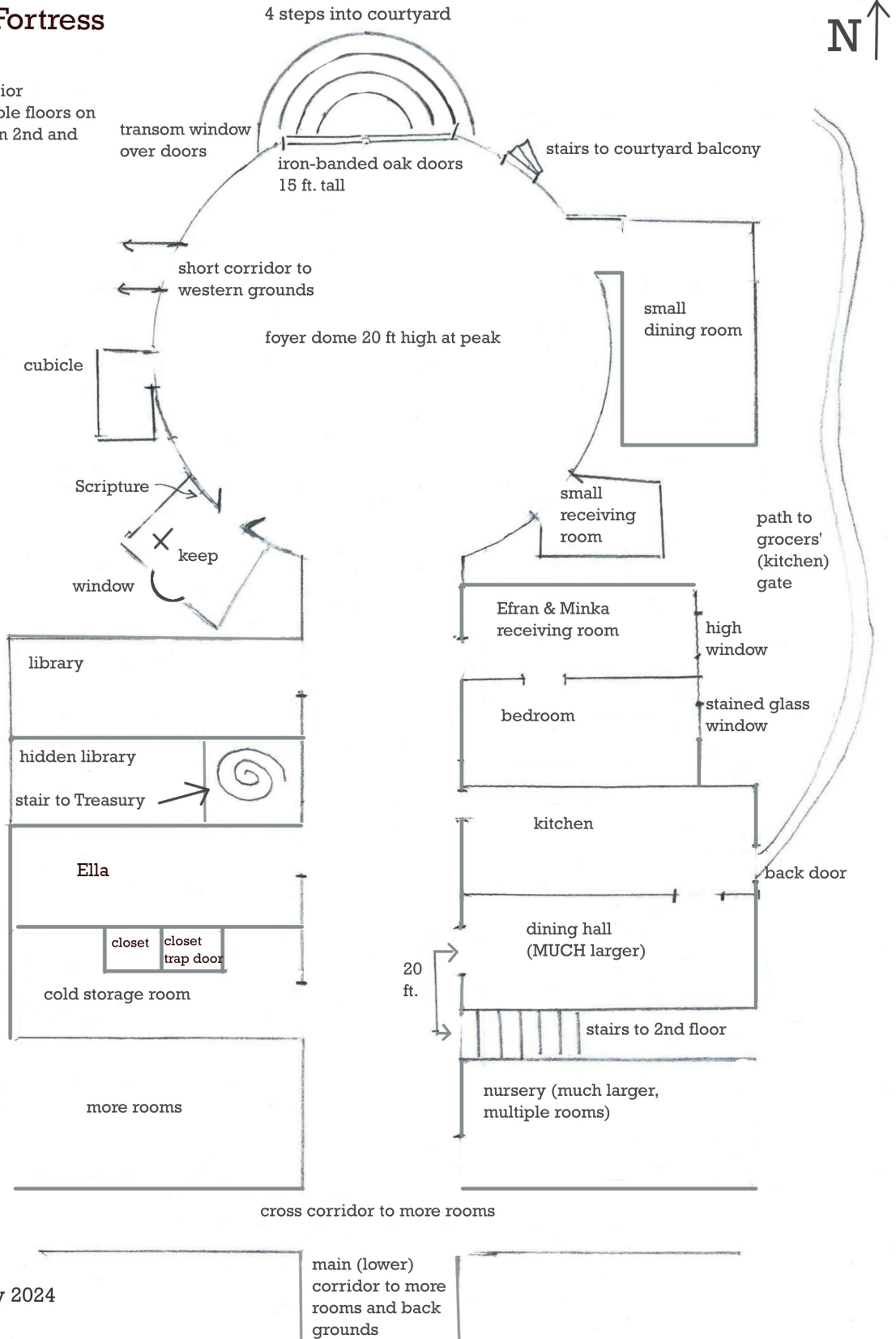
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Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Quilicus—QUIL eh cus
Reinagle—REN ah gull
Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee
Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
Ruckelshaus—RUCK ehl zhows
Sasany—SASS an ee
Serrano—suh RAHN oh
Sheol—SHE ohl
Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Stief—steef
Stites—stights
Suco—SUE coh
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Tandoori—tan DAW ree
Telo—TEE low
Tomer—TOH mur
Tourjee—TUR jee
trough--troff
Venegas--VEN eh gus
Venegasan--ven eh GAS un
Verlice—ver LEESE
Viglian—VIG lee en
Vychan—VI kan
Whobery—WAH bry
Windry—WIN dree
Wystan—WIS tan



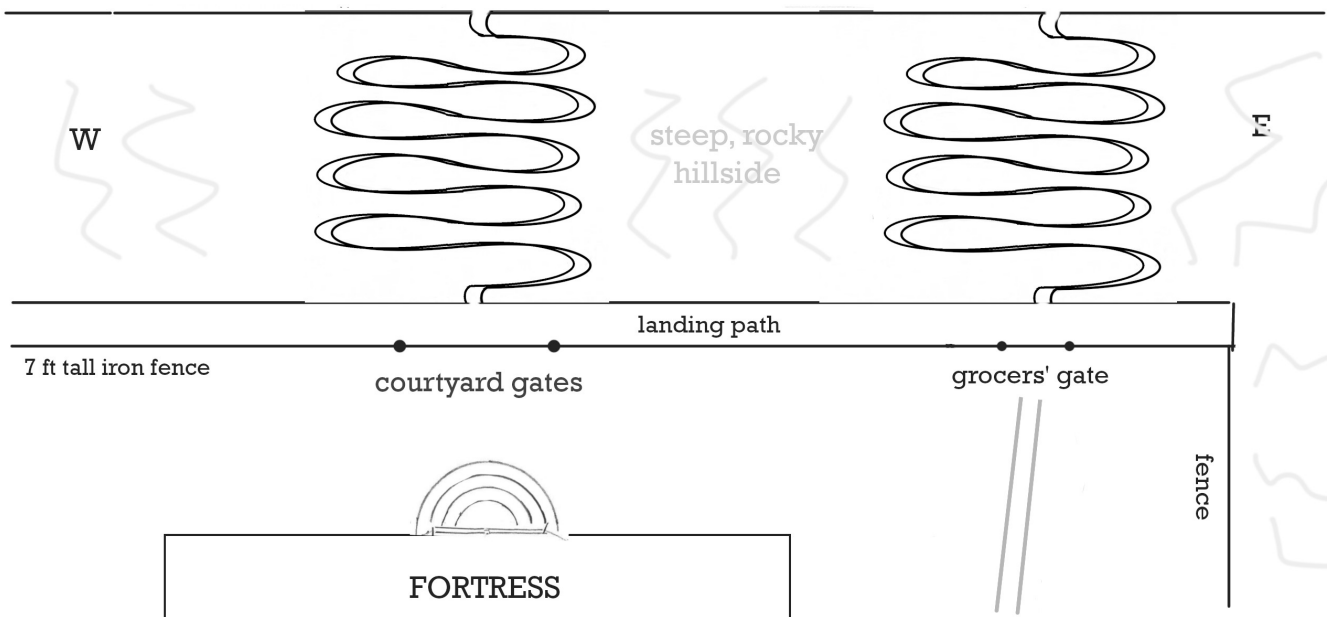
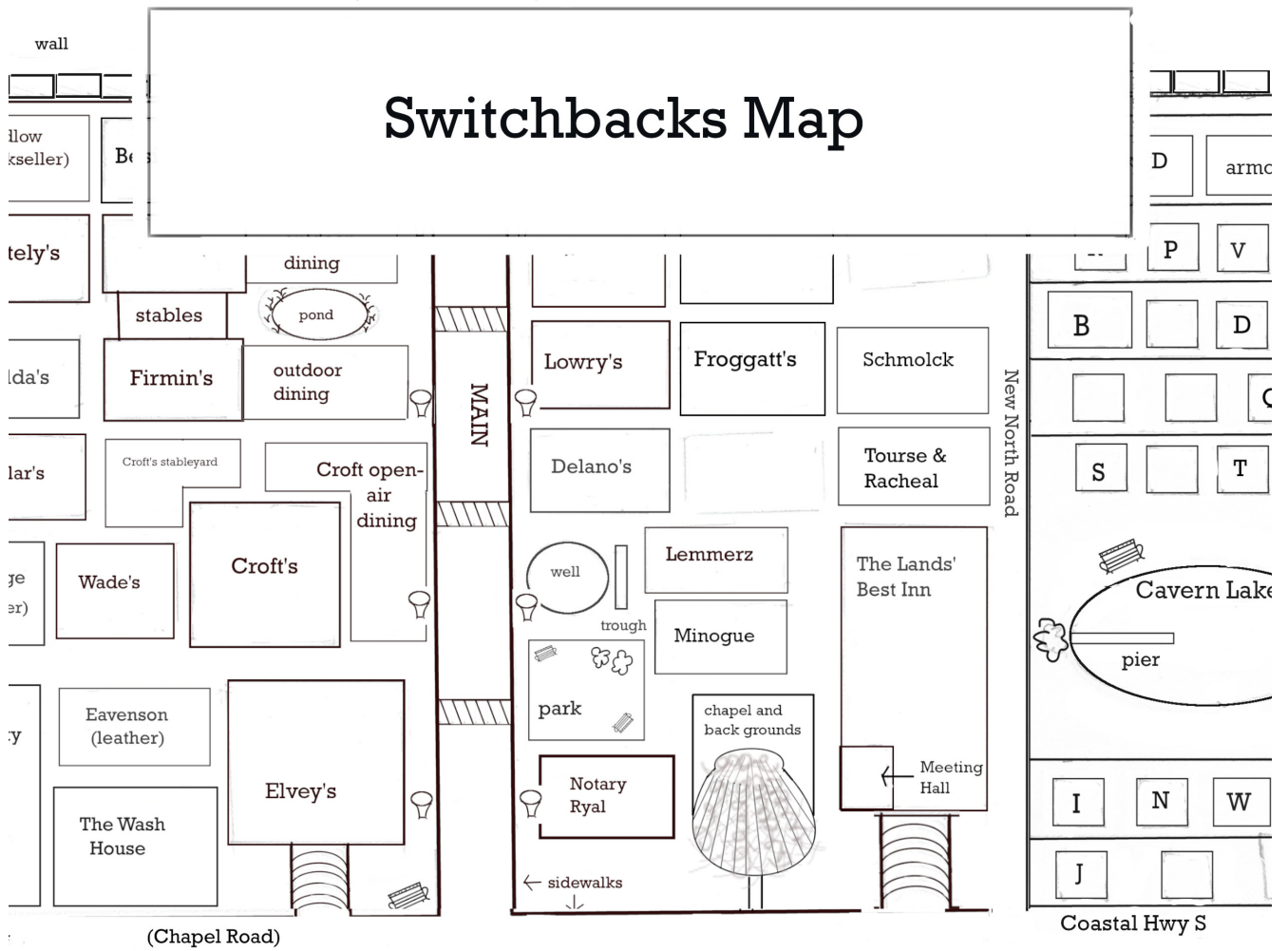
Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



NOT TO SCALE

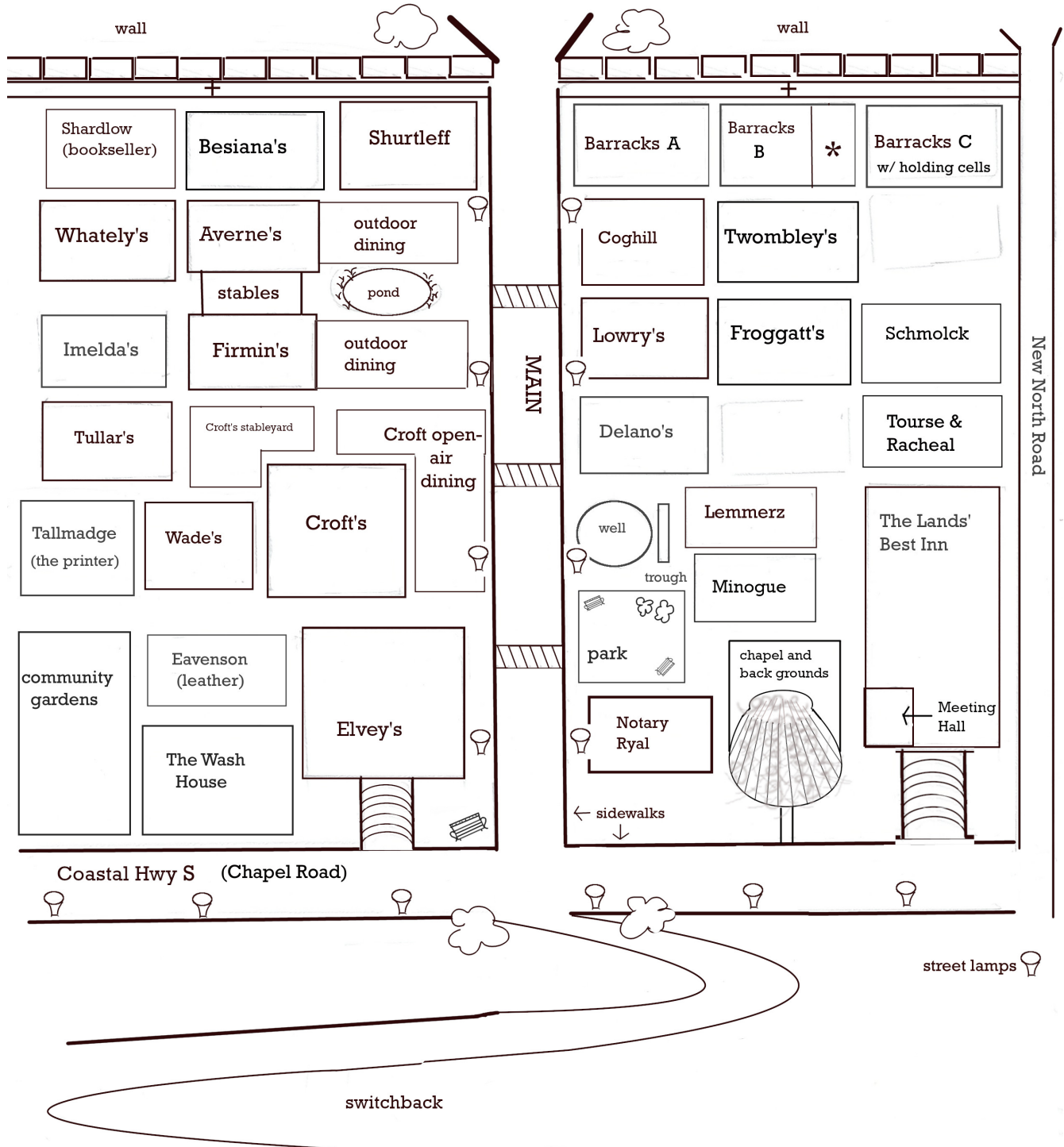
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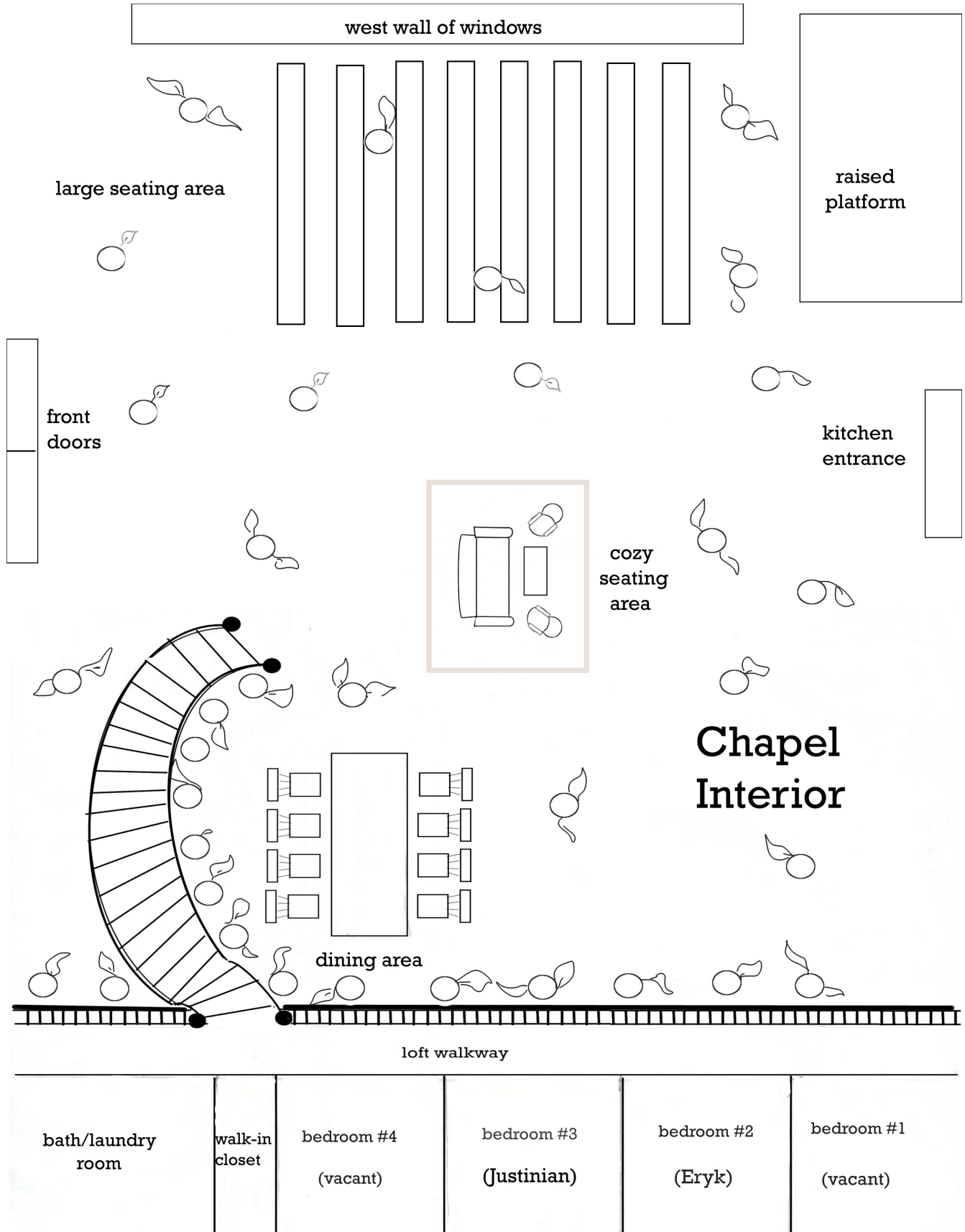


Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

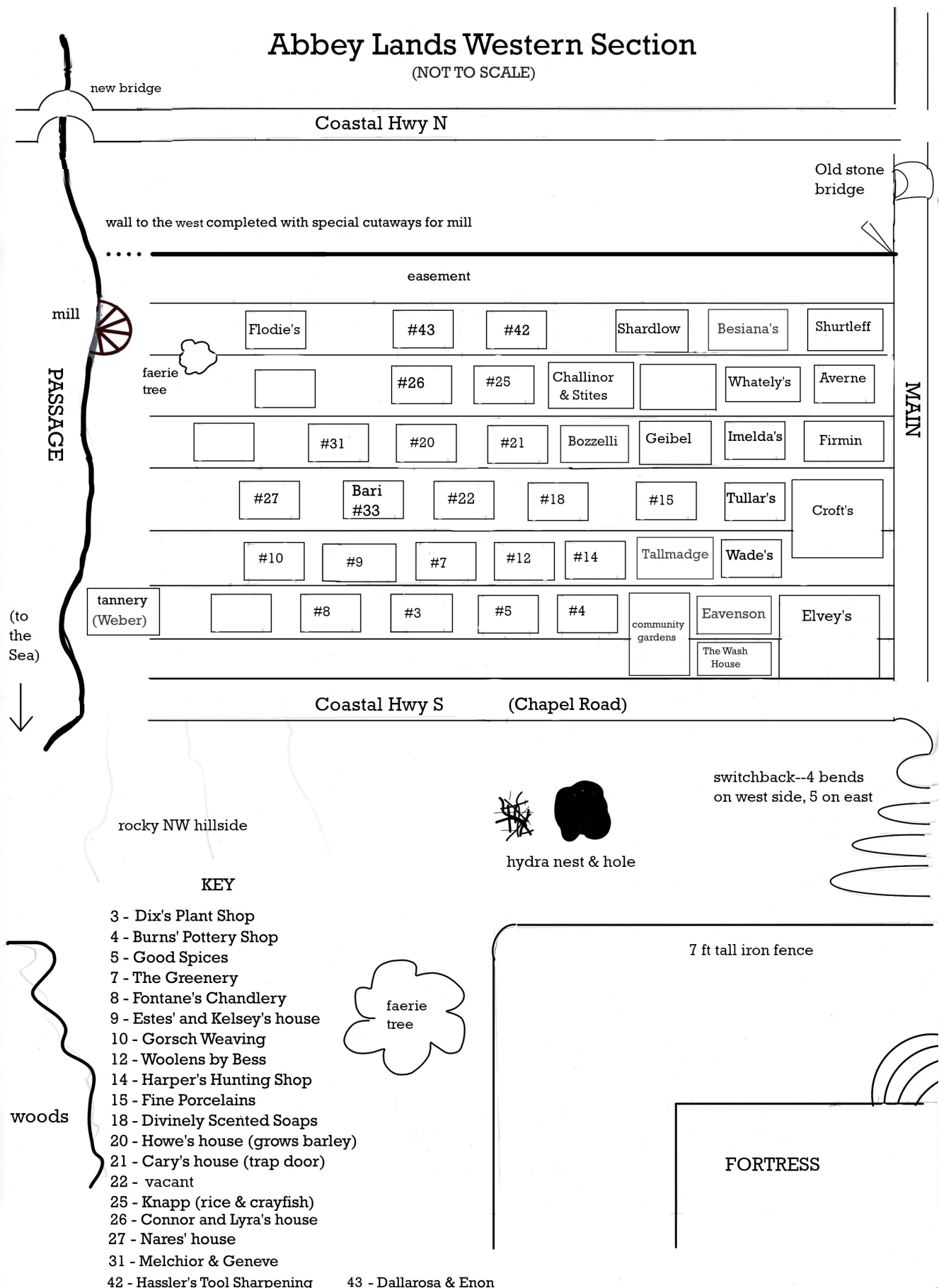
+ easements





Abbey Lands Western Section

(NOT TO SCALE)



new bridge

Coastal Hwy N

Old stone bridge

wall to the west completed with special cutaways for mill

easement

mill

PASSAGE

faerie tree

MAIN

Flodie's

#43

#42

Shardlow

Besiana's

Shurtleff

faerie tree

#26

#25

Challinor & Stites

Whately's

Averne

#31

#20

#21

Bozzelli

Geibel

Imelda's

Firmin

#27

Bari #33

#22

#18

#15

Tullar's

Croff's

#10

#9

#7

#12

#14

Tallmadge

Wade's

tannery (Weber)

#8

#3

#5

#4

community gardens

Eavenson

Elvey's

The Wash House

Coastal Hwy S

(Chapel Road)

rocky NW hillside



hydra nest & hole

switchback--4 bends on west side, 5 on east

KEY

- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
- 43 - Dallarosa & Enon

faerie tree

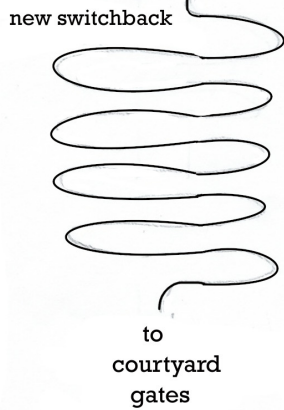
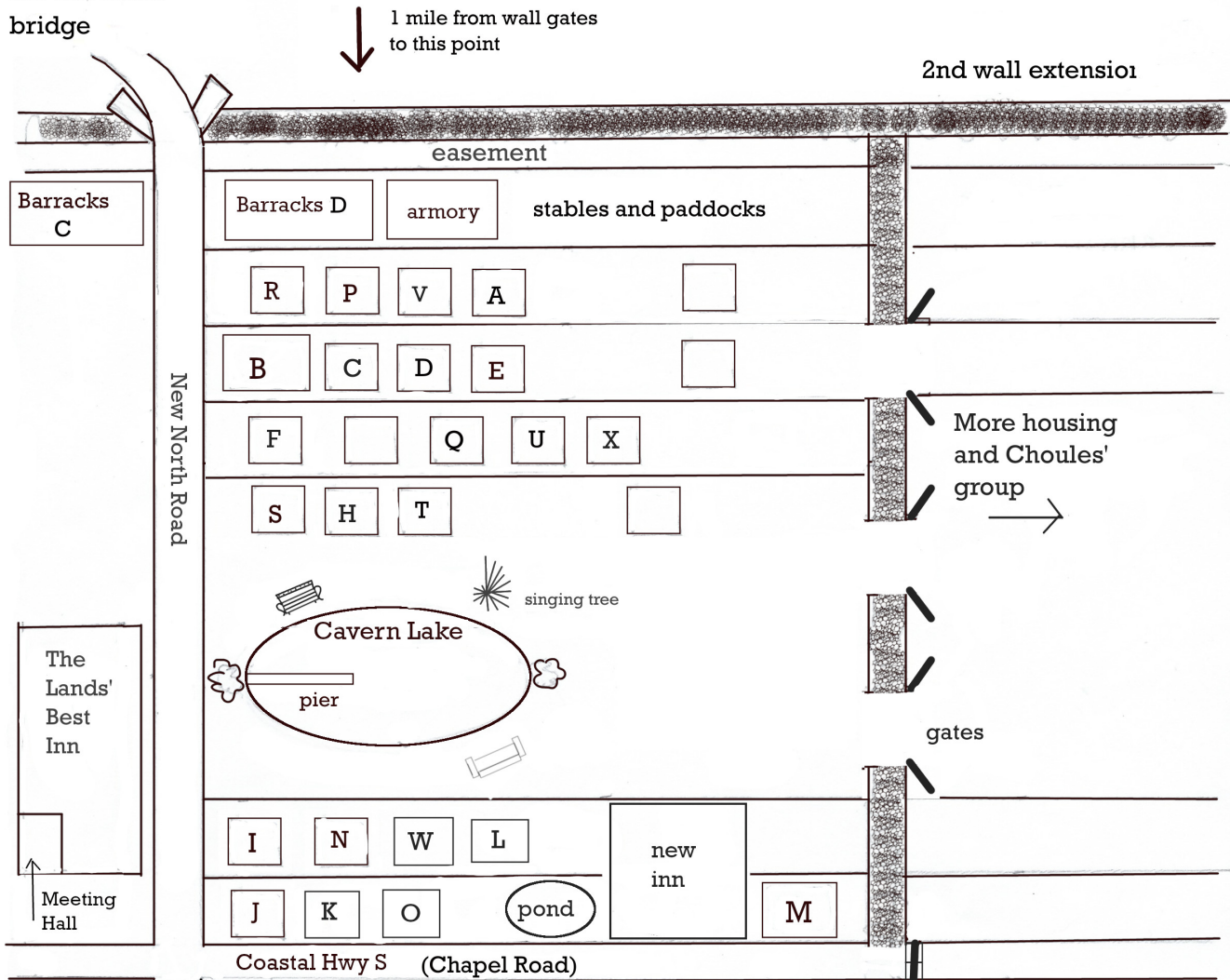
7 ft tall iron fence

FORTRESS

woods

road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

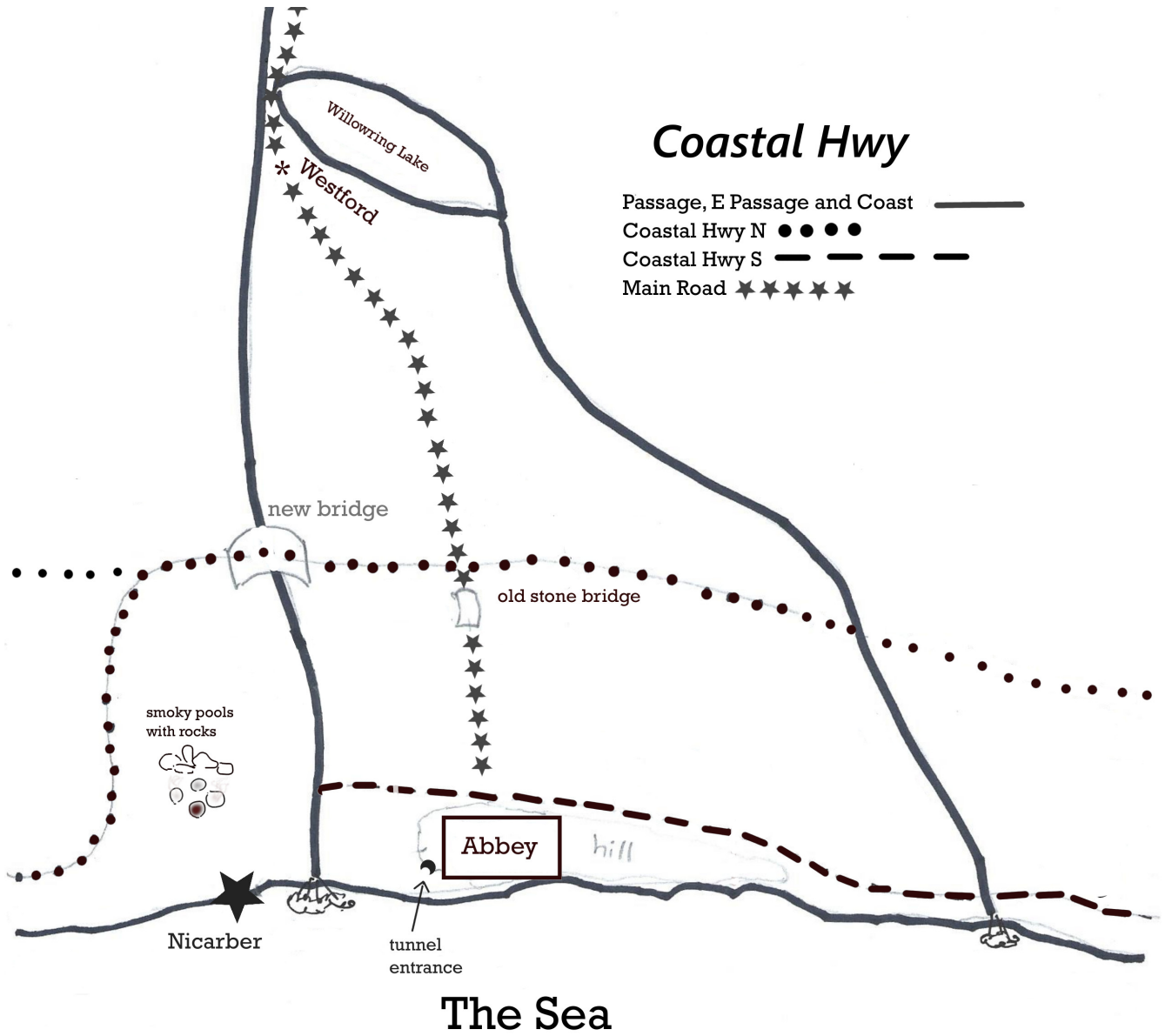
East Central Abbey Lands

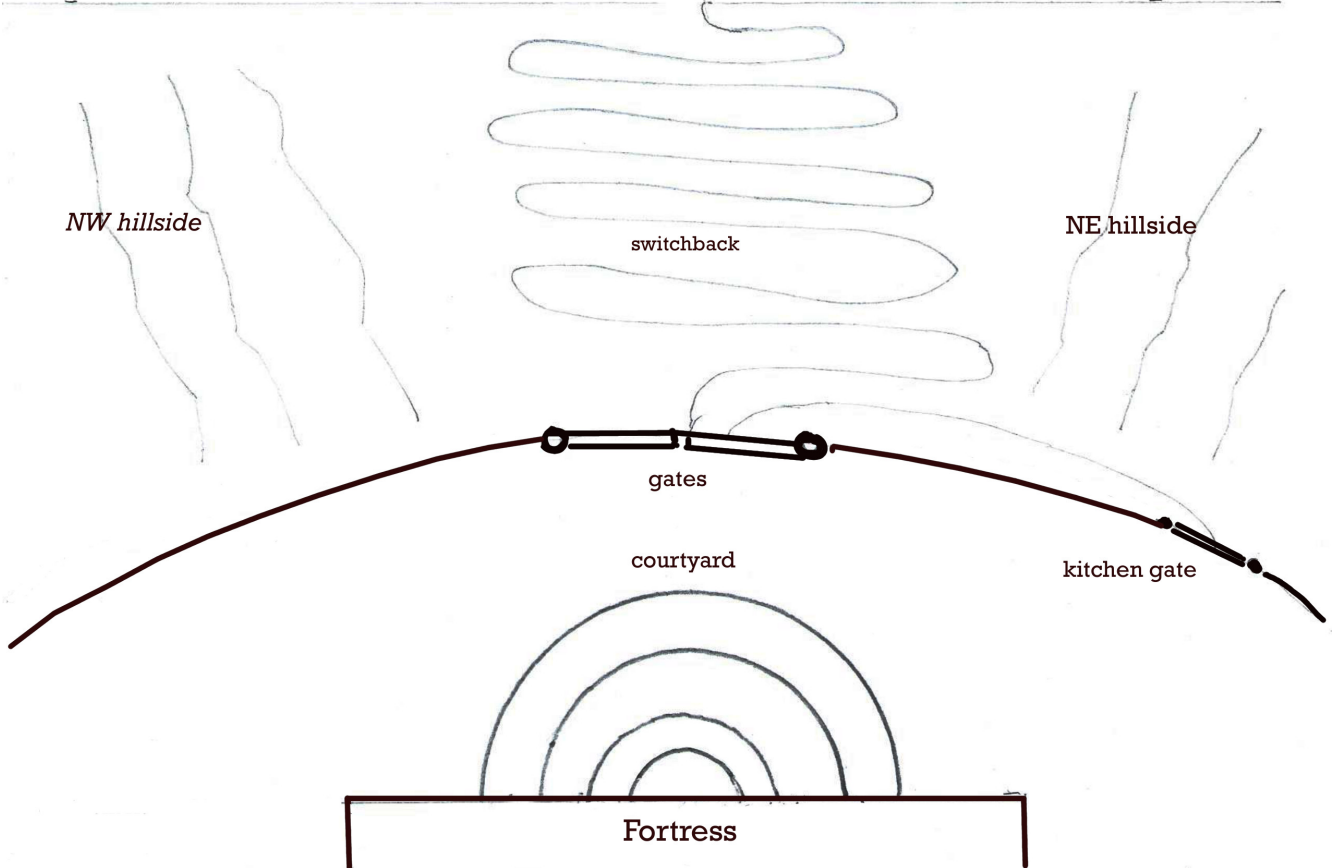
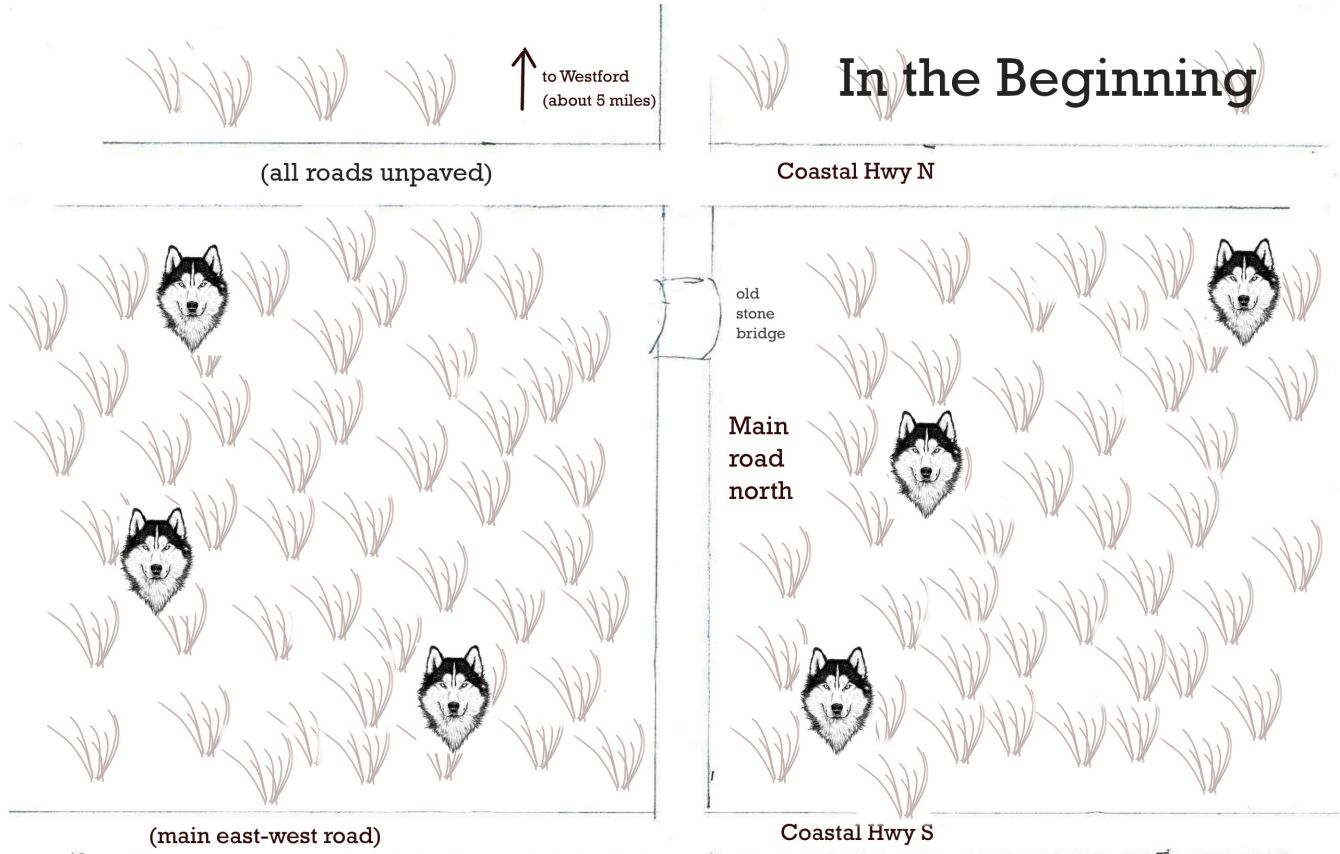


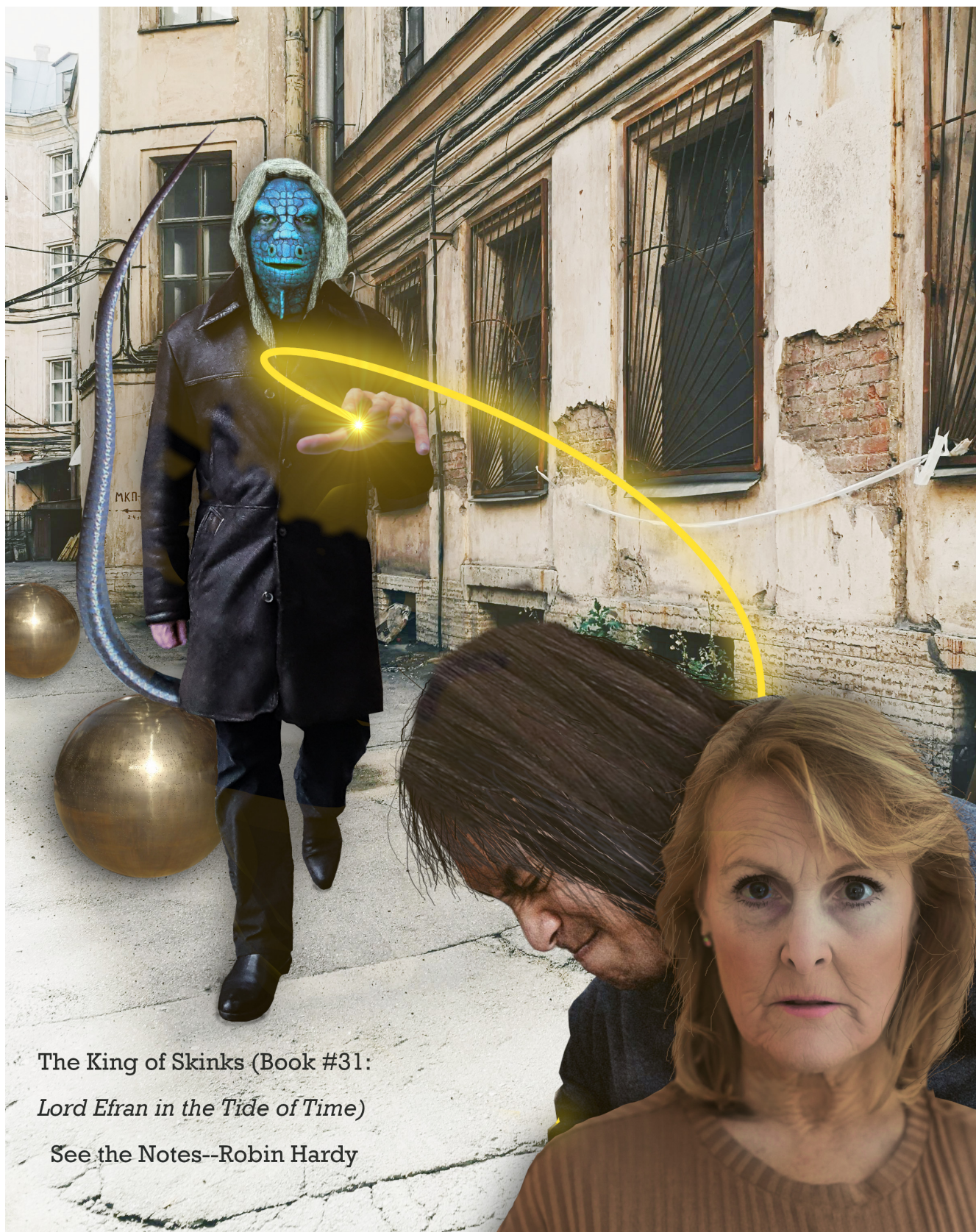
- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C - Pelagatti's Hats
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F - new chapel
- G
- H - Wonders & Illusions
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K - Notary Oulton
- L - Tambling's family & Escarra
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- 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
→







The King of Skinks (Book #31:
Lord Efran in the Tide of Time)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy

Today was a day of fantastic finds. First, the setting: although I could find no completely accurate depiction of the abandoned Abbey Lands, [this](#)¹ street scene evokes the sense of desolation Efran felt on landing there. For Windry, I used a photo of the [same model](#)² I had used to represent Marguerite in *More Sheep Brains* (the illustration for *Lord Efran in the Hall of Memories* [Book #21]). She's become another favorite of mine for her expressive face. And her look of blank shock at what she's finding in this realm is perfect.

For Efran, I found a [photo](#)³ that captures the strain of his effort to escape Heroux's golden cords. I wish the original picture were more complete, showing what the subject had in his right hand, but I'll take what I can get.

The art for Heroux was the easiest to find. First, his whole body came walking toward me [here](#)⁴, and I am grateful to John Mark Dougan for providing it. Then after I had compiled a dozen images of various lizards, I found Heroux's face as a Halloween mask at [Walmart](#) (scroll down). And his genuine skink tail came from [here](#)⁵.

The [orbs](#)⁶ were another great find. Although there were many creditable drawings of spheres, I liked the weight of the golden ball. Still, I spent way too much time admiring pics of [glowing orbs](#) that I couldn't use.

Robin Hardy
June 17, 2024

PS. I am claiming no copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed by [Ekaterina Astakhova](#) on Pexels
2. Photographed by [Teona Swift](#) on Pexels
3. Photographed by [Allan Mas](#) on Pexels
4. Photographed by Ruphotog on Wikimedia Commons
5. Photographed by [gailhampshire](#) on Wikimedia Commons
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