

The Stories of

*The Abbey of St. Benedict
on the Sea*

Book 19

*Lord Efran and
the War Drums*

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Efran, head down, sat in a chair against the wall of the second-floor workroom. He was just observing here, and the table was already full of men who would be contributing to the decision before them. (In respect of the gravity of the situation, and the need for all the men to be able to see each other, the faerie tree in the middle of the table drew itself up to an impossibly skinny ten inches in diameter.) The former Captain Neale sat in his rolling chair against the wall opposite Efran. Neale was also brought here to observe, though his eyes were glassy and unfocused.

The blind Commander Wendt sat at the head of the table; around him sat the Seconds Barr and Gabriel, the Captains Rigdon, Chee, Towner and Stites, the Steward Estes and the Administrator DeWitt. Also in attendance were the unranked but respected Stephanos and Shane, representing the Southerners, while Melchior and Koschat represented the Polonti. (Master Crowe's senior-most lieutenant Loriot had been invited to attend, but declined. He forwent rank or seniority in the Abbey army, choosing to serve quietly.)

Seated at the end of the table were Lord Commander Ryal, the Abbey Lands Notary, with his assistant Soames, the designated Abbey expert in the Law of Roman. Soames was also there to transcribe the hearing for the official records. Seated at a small table to Efran's right was Earnshaw, formerly Melchior's scribe, also to take notes. Standing at the end corner of the table in view of them all was the former Commander Lyte, here to be judged for his rôle in the failed insurrection against Captain Efran.

Lyte had been found yesterday, April 4th, hiding in the woods about fifteen miles north of the Lands with two associates. That was one week after the insurrection. His two EurAsian aides were now in a holding cell in the hilltop barracks, and the decision as to their fate would be made after the Abbey leadership decided what to do with the former Commander of the Abbey army.

Lyte had been enlisted in the insurrection by Lord DePew, the wealthy Abbey Lands builder who was further enriched by his EurAsian backers who expected to see him become the new Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. DePew was now a golden statue in the middle of Main Street.

Looking around the room, Ryal began, "I believe that everyone who was summoned is now here, so we will begin." He paused as one of the sentries at the door came in to lean over and whisper in Commander Wendt's ear.

Turning his head slightly, Wendt said, "Yes. Bring her a chair; put her next to Efran." At that, Efran sat upright. Another man brought a chair to place against the wall to Efran's left. He watched while Minka, eyes down, came in to sit beside him. He reached over to take her hand and hold it between both of his.

Ryal resumed, "Thank you for joining us, Lady Minka." She glanced up at him with a subdued smile, and he went on, "Now, I believe you're all acquainted with the bare facts of DePew's approaching then-Commander Lyte about four months ago with the suggestion that he could be a more effective Commander under DePew rather than Lord Efran. So, Lyte, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?" No one was surprised when Lyte declined to answer. Regardless, Ryal pressed on: "We would like to hear from you how he convinced you of his agenda."

Those at table looked to the defendant for his answer. But Lyte looked off to the middle distance and kept his mouth shut.

After a few moments, Ryal asked, “Who did you first confer with as to DePew’s suggestion?” Again, Lyte declined to answer, looking bored. Ryal asked, “Who were his backers?”

When Lyte persisted in silence, Ryal said, “Any explanation at all will help your defense.” Now Lyte looked contemptuous, turning his eyes to the side wall.

Releasing Minka’s hand, Efran leaned his head back on the wall and asked, “Why did you volunteer to bring up Arenado’s fireballs? It was—incredibly dangerous, and any slight mishandling would have killed you and brought down the hillside. But you worked all night to bring them up, and save us. Why, when you could have just ridden off and be done with us?” That was only 20 months ago.

Lyte looked at him. “I wanted to be a hero.”

“That made you a hero,” Efran said, “and earned you a Meritorious Cross. And we made you Commander largely on the basis of that. You led the defense of Venegas courageously—again, heroically. Even before then, you were one of the four I chose to track and kill the first Graetrix. Again, you performed courageously. Anything I gave you to do, you did it well. You earned standing and respect. Why, now, did you throw it all away?” Efran’s eyes were red and watering.

Lyte mildly snorted, looking away. “What good is respect in an army of rats?”

Icy stares were directed at him from all around the table, but Efran looked confused. “You came to us, at the very beginning. You asked to join us. Minka gave you a handful of royals to go buy food for a wedding feast, and you brought back cartloads! Why didn’t you just take the royals and leave?”

Lyte looked at him almost in pity. “Graduliere offered me a hundred royals to bring Sybil back up to Eurus. I could have done it; you were all so careless. But, I guess I got caught up in it all—a new adventure, new challenges. You had mostly Southerners with you, then.” Lyte glanced at Shane, Stephanos, and Captain Towner. “But then you brought back all these Polonti of Crowe’s—stinking animals. And after they came, *more* came, until they just overran everything. Disgusting.”

The men were staring at him in like disgust and anger. Efran opened his mouth, but Neale burst out in loud, cackling laughter. Everyone in the room stared at him; Captains Rigdon and Chee, their backs to him, twisted in their chairs to look. Neale hooted, “You didn’t mind the Polonti—you told Stawart that you were going to kill DePew and marry the girl so *you’d* be Lord Sovereign!”

Paradoxically, that made almost everyone relax. Melchior said what many were thinking: “Oh, it’s just a matter of attempted usurpation, then. Which calls for death.” Several men looked at him in surprise that he knew the Law of Roman.

Stephanos, likewise nonchalant, said, “Now that all the troublemakers are gone, there’s no tension in the ranks between the Southerners and the Polonti, Captain.” Others around the table silently agreed.

But Efran’s jaw went tight and he stood. “You wanted Minka,” he breathed at Lyte. “That’s why you were so angry at Bowring’s men toying with her.”

There were cautious and/or confused looks around the table; Minka was incredulously shaking her head. Lyte opened his mouth to possibly get himself killed on the spot, but Efran gripped her hand to pull her out of her chair and out of the room.

He strode with her past the startled guards to the stairway, where he stopped to breathe. “They all want you,” he whispered tightly.

“Efran. Don’t,” she said quietly. “I’m no Helen of Troy. Lyte wanted to be Lord Sovereign, just like DePew, and that was how he thought he could do it.”

He relaxed his tight grip on her hand. “Am I being too jealous?”

“Just a little,” she said, studying him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. Glancing back at the room, he put his hand to her back to walk her down the stairs. “I just—I can see anyone being in love with you; I can’t see anyone wanting to be Lord Sovereign. It’s *hard*.”

“That’s because you’re trying to do it right,” she said, smiling. Half-turning back toward the workroom, she began, “Do you think you should go back in to see—”

“No,” he said, proceeding with her downstairs.

They turned off the stairway and he paused to collect himself. He reached back to feel the metal plate in his head and the twin row of stitches from a month ago. Leese had removed the stitches, but the scars remained. The cut over his eye was healing, also; his split lip had healed a week ago. What had not healed was the knowledge that his own men had done that to him.

Efran closed his eyes. *I will not go there again; I will leave it in the past, where it belongs.* Then he looked down at Minka, who was watching him anxiously. “Come, let’s check on Joshua,” he said, smiling.

They went down the corridor to look in the door to the nursery. And they saw Joshua spread out on his back, asleep in his cramped bassinet. Minka laughed quietly; Efran looked perturbed.

Cordelia came out from a back room, putting a finger to her lips. Efran whispered, “He needs a bigger bed.”

Exasperated, she pointed to a large bassinet on the floor in the corner and whispered, “He won’t use it! He likes the little one.”

“Oh,” Efran said soundlessly, and Minka moved away so she could laugh.

From there, they went to the back door to step out and look over the grounds. Nakam was out here, supervising the activity, but declined to come over despite Minka’s calling him. Giving up, she said, “He’s afraid I’ll take him in, and he’s waiting for the children to come out.”

“Smart dog,” Efran said, glancing around.

Minka made a disgruntled face. “He’s not mine anymore.”

“Not entirely. But he’s happy and they’re happy. So what do you want?” he asked.

“To walk in Pia’s woods,” she decided, taking his arm.

The gate to exit the grounds to the woods was fortunately unlocked, so they didn’t have to climb the fence. It was another world back here in early April, of dense shade and crowns high overhead, of ferns, fungus, orchids,

primroses and bluebells. The aromas of wildflowers mingling with that of detritus and hickory almost made her sleepy. She looked for the white doe and her fawns that had been brought up here two months ago, but so many people had been trying to play with them that Pia moved them deep in the woods somewhere.

So Minka said, “I enjoyed sleeping out here that one night—until I woke to find you gone.”

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” he said, looking up at the sunlight filtering through the leaves above. “But I’m glad you came after me.”

She hugged his arm and he kissed her head. Then she looked around, asking, “Where is Pia?”

“Out here somewhere. She and her Polonti have been exploring the western face of the hill,” he said.

“Are there caverns? Holes?” she asked with a touch of anxiety.

He shook his head doubtfully. “I don’t think so, not under the trees, at least. They need deep soil for roots. You see they don’t grow on the northwestern face because of the caverns.”

She nodded, and they continued walking west down a gentle incline until the trees began to give way to rocks and thin topsoil. Here they stopped for the possibility of breaks in the ground. They saw a few Polonti exploring down below, but they were watching their feet, aware of the hazards.

From this spot, Efran and Minka could look down at the Sea splashing around the western foot of the hill. She said, “Oh, my. I didn’t realize the Sea came back this far. And there’s the Passage emptying into it! Oh, you can see the river water spreading out in the seawater. There’s even a little stretch of sandy beach.” She craned her neck to look.

“Yes, there is—or was—an opening to the caverns down there, where Cennick lost a few men when they tried to find a way into the fortress,” he said, holding her arm as he looked down to the strip of sand and rocks.

“Where the ladder led down from the storage room to the shelf, before Symphorien knocked out the hillside for her nest,” she recalled. “I can’t see that from here.”

“No, it’s on the south side, the cliffs,” Efran said, looking.

Minka murmured, “I miss going down to talk to Heye,” and he nodded. She raised her eyes to take in the view. The coastline snaked away to disappear into the western horizon, the Sea shimmering all to the left. Along to the right ran the coastal road, and to the north of that, the forest covered the earth until it diminished from sight.

“That’s glorious,” she murmured, taking it all in.

“Yes,” he quietly agreed. He could see the ruins of the small coastal town Nicarber not far off, which always depressed him. It and Prie Mer had been devastated by a hurricane in 8152. While Prie Mer was beginning to be rebuilt, Nicarber was untouched.

Then he noticed a small plume of white smoke emerging from the trees a few miles north of Nicarber. “I’ve seen that before,” he murmured. Looking harder, Efran saw a break, a clearing in the trees from which the smoke appeared to originate. He shook his head at the mystery, turning away.

They headed back east, into the thick of the forest. Here, they paused to silently absorb the atmosphere, with the

bird calls overhead and the skittering of small creatures through the forest floor below. There was the faint trickle of water somewhere out of sight, besides the constant rustling of leaves all around them and the waves pounding the cliffs below.

As they began walking back to the gate which gave entrance into the fortress compound, she glanced over to the faerie tree, healthy and bustling with faerie business. Their spring celebration had been abruptly halted by the insurrection, but the faeries had not resumed it, moving on to other pressing matters. These the faeries could create out of thin air if they had to.

Efran and Minka passed the stables to enter the courtyard around the northwest corner of the fortress. Hawk, on courtyard gate duty, trotted over to salute. “Administrator DeWitt is looking for you, Captain.”

“Oops. I guess we did wander off,” Efran said, more halfhearted than remorseful. He didn’t want to know anything about the hearing.

As he and she started toward the fortress doors, Krall said, “Carriage coming up.”

They turned back to look, and Efran stepped toward the gate. “Does that look like Justinian’s carriage?”

Coming to his side, Minka said, “Yes! Wait, let’s see if—yes, that’s him looking out the window!”

Hawk and Krall opened the gates while the carriage was yet one switchback level below, then it pulled into the courtyard. Before the footman could get down from his high seat, Krall amiably opened the carriage door and pulled out the steps. The Lord and Lady of the Fortress watched, smiling, as Justinian appeared at the door to look at them intently.

Efran said, “Hello, Justinian. We didn’t hear that you were coming.” Then he and Minka looked on in mild concern as Justinian, in a springtime sky-blue suit, woodenly descended the steps, eyes fastened on Efran. Finally stepping to the ground, he paused with a stricken face before falling forward to embrace Efran in a fit of emotion.

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Chapter 2

Efran patted his back, bemusedly looking at Minka over the blue shoulder. She said, “Oh, he must have heard something about the insurrection. Dear Justinian, are you all right? Come in and have a drink.”

Releasing Efran, Justinian turned to her, slightly reeling. “I’d hug you as well, dear Minka, but then I’d be the one on a gallows.” Feebly straightening his suit jacket, he looked back at Efran. “That’s the last I heard, in fact, that they had you up on the gallows. So my informant rode out before he saw the end of it, with the excuse that he was afraid of getting caught up in the war. And then Grand Councilor Vanidestine issued a moratorium on travel to the Abbey Lands, for our safety. I finally got out by insisting that I had a lover here pleading to be taken away.” With supreme self-discipline, Justinian refrained from glancing at Minka.

“So then I arrive here, and not only are you alive and walking around, your inns are full with tourists who seem to think there are more comedy and tragedy shows scheduled in the sky and *what* is that all about?” Justinian asked, frazzled.

“Oh, you do need a drink. We’ll talk,” Efran said. He asked Minka, “The room on the third floor is still available, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and I’ll have Justinian brought an early dinner in the small dining room,” Minka said, preceding them in.

After Justinian’s luggage had been unloaded, Efran gave the driver a few royals for food and lodging, then sent him and the footman with the carriage down to Croft’s stables. Minka had already gone into the fortress to get the key to the vacant third-floor room and send a man up to it with Justinian’s suitcases. Then she asked for plates from the kitchen and stopped by the nursery, where Joshua was awake and vocalizing, “Papapa!”

By the time she had Serrano bring him to the small dining room in clean wraps, Efran and Justinian were sitting with ales. As Efran opened his arms to the toddler descending to him, Justinian gaped. “Is that your baby? How did he get so big?”

Efran laughed, “He’s fed like a wrestler. When were you here last?”

Having removed his hat to the table, Justinian ran a hand through his longish, curling brown hair. “December. About four months ago.”

“Oh, we have some catching up to do,” Efran murmured. As Minka sat, he told her, “I’ve sent Allyr up to DeWitt telling him where we are, and that Justinian’s here, and I’m not coming back up to the hearing.” She nodded and Justinian looked at him pensively. “We’ll tell you all about it,” Efran told him, then looked at the kitchen assistant rolling in a cart with plates and ales for the three of them.

“Oh, may I have a lager, please?” Minka asked.

“Sorry, Lady Minka, we’re out of lagers. There’s been a huge demand for them,” the assistant said.

“Oh. All right,” she said. “Pie, please?”

“Pies all gone, too,” he said, quickly rolling the cart out. Efran blinked at his plate, which looked more like tavern fare than the usual Fortress meal.

Justinian, being hungry, didn’t appear to notice. “Now what the devil has been going on here?”

“It’s a long story,” Efran said, picking up his fork. As they ate, Efran told Justinian about the influx of lawless men, especially Eurussians, to the Lands and the army, of his being hit in the back of the head with a shovel, of des Collines operating on him to save his life while losing his memory, and their operating on him again to regain his memory but lose his legs.

While Justinian sat staring at him, Efran told him about the insurrection coming to a head with Minka stubbornly preventing his hanging, and the show by Nonesuch and Asmuch before the arrival of the Destroyer, which ended everything. “No doubt you passed the golden statue of DePew in the middle of Main,” Efran remarked, feeding Joshua a bite of cooked carrot. When the baby let the bite drop out of his mouth, Efran told him, “No carrot, no custard.” So Joshua accepted the carrot.

Justinian demanded, “Do you mean to tell me that the statue *is* DePew?”

Efran glanced up to nod. “Courtesy of the Destroyer.”

Justinian paused to take a bite of broiled beef. Efran saw that the edges were burnt, but Justinian didn't seem to care about that, either. He observed, "And you say that DePew had EurAsian backers."

"Yes, and we'd love to know who," Efran said. Scanning the table, he turned to Minka. "Would you pour Joshua a cup of water, please? I don't want to give him ale."

"Yes," she said, standing to leave the room. Justinian had stopped eating to raise his face in searching thought.

When she returned with water for the toddler, he took the cup in both hands to drink, soaking his front. Efran blinked at him, then waved. "I'll take him back to the nursery in a moment."

Justinian mused, "Vanidestine is one of the wealthiest on the Council, but he would not risk his position backing an insurrection here—with Surchatain Webbe the Destructor running off to do battle against imaginary enemies, Vanidestine is the de facto ruler and certainly the most powerful man in Eurus. However, others on the Council who are almost as wealthy would certainly consider it. . . . Councilors Rotchford and Baldassare leap to mind as likely candidates."

While Efran was contemplating this, Skalbeck appeared at the door, saluting. "Captain, Administrator DeWitt says that the judges have voted on punishment for the former Commander Lyte, except for Commander Wendt. He is waiting on your vote before casting his own."

Efran turned his head. "How have they voted?"

"They are evenly split, Captain. All the Southerners have voted to put him to death; all the Polonti have voted to spare him," Skalbeck replied.

Efran, Minka and Justinian stared at each other a moment—Polonti were not inclined to show mercy to traitors. Efran asked, "What do they intend to do with him if he's spared?"

"Captain Melchior suggested that he be sent for retraining to Sasany Fields, sir," Skalbeck replied.

Efran raised his face in comprehension. Master Crowe's former camp at the Sasany Fields was now run by associates of the Abbey Lands Polonti. It was a training camp for soldiers in self-discipline, unity of purpose, and fighting—according to Polonti customs, of course. A EurAsian would find it the approximation of hell on earth. "I vote to send him to Sasany Fields," Efran said.

"Yes, sir." Skalbeck saluted and disappeared.

Those in the small dining room were silent until Efran said, "That's surprising. An even split like that is unlikely."

Minka offered, "They did that on purpose, so that you would have the deciding vote."

"Ah," Efran said, and Justinian nodded.

Efran and Minka then decided to take horses around the Lands for Justinian to see the newest developments. As part of their tour, they exited the lower corridor to the back grounds where the children were playing. When Justinian emerged with his top hat and walking stick, a garden faerie caught sight of him and went to find Sir Ditson in great excitement.

Shortly, Ditson, Nutbin, and a score of faeries were invisibly hovering around Justinian while he chatted with the children. After careful study, Ditson altered his current ensemble to an exact copy of Lord Justinian's sartorial elegance, and the lady faeries swooned.

"Lord Justinian! Do you remember me?" Hassie demanded, positioning herself in front of him with her fists on her hips.

While Justinian stood gaping at her, Minka whispered, "Midnight carriage ride."

So he cried, "How could I forget the enchanting midnight ride when two angels of the night waylaid my carriage?" While she turned to laugh with her friends, Justinian swiveled to Minka, whispering, "Name?"

"Hassie," she whispered back.

He then turned to say, "I hope you are having great fun at your new home, Hassie."

"Yes," she said, "but I haven't decided on my forever home yet. I think I would like to stay with you." She tapped her chin thoughtfully.

Her friends looked confused; Efran, with Joshua in his sling, had to choke back a laugh, and Justinian froze. "Me?" he squeaked.

"Yes, you're so funny. That's why they made him a lord," she told her friends.

Minka said, "Oh, Hassie, he is adorable, but, there are no children at his house! And your friends here would miss you terribly. What would poor Nakam do without you?" The dog was presently sitting in the midst of them, convincingly close by her.

"Oh," Hassie drooped in remorse. "That's true. I'm sorry, Lord Justinian. Maybe later."

Justinian revived to doff his hat to her. "Then I shall live in hope, dear Hassie."

Giggling, she ran off with the other children, and Toby rolled his eyes.

Then Minka, Justinian, and Efran with Joshua went around to the stables to get their own horses. Squirt saddled Rose for Minka while Efran saddled Kraken for himself. The horse looked over to Justinian, whinnying in laughter: *Oh, let him ride me.*

"You buck anyone else off, you'll wind up a rug on someone's floor," Efran grunted, tightening the cinch. Kraken looked back at him quickly, ears shooting straight up. In the sling on Efran's back, Joshua laughed, and Efran glanced back at him.

Meanwhile, Efran was keeping an eye on Tuffin as he saddled Gaunter for Justinian. Aware that he was being monitored, Tuffin worked quickly and correctly before handing the reins to Justinian with a respectful, "There you go, sir. Happy riding."

"Thank you, my good man." Justinian put a royal in his hand, which the stablehand regarded in disbelief.

So Efran reached in his pocket for a royal to hand Squirt. He took it, grinning, "Thankee, Cap'n." Efran ruffled

Squirt's head before casting a disgruntled glance at Justinian. Efran didn't like the stablehands receiving tips because Squirt was the only one who ever deserved it.

The three of them (and Joshua) rode down the switchback to walk up Main. Justinian paused before the golden statue to read both the dedication and the prohibitions. Returning to his companions (who waited on their horses out of traffic), he murmured, "Do they know that that's *him*?"

"We're debating that," Efran said, glancing at Minka. "One school of thought has it that they were glad to see it happen."

"Oooh," Justinian grimaced. "And there I thought the Landers were all so cordial and righteous."

"His people are mostly EurAsian," Efran noted.

"As is your wife," Justinian returned, and Minka raised a brow at her husband.

He looked at her. "And a more devious, dangerous, headstrong woman you'll never find. She's entirely responsible for two men falling from the gallows and incurring serious injuries, probably. It certainly sounded like they were hurt."

"And that was when you were not hanged," Justinian observed.

"That's correct," Efran said. He looked down at Joshua on his arm, who was threatening to go to sleep unless they picked up the pace a bit.

Justinian turned in the saddle to regard her. "And they just let you walk up the gallows with him?"

Efran answered, "They were all afraid of her."

"As well they should have been," Justinian said, straightening his shoulders. Minka smiled serenely.

They walked past the ongoing construction of the chapel and the inn, past all the new houses going up in the eastern plots. Beyond that were the Fortress' fields and animal pens, and the recently established cattle and sheep farms owned by newcomers to the Lands. With all this, there should be plenty of meat for families on the Lands.

Efran was glad to see that military compounds were no longer being constructed in the eastern Lands. What was left of the effort was a vast pile of felled trees anywhere from 15 to 20 feet in length, with diameters of 10 to 12 inches. The crowns and branches had been removed, but the bark remained. Everyone in the Lands knew about the quantity of raw wood here, but since it had to be cut to lumber, it sat here until someone could get it all to the mill in Venegas.

As they rode leisurely, Efran noted, "Oh, the wolves are back."

Justinian pulled Gaunter to a stop. "Where?" he asked warily.

"Out in the east Lands. Not here." Efran smiled back at him.

"Remember when Justinian took care of the wolf hunters for you?" Minka asked. Efran was replying in the affirmative, laughing, when she added, "Oh, let's go back to walk around the lake."

“What’s in the lake now?” Justinian asked, still stopped.

“Nothing but fish,” Minka said regretfully.

“You see? She’s dangerous, and she likes dangerous pets,” Efran vented. She laughed at him, but Justinian nodded.

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Chapter 3

Minka, Justinian, and Efran with Joshua paused their horses at the lakeside, looking over the placid water, sprinkled with glints of sunlight. A few families were fishing off the pier. The faerie trees at either end of the lake waved their luxurious branches in greeting, but the riders were not inclined to sit under them. Still, given the warm sun, the cool breeze, and the serenity around them, with only the distant sound of hammers, Justinian was moved to remark, “This is really rather pleasant.”

The surface of the water directly in front of them was broken by the hydra plopping up on shore, all three of its heads bobbing while one opened jaws of sharp teeth as though smiling. Kraken sprang into the air via all four feet and Gaunter shied away. Only Rose looked undisturbed, as she was the farthest away. Minka said, “Oh, there’s Jonguitud coming up to say hello! Can’t I pet him, Efran?”

“No, no,” Efran laughed, as Justinian was earnestly kicking Gaunter to a plodding lope in the opposite direction. So Minka and Efran had to follow.

“Goodbye, Jonguitud! The children will come talk to you at the bottom of the hill a little later!” she called, and the heads waved to her.

At the intersection of the east-west road with Main, they stopped to watch horses come down the switchback. On them were Commander Wendt, his Seconds Barr and Gabriel, the lower barracks Captains Towner and Stites, and Melchior. Riding in the midst of them was Lyte, with Koschat and Stephanos on either side. Lagging behind, Lambdin was pushing Neale down the switchback in his rolling chair.

Seeing Efran’s group, Barr leaned over to Wendt to say something, and he replied, “We’ll stop here a moment. The rest of you go on.” Barr motioned to the others to proceed; they did, saluting Efran as they passed.

Wendt said, “Hello Minka, Justinian. Well, Efran, Lyte will be off to the Sasany Fields tomorrow morning. They’ll send weekly reports to us.”

Efran said, “Thank you for consulting me, Commander, which was unnecessary, but . . . is this punishment or rehabilitation?”

“That depends on Lyte,” Wendt said. “He understands that Hob and Wymond will have the authority to do whatever they think necessary with him. Incidentally, once DeWitt is through with Lyte’s two associates, they’ll be executed as traitors.”

“Ah,” Efran acknowledged. “So, Lyte’s training depends on how much he wants to live.”

“I think so, yes,” Wendt said. “Barr will keep you informed.”

“Thank you, Commander. Barr,” Efran said.

Barr saluted and Wendt said, “Let’s go.” Barr turned his horse to walk, and Wendt’s followed.

The three at the side of the road contemplated that, then went on up the switchback to clean up for dinner, at which they showed up just to drink ale, eat dessert, and talk.

The following morning, April 6th, Efran was at the courtyard gates early to watch the party prepare to ride to the Sasany Fields. There were six men accompanying Lyte, as it was a day-long, somewhat treacherous ride crossing the Passage and skirting the Green Hills. Riders never knew what renegade bands might have taken hold along the route until they were upon them.

Efran surveyed the party as they assembled in the courtyard: four Polonti and two Southerners: Mathurin, Pleyel, Goss, Dango, Routh and Teschner. Efran checked through their provisions, then sent to the kitchen to have them packed more dried venison. He also sent with them a one-horse cart with provender for the camp.

When Lyte was brought out to mount, they discussed whether to bind his hands. Efran shook his head: “What’s he going to do? Jump off and run away in the wilderness? At least in the camp, he’ll have a chance to survive.” The men quietly agreed, noting how the Captain was talking about survival for a man who barely avoided being sentenced to death.

As they mounted to ride out, Efran glanced over them one last time, noting such details as the condition of leather straps and the number of arrows in their quivers. Then he glanced up at Teschner in command to say, “God speed.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Teschner saluted, as they all did, before turning out of the gates to ride down the switchback. Efran couldn’t bring himself to look at Lyte until the group was well away.

Efran went back to the bedroom, then, where Minka was barely waking. He kicked off his boots to lie down beside her, and she snuggled him. That alone made him feel better. “Did you see them off?” she murmured.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s not a fun ride; it’s as far as Eurus but without Marguerite’s table when you get there.”

She snorted lightly and he held her hand on his chest. After a little while, she said, “It was a good thing to happen, Efran.” He turned his head to look down at her. She explained, “It was a—shaking out, a testing. The men who remain are stronger for it.”

He pressed her hand to his chest. “I can see that. And if nothing else, to have Wendt in command makes all of it worthwhile.”

“Isn’t that amazing?” she said, lifting up. “And you were the one to think of it.”

He exhaled, “No, I just saw the next page.” She laughed, getting up to begin her day.

Justinian descended the stairs for breakfast, expressing admiration for the amenities of the third-floor room. As he was curious to visit the new businesses in the Lands, Efran sent him out with an escort and a pouch of royals. “Be sure to take him to The Lands Clothing Shop,” he told Coxe and Seagrave. They saluted.

But when Minka expressed her desire to accompany him, Efran disallowed it. “Don’t think I’m going to forget that he and Adele tried to kidnap you so that you could marry him,” he said, mildly peeved. “And I’m supposed to let him shop with you?”

She laughed, then said, “Oh, he hasn’t asked about Adele, has he?”

Efran shook his head. “He’s probably afraid to. And I’m not saying anything unless he pries it out of me.” So she went to put on her chickening clothes instead.

While Minka had Bennard help her take Joshua out to play with the children and Nakam, Efran went up to the second-floor workroom in response to DeWitt’s summons. When Efran arrived to flop down in his usual chair, DeWitt looked up, then leaned forward on his arms. Efran sat up at this signal that something interesting had happened. “Yes?” he asked, and Estes looked over from his worksheets.

DeWitt began, “If Tourse gets any more commendations, you’re going to have to promote him to something—Chief Inquisitor, I don’t know. We’ve had the men working on Lyte’s two associates, but they weren’t cracking at all. Since the Law doesn’t allow torture, our interrogators gave up. But then Tourse happened by their cells, and sat to talk, and tell stories, and I don’t know what all. But now we have what looks like reliable information that DePew’s primary backer in Euris was Baldassare.”

Efran breathed, “Baldassare. A Councilor. That’s what Justinian thought.”

“So now we have to figure out how to use this information,” DeWitt said.

Efran scanned the faerie tree, now aggressively plump, then turned his head to whistle. The guard at the door, Eustace, stepped in to salute. “Yes, Captain?”

“Find Tourse, please. Haul him up here,” Efran said.

“Yes, sir.” Eustace disappeared, and Efran was so fixed on the question before them that he forgot to tell him not to run down the stairs.

They sat silently, Estes and DeWitt working, until the summoned appeared at the door, saluting. “Tourse reporting, Captain. Steward. Administrator.”

“Sit down, Tourse,” Efran said, kicking the nearby chair out a few inches. When Tourse deftly spun the chair to sit, Efran looked over to tell DeWitt, “There’s his opening gambit. He does tricks, so his dupe says, ‘Ahh, here’s someone I like.’ Then he tells stories, so his dupe has to tell a story in return.” He asked Tourse, “Is that how it works?”

Tourse smoothed back his hair. “Marginally, Captain, but my methods are confidential.” DeWitt laughed and Estes shook his head.

Efran said, “Well, now that you’ve cracked the nut, we have to extract the meat. I want Baldassare.”

Tourse inhaled, studying the faerie tree. “To eliminate him or interrogate him, Captain?”

“To neutralize him. I’m not particular about how,” Efran said.

“Then we need to know more about him—specifically, his weaknesses,” Tourse said.

“We happen to have a well-connected EurAsian roaming the Lands even as we speak,” Efran said, swiveling to the door again. “Justinian’s out and about with Coxe and Seagrave. Have them bring him up here, please,” he told Eustace. “And don’t run down the stairs.”

“Yes, Captain,” Eustace said almost without smiling.

While waiting, Efran sent another man to bring up Joshua and Minka. They came readily, as Minka had finished cleaning two coops and the children were in lessons. It took a while longer for Justinian to be located, but Minka used the time well: “I’m glad to see you, Tourse! How is Racheal settling in?”

“Admirably, Lady Minka,” he said. “She’s having great fun with the clothing shop. They were devastated at first that the embroidered women’s dresses weren’t selling, so Racheal cut them down to children’s size, and put one on DeGrado’s little girl—he makes custom windows, you know, and parades the child everywhere. So now the shop has a backlog of orders for embroidered children’s dresses. Racheal was also aggrieved that Trina was copying their men’s clothing, but that took care of itself when Rimbault split a seam of one of Trina’s suits. Racheal tells me that he quietly ditched them and came over to the Lands shop, where seams are doubly reinforced.”

“Oh, very good,” Minka breathed.

“Especially for the hearty eaters,” DeWitt added without looking up from his numbers.

Tourse cleared his throat in disavowal, but Minka asked, “You’ve haven’t been scaring anyone in your demon mask, have you?”

He looked at her with uncharacteristic astonishment. “Lady Minka, it’s disappeared! I am shocked and appalled that someone has lifted it!”

“From where?” Efran asked in curiosity.

“I’m not even sure, Captain,” Tourse said. “There are three or four places that I’m liable to toss it down, and it’s disappeared from all of them.”

Estes glanced up. “Someone had a use for it.”

“Well, let me affirm my innocence before the wretch makes mischief with it,” Tourse said, aggrieved.

“Noted,” Efran said sympathetically.

Shortly thereafter, Seagrave and Coxe appeared at the door with Justinian. Saluting, Seagrave said, “Sorry for the delay, Captain—Lord Justinian found several suits at The Lands Clothing Shop that he had to be measured for.”

Efran grinned at Tourse’s smug look while Justinian shook out his sleeves and sat. “Yes, I’m terribly sorry to keep you waiting, Efran, but you are the one who baited me with the fact that you finally have a decent tailoring shop on your Lands.”

“With seams doubly reinforced,” Tourse sniffed.

Wide-eyed, Justinian paused to breathe, “Oh, that’s good to know. I heard of the most nightmarish disaster befalling your housing representative.”

“Yes, apparently everyone has,” Efran said. “Thank you, Coxe, Seagrave—you’re dismissed.” After they saluted and left, Efran said, “Justinian, Tourse here is married to one of the owners of The Lands Clothing Shop.” As Justinian turned to him attentively, Efran went on, “And he also discovered by crafty interrogation that Baldassare was likely DePew’s EurAsian financier.”

“Ah ha,” Justinian said, unsurprised.

Efran went on, “So now what we need from you is to know all about Councilor Baldassare so that we may yank out his teeth.”

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Chapter 4

Justinian thoughtfully turned his eyes on the faerie tree. “Yes, ‘crafty’ is a good word to describe Councilor Baldassare—crafty and careful. He is ambitious, but too cautious to challenge Vanidestine for EurAs. And as Westford is still mostly ash, then the Abbey Lands must do for his domain. Yes, with DePew’s failure, he will cast about for a replacement and try again.”

“How is he getting information about us?” Efran asked.

“Spies, certainly,” Justinian said. “He’ll have men coming down dressed as householders or business owners looking for opportunities, and you won’t be able to see through them. Your Lands are ridiculously open, still, for people to come in and just walk around.”

“I’m afraid that won’t change,” Efran said. “Besides which, I’m not after his spies, I’m after him. How can I get Baldassare down here?”

“Bait,” Tourse said. “What are his . . . interests?”

Minka noted, “You mean ‘sins.’”

“Not in front of ladies,” Tourse said righteously.

“Well?” Efran asked Justinian.

“What else could interest a wealthy reprobate but a beautiful young woman?” Justinian asked, looking at Minka. “In fact, after DePew had disposed of the Lord of the Abbey Fortress and married its Lady, there’s a strong chance he would have met with a terrible accident, freeing up the Lady to marry again—to someone better befitting her station,” Justinian said.

“How do you know this?” Efran asked.

“That’s how that part of the plot always goes,” Justinian said.

Efran leaned back. "I won't dangle Minka as bait."

She eyed him. "What if it were an illusion?"

Their interest piqued, they regarded her. Efran looked distrustful. "How so?"

"Remember how you used Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin to impersonate my father and Blairgowrie in order to discredit Wedderburn about the information he was selling?" she asked.

"Yes," Efran said warily.

"Well," Minka said, looking at the faerie tree. "Dear Queene Kele, can you have someone impersonate me? Make her look just like me, except with makeup and styled hair and a provocative dress."

There was a burst of faerie laughter, then Kele's voice said, "Oh, dear Minka, you'll get me in trouble!"

"No, Kele, we want to fool an enemy. Just show us what your faerie double of me would look like," Minka insisted.

An instant later, there was a second Minka standing in the room just as the real Minka had ordered: she wore a low-cut, extravagant gown, with charcoaled eyes and rouged lips, hair slicked back with pomade in a silver clip. The men gaped at her; Efran looked sick.

Studying her gussied double, Minka said, "My, don't you look tawdry."

The double looked back at her contemptuously. "And aren't you plain."

"How would you like to go to Eurus and ensnare a wicked Councilor for us?" Minka asked.

"That would be fun," the evil Minka grinned.

DeWitt breathed, "Minka, that's scary. How would you get her up there, though?"

"Here are my thoughts," Minka said, eyes flicking from man to man. "We send this Minka with two faerie bodyguards in a faerie coach drawn by faerie horses to Eurus." Looking at her evil twin, she said, "We want you to catch the eye of Councilor Baldassare. You are me, except that I am dissatisfied with my luscious Polonti husband [here flicking a lascivious look to him] so I've come to Eurus on an unauthorized holiday.

"I will be flirtatious, especially with Baldassare, but no one will be able to lay a hand on me. Then I will proclaim myself bored enough to go back to the Abbey Lands. Our intent is to get Baldassare to follow me—you--back down here. You don't need to make an impression on anyone but him, and you don't need to stay long, just long enough to drive him mad. Can you do that?"

"Child's play," the faerie Minka said, looking off.

"Well?" the real Minka asked, looking around.

"Show me the bodyguards," Efran said. Two faeries appeared as his men, life-sized Polonti, in Abbey red. "Not Polonti," Efran corrected. "Make them look and talk like Eurusians."

So the two Polonti bodyguards were replaced by two smooth Southerners. One said, “Polonti are rats.”

Justinian nodded. “The accent is perfect, as is the sentiment.”

“So?” Minka looked around again.

DeWitt stood. “Let’s see the carriage and horses in the courtyard.”

The faeries disappeared, then Minka, Efran, DeWitt, Estes, Justinian and Tourse all progressed down to the foyer. As they emerged from the fortress doors, they looked hard at the fine carriage pulled by two liveried white horses. A driver and footman, also in livery, awaited the glittering, decorated Minka and bodyguards.

“Captain!” gasped Fennig, one of the gate guards. “This carriage—just—appeared—and—” The other gate guard, Tourle, was mutely agreeing.

“Yes, at ease, it’s an illusion we’re testing out,” Efran said. The guards looked back at the carriage, and especially the decadent Minka, in bewildered disbelief.

“Should it be in Abbey livery?” DeWitt asked dubiously, as it was all decked out so.

Estes was shaking his head. “That implies an official visit, when she’s on an unauthorized lark.”

“I agree,” Efran said. “Take off the Abbey livery; just make it nice. Put the bodyguards in plain white uniforms.”

The carriage, horses, and men were thus transformed, and the real Abbey men studied the effect as the bodyguard escorted the evil Minka into the carriage and boarded with her. “We await your word, Lord Efran,” the driver said.

Efran looked at his advisors. “Have we made the plan clear enough?”

Estes observed, “With faeries, you never know.”

Tourse was shaking his head. “It could work beautifully or backfire spectacularly. If you let them go, Captain, I’d be prepared for an onslaught of suitors at your gates. And I’d hide the real Lady Minka.”

Efran turned a shade green, but Minka said, “All that may be true, but what’s certain is that if we do nothing, Baldassare will have the upper hand in planning something else. At the very least, we’ll disrupt that.”

“She’s ri-i-i-ght,” Justinian sang, twirling his hat.

Groaning, Efran looked through the carriage window at the decadent Minka. “All right, report back to me when you’re done.” Looking up to the driver, he said, “You may go.”

The driver tapped the horses with his whip, clicking his teeth, and the guards opened the gates for the carriage to descend the switchback. As it progressed north on Main, people stopped to watch. The wall guards opened the gates while the carriage was still a ways off; as soon as it had passed over the old stone bridge, the carriage and horses vanished.

The wall gate guards stared up the road, then jerked back to look to the courtyard. Efran raised a hand in a signal that all was well. *I hope all is well. I pray it is. Oh, what have we done?* he mused inwardly.

The Abbey resumed its normal activities, and Justinian took two soldiers to return to The Lands Clothing Shop. Walking the back grounds with Minka and Joshua, Efran noted that there were fewer people milling around here, as there were fewer “workers” in the fortress. It seemed that another effect of the insurrection was an off-scouring of hangers-on and possible spies. *We need to retain this tightness*, he thought.

When the children came out to play, Efran put Joshua in his cart and Nakam jumped up to ride in it with him. As Minka took up the handle, Efran told her, “I’m going back up to talk to Estes and DeWitt about keeping the fortress workforce at this level.”

“At this level?” she repeated, looking around. “Half of them are gone,” she observed.

“That’s right, and we were paying them for who knows what,” Efran said. She nodded.

As she began pulling the cart, Joshua clutched the side with one hand, raising the other to call, “Heya!” at the oncoming children.

His parents looked at him quickly; Toby called back, “Hey, Joshua!” and Almund took up a ball.

Seeing the children settling to play with Minka watching them, Efran went into the fortress and up to the workroom to apprise Estes and DeWitt of his concerns about the excess number of people they’d had at the fortress. DeWitt agreed: “Yes, Efran—after Adele was able to get on as a worker with no discernible skills whatsoever, Estes and I talked about paring down. And the number of supervisors we had almost equaled the number of workers. Do you know we had people whose sole job was sweeping corridors?”

Efran laughed, “I’ve got time to do that, most days.”

“It occasionally needs to be done, but no one wants to be seen doing it,” DeWitt said.

Estes looked over from his ledger. “Offer the children to do it, and pay them what we were paying the workers.”

“Oh, yes. Toby would do that in a heartbeat,” Efran observed.

“Good. We’ll do that. We’re restricting the number of men we take in as soldiers; we should already have been doing that in the fortress,” DeWitt said.

“How about the kitchen staff?” Efran asked.

Estes said, “That’s Madea’s domain, but there seems to be an inordinate number of workers there, too.”

“Who can we get to have a quiet look down there?” Efran asked.

“And with what excuse?” DeWitt mused.

“Who complained about rats in the kitchen?” Estes asked, looking over.

“Dobell? I don’t remember,” DeWitt muttered.

“Wait,” Estes said, inspiration lighting his eyes. “There’s a new man who’s highly intelligent; has incredible recall, but hasn’t found his place—”

He interrupted himself to whistle, and the sentry, Telo, stepped in to salute. “Steward?”

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Chapter 5

Estes said, “Yes, Telo; I need you to find the new man, Goyne. Check Captain Rigdon’s and Captain Chee’s regiments up here, first.”

“Yes, Steward, and I will not run down the stairs, Captain,” Telo said, saluting again.

“Very good,” Efran laughed. Telo departed and the three administrators settled in to wait, discussing how they would use their rat catcher in the kitchen.

It took only minutes for Telo to return with his man in tow. Saluting, Telo said, “Steward, I’ve located Goyne, preparing to leave.”

The administrators looked at the duffel bag that the young man was dragging. He was blond, slender, probably not yet twenty. Saluting with an air of defeat, he said, “Goyne reporting as summoned, Steward. Captain. Administrator.”

Estes asked, “Why are you leaving?”

“Steward, Commander Wendt thought to give me an opportunity to serve, so Captain Chee did everything in his power to find me something, but, he already has a scribe, and I didn’t hit it off teaching the Polonti, so, I seem to be a wash-out,” the young man said, shame-faced.

Efran started to reply, but shut his mouth to let his Steward pursue his own idea. Estes said, “Telo, take his bag back to his barracks and tell Captain Chee that we may have a job for him.”

“Yes, sir.” Telo took up the duffel bag to walk it out smartly. Goyne looked at Estes in pained hope.

Estes told him, “All right, Goyne, here is our situation. We want an accounting of everyone who’s working in the kitchen and what they do. We want to know who is actually working, who is loitering, who could be a spy, and who is stealing, but we want to find out quietly, without offending Madea. Someone complained about rats in the kitchen, so you’re to go to the cleaning supervisor Onfroi on the third floor for rat-catching equipment. This will be your cover. Take as long as you need to get us a thorough accounting; when you’re satisfied with the information you’ve got, come tell us. Oh, and do catch any rats running about.”

Goyne was blinking in relieved anticipation. “Yes, Steward. Thank you for the opportunity.”

Estes nodded. “Feel free to come back to us with questions as they arise. You’re dismissed.”

“Yes, sir! Captain, Administrator.” And Goyne vanished with the adroitness of a faerie.

Efran grinned back at Estes. “I can hardly wait to hear what he comes up with.”

“It will be something,” DeWitt agreed. And they got back to work.

Meanwhile, Shurtleff’s dining area on Main Street opened. He had secondhand furniture, mismatched dinnerware, no landscaping, and slovenly waiters. He himself wore nothing finer than his sweat-stained work clothes and frayed, smelly apron. Also, his entrees were rather expensive and his desserts an afterthought. So the moment he hung the hand-lettered sign that read: “Dining open Today,” he was mobbed.

Customers, predominantly men, were lined up down Main. There were only a few women, and none wearing Trina’s clothing. But everyone knew that Shurtleff’s fish were impossibly fresh and cooked to perfection, whether fried or baked. His oil was changed out daily; his coating mix a closely guarded secret. And the aroma from a plate of Shurtleff’s sizzling fish tossed onto a table elicited tears of joy from those waiting.

When the fish ran out, as it did within hours, Shurtleff closed his dining area, turning away scores in line. Meanwhile, men paid children to watch the shopfront for the sign to go up again, thus securing themselves a top spot in line. The surrounding eateries had to content themselves with their ambience, lovely desserts, and slow-roasted meats.

It was two days following, late in the morning of April 8th, that the faerie carriage rolled up to the wall gates. Having been alerted that it would return at some point, the gate guards knew to let it in without question. As it rolled sedately up Main, stopping at occupied crosswalks, the courtyard sentries sent a messenger up to the workroom.

Shortly, Estes, DeWitt and Efran appeared in the courtyard. Minka had not yet arrived, as the messenger had to go look for her. So she was not present when the carriage pulled through the courtyard gates. The three administrators watched as the footman lowered the step and opened the door to assist faerie Minka down, looking just the same as when she had departed the day before yesterday.

Her bodyguard exited the carriage, and Efran was opening his mouth to question them when the footman extended his hand to assist another man down. Dressed in lounge wear, he was a dashing man in his mid-forties with coiffed brown hair flowing to his shoulders and a few days’ growth of grayish-brown beard.

Weaving on his feet, he reached out to the faerie Minka, but she extended a hand to the three stunned men to say, “Lord Efran, Steward Estes, Administrator DeWitt, may I present Lord Councilor Baldassare of Eurús.”

“Come back into the carriage,” Baldassare urged, capturing her in his arms. In sudden awareness that he was someplace new, he murmured, “Where have you brought me?”

DeWitt was the first of the three to come to himself and step forward. “You are at the Abbey Fortress, Lord Councilor Baldassare. Please come with me.” The Councilor looked at him in hazy confusion, but consented to follow with the faerie Minka in hand behind him.

While DeWitt was leading the incapacitated man up the steps into the foyer, Estes sent a messenger to wake Justinian in his third-floor room and Efran sent another man to the kitchen to bring up a plate and ale for the visitor to the workroom. The moment Baldassare entered the fortress, the faeries (coachmen, bodyguards and Minka), along with the coach and horses, vanished. Baldassare, gazing at the faerie tree roots growing down the walls of the foyer, was at first unaware that his trailing hand was empty.

DeWitt led the man like an invalid upstairs to sit at the table in the workroom. Following, Estes and Efran sat cautiously around him. Blinking hazily at the tree, Baldassare leaned on the arm of the chair, complaining,

“Where is Minka? I must have her. Which one of you is her husband? I will fight you for her.” His voice was that of a man half asleep.

Roused from bed, Justinian appeared at the door in a luxurious night robe. He looked around at them, but when he spotted the new arrival, his eyes shot wide open and he fell out of the doorway. Efran rose to catch him in the corridor. “Justinian--”

“SHHH!” Justinian hissed. He went on in a frantic whisper: “That’s Baldassare; we’ve been introduced, and he must not see me here! Did he catch sight of me? What the deuce—do you mean—did the faerie Minka—?”

Efran reassured him in whispers, “Yes, she did; no, he didn’t see you. Go get dressed, but don’t leave yet. We won’t let him see you.”

Justinian exhaled, hanging on Efran’s arm. “All right, no worries. Yes, I’ll—do that.” He staggered down the corridor to the stairs, waving away the sentry.

Meanwhile, Efran took the tray from the kitchen assistant outside the door. This he brought to place before the lovesick lord. “I’ve just had the most—amazing experience with the Lady—the Lady—where is she?” Baldassare pleaded, gazing around the room.

“Uhhh,” DeWitt hedged as the three of them looked at each other.

At that time, the real Minka entered. She glanced at the lord, then went to the foot of the table to sit partially hidden by the faerie tree. “The Lady Minka,” Baldassare demanded in a firmer voice, and her eyes widened as she sat very still. “Where is she? I demand you return her to me at once.”

“Well, Lord Baldassare, I’m afraid that wasn’t really the Lady Minka,” DeWitt began.

Breathing deeply, Baldassare straightened to look at him. “Of course it was. That was the name she gave me.” Slowly, his thinking processes began to resume, and he looked around with greater clarity. “Where am I?”

Again DeWitt answered him. “This is the Abbey Fortress, Lord Baldassare.”

“The Abbey Fortress,” Baldassare repeated, peering at Efran and Estes. “Polonti. Which of you is Lord Efran, then?”

“I am,” Efran said.

Studying him, Baldassare allowed his chest to expand like that of a primate about to do battle, and he said, “Your wife came to me.”

Efran grimaced. “I’m sorry, but, that wasn’t actually my wife.” Realizing what he had just said, he amended, “I’m not sorry that that was not my wife; I’m sorry that you thought it was.”

“No? Who was it?” Baldassare challenged him.

When Efran hesitated with open mouth, DeWitt interposed, “It must have been an impostor, Lord Baldassare.”

“An impostor! Who is she, then?” Baldassare demanded.

The three looked at each other, and Estes said, “We don’t precisely know, Lord Baldassare.”

“I must find her again,” he breathed. Then he looked at the faerie tree. “But what am I doing here?”

DeWitt said, “I see you’ve lost your memory. That can be a side effect of mild poisoning.” Baldassare glared at him suspiciously, and DeWitt added, “Not here. Allow me to reassure you.” He took small bites from the tray in front of him. “Um. Very good. And the ale’s unopened. Do you remember where you were when you last ate?”

Baldassare looked off with a dreamy gaze. “It must have been—it had to have been . . . with the most exquisite creature.” He then lowered his eyes to catch sight of Minka on the other side of the faerie tree. He stood abruptly to peer at her. Efran tensed, but DeWitt laid a restraining hand on his arm.

Baldassare leaned forward, hands on the table, to stare hard at her. Although Minka’s eyes widened, she said nothing. He began, “Are you—are you—” Efran was standing when Baldassare finished, “—a relative of the Lady Minka?”

“No,” she whispered.

“Ohh.” He sat down in disappointment, so Efran sat as well. Baldassare glanced at him to utter, “Your wife must be exquisite.”

Efran didn’t trust himself to answer, so DeWitt said, “As long as you’re here, Lord Baldassare, we may as well chat. The Abbey has always been friendly to Eurus, you know, and we strongly desire to maintain mutual good will. You’ll have noted the peace we enjoy, which we’re determined to preserve.”

Now mostly restored, Baldassare looked warily from DeWitt to Estes to Efran before murmuring, “I’m glad to know that, as I seem to recall hearing something about an insurrection a few weeks ago.”

“An insurrection?” DeWitt laughed. “How these wild rumors get started, I’ll never know. No, no. A sparring match got out of hand, unfortunately, and I have no idea how our builder DePew got in the middle of it. He died, you see. You’ll have noted his memorial on Main Street.” DeWitt looked at him over his glasses. Baldassare looked depressed.

“We try to avoid that kind of thing happening,” DeWitt went on, “which is why we have ears everywhere. While we can’t possibly explain how you wound up here, in our very bosom, alone and defenseless, it may serve as a reminder for you to warn your colleagues against aggression toward us. We’ll know, and we’ll act.”

As the mild-mannered DeWitt and the wary Baldassare eyed each other, Estes added, “So, after you have a bite, we’ll get you a hired carriage back to Eurus. And we certainly hope you’ll suffer no more attacks by impostors.”

Baldassare narrowed his eyes at him, but Efran stepped out to whisper to the sentry, Tiras, “Get money from Doane to hire one of Wade’s carriages to Eurus; tell him to bring it up here, and that he’ll have an escort. Go to Captain Towner for four men, Southerners, to accompany it. They’re to dress as mercenaries and let the passenger out a few miles south of Eurus, then they’re to go on to Lady Marguerite’s and stay the night. Oh—tell Commander Wendt I’ll be down shortly to explain things. I hope.”

“Yes, Captain.” Tiras saluted and sprinted away, but self-consciously slowed to walk down the stairs.

Meanwhile, Minka had slipped out of the workroom. “I think I’ll go back outside with the children and Joshua,” she whispered to Efran with slightly widened eyes.

“Yes,” he said. He checked to see that they were out of Baldassare’s sight, then kissed her head. “Exquisite creature,” he murmured.

“He curls his hair,” she muttered derisively. Laughing silently, he let her go.

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Chapter 6

When Efran stepped back into the workroom, he found Estes and DeWitt working as usual while Baldassare glumly ate, assessing his lounge wear and glancing around as if still unbelieving. “There must be an explanation,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Yes, I believe you were drugged,” DeWitt said casually.

“And brought *here*?” Baldassare demanded.

“Your enemy thought we would kill you, allowing him to keep his own hands clean,” DeWitt said, glancing up. Estes barely avoided smiling.

“My enemy? Then why did your people allow the carriage up to your very door and then let them drive away again?” Baldassare demanded, which was actually a good question.

DeWitt observed, “We have fine carriages with distinguished visitors coming all the time, from all over. You must admit you didn’t immediately appear to be a victim of kidnapping.” He paused to consider, “Your enemy has been very shrewd here. His only miscalculation was in thinking we were your enemy as well. I wonder why? Regardless, if I were you, I would look at the people around me very closely when you get back.”

Estes raised a paper for DeWitt’s opinion and Baldassare looked away with a set jaw.

Shortly, Efran, Estes and DeWitt stood in the courtyard to watch the Eurasian Lord Councilor climb into one of Wade’s carriages and ride down the switchback. They continued to watch as soldiers in nondescript clothing peeled away from the lower stables to ride alongside the carriage up the northbound road. Then Estes turned to DeWitt to query, “In our very *bosom*’?”

“I like the sound of it,” DeWitt said as Efran leaned over his knees, laughing. “Besides, of course I was floundering. That was scary,” DeWitt added as an excuse.

Estes demanded, “How can you say that, when you created a whole conspiracy for him to deal with when he gets back?”

“Yes, I don’t know where that came from,” DeWitt mused.

Efran said, “Regardless, I *think* that the scheme accomplished all we could hope for. . . . And I’ll never do anything like it again.”

DeWitt grunted in agreement; Estes shuddered, whispering, “Faeries are unaccountable.”

While Estes and DeWitt went back to work, Efran collected Minka and Joshua to take them down to talk to the Commander. “This is where I get in trouble,” he told her on the ride down. He glanced down at Joshua in his sling. “I do things and forget to run them by my superior.”

“Was Lyte your superior as Commander?” she asked.

“No,” he said.

“I will accept that Commander Wendt is your superior. But you can blame me for the idea,” she offered complacently.

“That won’t spare me a beatdown,” he muttered.

They dismounted in front of Barracks A and entered for Efran to salute Wendt at his desk. Barr, beside him, had no need to whisper in his ear as Efran said, “Captain Efran reporting with Lady Minka and Joshua, Commander.”

Wendt almost smiled. “Have a seat, all of you. I can’t wait to hear this.”

“Yes, sir.” Efran glanced back as a sentry, Fennig, brought up chairs for them. Bouncing Joshua on his leg, Efran then explained Tourse’s discovery of DePew’s backer and their decision to use the faeries in a scheme to get Baldassare down to the Abbey for questioning.

“It, ah, worked a little too well. Nonetheless, the Councilor is on his way back up to Eurus, and I hopefully expect him to arrive safely so that we won’t see yet another attack from them any time soon,” Efran said tentatively. After so many treacherous Eurusians had been shaken out of the Abbey army, it was still in the process of reorganizing under Wendt.

“Interesting,” Wendt said with a laugh. “Well, I’m glad you sent a bodyguard with him. I hope that will be sufficient protection.”

Efran tensed. “What am I missing, Commander?”

“Nothing critical, that I know of. We’ve got scouts out on regular patrols as far north as Westford, and a ways beyond, also to Featheringham and Venegas, and over to Eviron. They’re finding no sign of mobilization, but a lot of dead bodies, all apparently Eurusian. There’s no way to tell how many of them might have infiltrated our army under DePew.

“Surchatain Sewell in Venegas seems to have no idea what happened here; they’re too busy getting rich supplying us with lumber and dyed cloth—oh, and lumber to Westford, as well. The new inn going up under Bortniansky is on schedule. I hear that Rimbault is keeping an eye on their progress, as he’s in charge of the new inn here which DePew began,” Wendt continued. Efran remembered then what a stickler Wendt was for intelligence—before he did anything, he made sure to know what was happening everywhere.

As Efran was digesting this, Minka asked quietly, “How is Neale, Commander?”

Wendt turned his face to her; Towner also glanced over from his desk. The Commander said, “I appreciate your asking, Minka. Something about Lyte’s hearing stuck with him; he’s no longer in a holding cell, but riding out with a couple of men to get reports from the livestock pens and the fields. That’s actually been useful. He took notes from Efran’s learning to ride while in the rolling chair, which has also helped his outlook.”

Efran studied him. That was the Commander, who valued even a crippled traitor: *Don't kill your own wounded*. He had an unaccountable streak of mercy even before his blinding—which mercy accounted for Efran's thriving in the army—but now, Wendt's ability to pluck a burning branch out of the fire was . . . scary.

"Thank you, Commander," Minka whispered.

As Efran was silent, Wendt said, "You're welcome, Minka. If there's nothing else, you're dismissed."

Efran stood, saluting. "Yes, Commander."

But Minka went around Wendt's desk to kiss his cheek. He patted her arm. "Don't make Efran jealous."

"He understands my gratitude," she murmured. Efran glanced away; Barr and Towner smiled.

Outside, Efran shifted Joshua on his arm to mount Kraken, who looked over. *You trust me*.

"You don't want to be a rug," Efran muttered. Kraken snorted, shaking his head.

Gaunter turned his head to make himself heard for the first time: *But the lady rides me*.

Efran and Kraken looked at him in surprise, the latter whinnying, *You bucked her off!*

"Shut up!" Efran said irritably, and Minka looked at him, wide-eyed. Seeing his turmoil, she let it be.

He looked around, distracted. "Do you want to sit in one of the dining areas?" The midday meal rush had mostly passed.

"Yes, that's fine," she said. Then, glancing up: "Oh, no!"

He quickly looked over to where she was looking, and didn't see anything right away. "What is it?"

"DePew's been knocked over!" she said. He looked again to see the golden statue lying on its back, pointing an accusatory finger toward the fortress hill. The wooden sign that had been behind it was still behind it, only splintered.

They rode over to get a closer look. Noting the scratches at the base of the pointing finger and the wrist, Efran muttered, "Someone's been trying to cut off a chunk of gold."

"Oh, dear. Isn't his body encased in it?" she asked in horror.

"It—could be," he said, raising his shoulders dubiously.

"Pardon, Lord Efran," a cart driver called behind them, so they walked their horses out of the road to Averno's Bakery. His dining area, with landscaping around a small pond, had tables available, while Croft's and Shurtleff's were still packed full.

Averno seated them in a prominent table near Main but close to the pond, then brought their tea, ale, and pie. Efran looked down at Joshua blinking on his arm in the mild April sunlight. He rolled to his father's chest and closed his eyes.

Efran glanced around, then craned his neck and uttered a laugh. “There’s the gallows, sure enough being used as a scaffold at the inn construction. I hope they secured the trapdoor.”

She looked as well. “I can’t see it around the chapel construction. That’s going to be lovely, anyway.”

“I’m glad Ella and Quennel didn’t have to wait on it to get married,” he noted.

“Which I never suggested,” she said, mildly affronted. He grinned at her.

Turning up his ale, he squinted at a large sign rising up from a rooftop behind Whately’s (which was behind Avene’s). “Empress Trina’s Designs,” he read. “Wait. Wasn’t Challinor part of that effort?”

“Yes, last I heard. Oh, they must have had a falling out,” she observed.

“That would be interesting to watch, as long as it doesn’t inconvenience Stites [Challinor’s husband]. He’s just been made Captain, and I don’t want him distracted,” Efran said.

“Oh, he’ll just laugh it off,” she said. He studied her as though pondering how well she knew Stites, and she added, “You remember he was my bodyguard on one of Symphorien’s visits.”

“Ah,” he said in remembrance. Then he asked, “What of Bowring? I haven’t seen him lately.”

She shook her head. “As far as I know, he’s alone in the same house they bought when they first came here. I don’t know what he’s doing. The peach pie is wonderful,” she noted.

“Good,” he said. Turning, he raised a finger to a dapper waiter. “Bring us another piece of pie, please. The peach.”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” he said with a short bow.

As the waiter moved off, she said, “Oh, thank you.”

She had begun to add that she never could get it at dinner anymore, but Efran asked, “Can’t I eat it?” His face was deliberately blank.

She quickly looked up, shocked and apologetic. “Of course! I’m sorry.” He laughed, shaking his head, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

At this time, they heard Reinagle’s raspy voice raised from across the street. “You! Hiya, Efran!” Barely moaning, Efran took another drink, closing his eyes. Despite Efran’s lack of encouragement, the ex-Surchatain of Eurus stalked over to their table. In crossing Main, he eschewed all three crosswalks, so traffic was forced to halt abruptly both ways.

Reinagle was quivering in anger. “Efran, I’ve just been robbed.”

“That’s unfortunate. You—”

“It was your man in the demon mask. He took a whole pouch!” Reinagle shouted.

“Well, it wasn’t—”

Folliott came running up, white-faced. “Efran, your man who bought the demon mask just walked off with a purse full of royals that he just picked up from my table and walked off with!”

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Chapter 7

Efran sighed, “I’m sorry to hear that, Folliott, but it wasn’t Tourse. Someone took his mask. So you and your father will have to go swear out a complaint to Ryal, and we’ll advise everyone that a thief in a stolen mask is on the loose.”

“You do something!” Reinagle demanded.

“Yes, you’re Lord of the Abbey Lands!” Folliott exclaimed. Abruptly, he paused to remember, “He smelled like onions. Anyway, you must find him!”

Efran regarded them coolly, and Joshua blinked awake. A small crowd had gathered around them by this time. The waiter brought up the second piece of pie to place it before Efran, who took a few royals from his pocket to excessively cover the food and a tip. “Thank you,” he said, handing the coins to the waiter, who bowed.

As Efran placed the pie in front of Minka, he began, “Yes, as Lord of the Abbey Lands, I’m going to sit—”

“Look! Someone in a demon mask!” a bystander shouted. Everyone looked across the street, where there was indeed a man (judging from the clothes) who issued a kind of screeching growl, raising his hands with his fingers curved like claws. Then he ran off.

A whole crowd of people ran after him while Efran leaned back, exhaling. Unperturbed, Minka was enjoying her second piece of pie. Joshua watched the people run off to quickly catch the fleeing thief. Then they hauled him back to stand before Efran, who looked disinterested.

One man pulled the mask off his head to reveal a bemused, irritated young man. “Let up, now! Let go! I was only joking; what d’you think I was going to do?”

Efran squinted at him. “Shanko? Are you back?”

“Yes, Captain,” he said cheerfully. “Hullo, Lady Minka.”

She looked disapproving. “Shanko, what have you been doing in that mask?”

“Scaring village idiots,” he said, jerking his arm away from the man at his side.

“What else?” Minka asked, chin down.

“What else is there supposed to be? I found it lying in the road over there and thought I’d try it on,” Shanko said, gesturing toward the side street on which Folliott’s house stood. “But, phew! It stinks of onion.”

“You stole my royals!” Reinagle shouted, shaking a fist at him.

“What? You’re crazy, old man,” Shanko said, scowling.

The growing crowd began to get agitated, and one of them pushed Shanko, almost knocking him down. Efran whistled sharply so that they all stilled. He said, “All right, I’ll see to it. Go about your business.” He was still seated because Minka was still eating her pie, and he would not rush her.

Disgruntled, all the spectators but Reinagle and Follriott left. Those two continued to accuse the young layabout, who sneered at them, “Pouches of royals. Do I look like I’m carrying pouches of royals?”

Efran said testily, “Reinagle, Follriott, be quiet. Shanko, where are you staying?”

Shanko shrugged, “Ah, just flopping at the stables with Loriot and Tess. Cripes, can you believe they’re married? So he’s making me run odd jobs for them. I just now dropped off a payment of two [royals] and six [silver pieces] to Shurtleff’s for fish. Here—here’s the receipt.” Digging in a large pocket, he pulled out a paper to show Efran.

Glancing at it, Efran looked up at Truro, one of several soldiers who had come to see what the brouhaha around the Captain was all about. Efran said, “Truro, take that to Shurtleff; ask him who he gave it to and when.”

“Yes, Captain.” Truro plucked the receipt from Shanko’s fingers and ran with it toward Shurtleff’s Fish Market.

“I just told you he gave it to me,” Shanko complained.

Efran eased back to look at his son, who was eyeing Mummy’s pie. “Well, the problem is, someone wore the mask to rob both these men of a lot of money, so I’m trying to rule you out.”

“Oh,” Shanko said, perturbed.

Truro quickly returned to hand the paper to Efran. “Captain, Shurtleff says he just now gave the receipt to Shanko for his payment.”

“*Really?*” Shanko said irritably, grabbing back the receipt.

“Don’t be stupid, Shanko; their suspicions were reasonable. All right, then: you three go to Ryal’s where Reinagle and Follriott will make their complaint and Shanko will present the receipt as proof of his innocence. Shanko, you’ll leave the mask with Ryal as well.”

As those three turned toward the notary’s shop, walking conspicuously apart, Efran scanned the soldiers remaining. “Anyone going up to the hilltop?”

“I am, Captain; have gate duty shortly,” Willis said.

“Good. Go to the stables to tell Tess or Loriot that Shanko completed his errand, but had to stop by Ryal’s. Oh, and see if you can get word to Tourse that his mask is there,” Efran said wryly.

“Ah, yes, Captain,” Willis said uncertainly, glancing around.

“Oh, he and Racheal have a house—there. Right next to Schmolck, there.” Efran pointed to the new house

between Schmolck's and the new inn going up. "As you were," he said to the others, who dispersed. Willis saluted and began trotting to the house.

Minka pushed away the empty plate, sighing, "That was very good."

"Would you like another piece?" Efran asked.

"No, I'd better not," she murmured, eyeing Joshua. "Someone would want to share it."

Efran hefted Joshua proudly, and the toddler grinned at him. "Tomorrow I'm going to put you on Gaunter."

Minka winced. "Maybe start with a smaller horse, like Cloud? You're going to walk beside him, aren't you?"

"Of course. I'll look at the horses available. Would you like to come watch?" he asked, lips twisted so as not to smile too obviously.

She looked at him darkly. "You had better not start with him until I get out there, and I have to go to Law class tomorrow because Soames is getting hurt feelings that I've missed so many lately."

"I will wait, O Queene," he said, standing.

As they collected their horses, they glanced down the street to see the three antagonists emerging from the notary's shop. Efran noted, "Ah. They're leaving. Let's step in to see what we've inflicted on Ryal and Giardini."

"Yes," she agreed, so they simply walked their horses across the street and up a few doors.

I had to get saddled for this? Kraken snarked. "Yes, and you should be grateful for it," Efran said. Gaunter kept quiet but Minka had to choke back a laugh.

With Joshua on his shoulder, Efran dismounted and just dropped both sets of reins through a ring outside the shop. Then they went in to greet Giardi at the counter, and Joshua raised up at her cooing.

The visitors looked through the open door of the back room where Ryal and Soames were standing over an assortment of papers topped by a painted rubber mask. Efran said apologetically, "So you had to take three contradictory and argumentative statements, *plus* a demon mask. Whew, it does stink of onion."

Soames looked over to laugh, and Ryal sighed, "Do you have any information about this, Efran?"

"Only that I had Truro check out the receipt with Shurtleff, and he said that he'd just given it to Shanko, who said he just picked up the mask out of the road. Oh—Tourse had mentioned earlier that it had been stolen," Efran said.

"Well, that does fairly take Shanko out of the picture—unless it's possible he were the original thief," Ryal said.

"Of the mask? From Tourse? No, no," Efran said, shaking his head.

"At any rate, I didn't know he was back," Ryal said, tossing the papers down to the table.

"Neither did I, but apparently it was recent; he's still shocked that Lorient's his brother-in-law," Efran said.

“I would imagine so. Hello, Minka,” Ryal nodded to her.

“Hello, dear Ryal. Soames, I will be in Law class tomorrow morning. Efran has promised not to put Joshua on a horse until we’re done,” she said.

“Thank you, Lady Minka,” Soames said, reddening.

“On a horse? Already?” Ryal asked Efran in concern.

“With me alongside,” Efran assured him.

Ryal said, “Good. Well, I suppose you’ve noticed the vandalism of DePew out there.” He nodded to the street.

Halfheartedly turning, Efran said, “Yes, and I have no idea how anyone managed it”—given the weight of the statue.

“And now they’re trying to hack off bits of gold. I’m concerned that someone may get hurt doing it,” Ryal said in disapproval.

“Perhaps we should put up a sign warning against it,” Efran suggested. His hearers snorted or muffled their laughter, given the exhaustive board of warnings now lying in pieces under the statue.

Efran looked to the street as though appraising the danger, then murmured, “That’s strange.” With Joshua on his arm, he stepped out of the shop to go look. Minka, Giardi, Soames and Ryal followed him.

Flagrantly ignoring the crosswalks, Efran walked over to the statue (also outside the crosswalks). The others came alongside him to look down on it. “What is that?” Ryal muttered.

Beginning at the fingertip, the gold was melting away to reveal a dull, dark gray metal. “That looks like lead,” Efran said. His companions silently watched the slow transformation of the statue. “Huh. It seems that someone took note of your concerns,” he told Ryal, who looked up in mild astonishment.

Since they were impeding traffic, they withdrew to the front of Ryal’s shop. “All right, we’re off. Let me know what else I can do for you,” Efran told him, smiling at Ryal’s wife as well. “Giardini.” She smiled back, but it was mostly at Joshua.

He and Minka remounted to climb the switchback and return to the fortress. In the foyer, they found Justinian receiving his two new suits, altered to fit him, from The Lands Clothing Shop. “All right, Efran; rather than risk running into any more EurAsian Councilors down here, I’m returning to EurAs tomorrow morning so that I can safely meet them on common ground,” he said.

“Already? I may actually miss you, Justinian,” Efran said.

Justinian glanced at him, but turned to Minka. “Our dear Lady M would love a visit from you, dear heart. It’s been too long. Why don’t you ride up with me?”

Neither of them had to look at Efran to see him stiffen. Minka suspected that Justinian made the offer just to elicit that reaction. So she said, “Thank you; I’d love to see her, but she would be disappointed if I showed up without my handsome man.”

Efran relaxed and Justinian fretted, “How you continually crush me. Well, I may get your faerie counterpart to ride along with me, then.”

Efran looked instantly on guard again, and Minka chortled. “Justinian, you’re just like your letters. Be sure to let us know that you arrived safely.”

“Of course, dear Minka.” He puckered toward her, but Efran stepped in between them. Grinning, Justinian bowed to them and turned away with his packages.

Minka turned her eyes reprovingly to her husband, who muttered, “He wishes he had married you.”

“Nonsense. That would deprive him of the fun he has afflicting you,” she countered. Then they both looked down the corridor where Toby was effectively deploying a broom and dustpan. Three other children—Alcmond, Hassie, and Jera—came off the stairs to run up to him, likewise equipped. He directed them respectively to the second floor, the third floor, and the western corridor on this floor. (Although seldom used, it did get dirty for the stablehands’ tromping in and out.)

Watching them scatter to their assignments, Efran mused, “Toby’s going to run an empire some day.” Minka nodded, laughing.

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Chapter 8

As threatened, Justinian did depart the following morning, April 9th. In Law class with Minka, Ella, and the Librarian, Soames covered civilian complaints against the military, which proved to be a large section. Minka observed, “My goodness, soldiers are judged so strictly. Some of these requirements, such as using titles properly, seem trivial.”

Soames agreed, “Yes, Lady Minka, but there’s a reason for that. Surchatain Roman knew how quickly armed men can become tyrants over the people they’re supposed to protect, so these laws are safeguards against that.”

“Oh. So something like the insurrection won’t happen,” she said quietly.

“It doesn’t have to get anywhere near the point of insurrection to be dangerous,” Soames said. “The men must maintain an attitude of service toward the population, and not the other way around. You see the Captain has that attitude toward the residents, even those who don’t merit it.”

“Yes,” she said, thinking of Reinagle and Follriott’s demands that Efran personally track down the masked thief. While he didn’t jump up to start knocking on doors, he got them started on the proper course of action.

Following Law lessons, Efran took her and Joshua out to the horse training pens. Jasque found a suitable pony for Joshua, who was not quite 16 months old. “His name’s Soup,” Jasque told them.

“‘Soup’?” Minka laughed, petting him. “How did he get that name?”

“That’s just what one of the children called him, and it stuck,” Jasque said. The pony did have a rather mottled, soupy-looking coat.

So as Soup was equipped with a child's saddle, Ella and Tess stopped work to watch, and many of the children came to the railing to cheer Joshua on.

Efran set him in the saddle, though the stirrups were far out of reach. Then he just let the baby sit there for a while, finding his balance. "Can you stay on, Joshua? Sit right there in the middle, and stay still. Can you sit right there?" Efran talked quietly to him.

When Joshua rocked impatiently so that the pony began walking, Efran let him walk, putting Joshua's hands on the pommel. Efran glanced up at those watching, then said, "Ella, will you come over and lead him?"

"Yes," Ella said instantly, climbing over the railing. Minka watched jealously, even while knowing that Efran called Ella over because she was wearing boots, whereas Minka was in house shoes—a bad thing to be wearing when a horse accidentally stepped on your foot.

While Ella led the pony around the pen, Efran walked beside Joshua without touching him, but close enough to catch him if he started to fall. Eyes alight, Joshua rode with a hazy smile, taking in everything. Wanting to sit up straight, he let go of the pommel. When he started to sway, Efran caught him and put his hands back on the pommel. Joshua accepted this for a little while before letting go first with one hand, then the other. Then everyone watched silently while he balanced on the rocking saddle with both hands resting on his thighs.

Efran put a hand on his back to steady him, then asked Ella to turn Soup around to walk in the opposite direction. As she did, Joshua put a hand on his father's arm, then let go again after the turn. When Soup had walked that way for a while, Efran had Ella lead him across the pen to the other side. There, she had him turn to walk back across the pen.

After they had done this three or four times, Joshua was able to keep his balance turning without holding on. "Oh, he looks so much like Efran," Minka breathed.

"All right; that's enough for the first day," Efran said, lifting Joshua from the saddle. The baby screamed in objection. "Hush," Efran said sternly. "Do what I say, and we'll come back out tomorrow." Joshua quieted down, watching as Ella led Soup back to the stables to unsaddle and groom him.

Turning to Minka, Efran paused at her teary eyes. "Oh, Efran. I feel like I just watched you ride for the first time."

"It was not quite so orderly," he laughed, and they took Joshua in for fresh wraps and his bottle.

That afternoon, the soldiers who had accompanied Councilor Baldassare's carriage to Eurus returned from Marguerite's mansion Featherstone. Efran had them sent to the small dining room for an early dinner. Then he brought DeWitt, Estes, and Minka to hear them.

As those three entered, the weary riders sprang up from their seats to salute, and Minka thought about the Law that put such an emphasis on respect. "Sit down," DeWitt waved, so Connor, Detler, Graeme, and Leneghan sat to resume eating.

Connor paused to say, "We met Lord Justinian's carriage about the halfway point, Captain. He really should take a bodyguard. Fortunately, his driver recognized us, so stopped the carriage for us to say hello. But we didn't bother to wake him." Connor took a quick bite.

The others laughed, and Minka asked, "How is dear Auntie Marguerite?"

Several of the men nodded but Connor quickly cleared his mouth to say, "Splendid, Lady Minka. She remembered me!"

"And me," Detler said, pointing to himself with his knife. "I'm not sure Graeme's been to Featherstone, and Leneghan's too new. So what we need is, a team taking messages back and forth constantly, because her suckling pig is heaven itself."

"I know," Efran said, sighing in remembrance. The fortress kitchen couldn't procure enough to satisfy the demand. As a matter of fact, they hadn't had any ham recently. "But now that we've covered the important matters, what of Councilor Baldassare?"

Detler pointed to Graeme, who said, "Angry, Captain. And since he didn't have any company in the carriage, he kept leaning out of the window to talk to me. I must be the most intelligent-looking one of this bunch."

There was a burst of laughter and a few rebuttals before Efran quieted them to say, "Regardless, what did he impart to his new bosom friend?"

The men fell over themselves again, as they were very tired. Estes looked to DeWitt to say accusingly, "See what you started?"

Graeme looked thoughtful. "Deep description, Captain. Well, he was sifting through everyone he knew at the palace in Eurus, trying to figure out who had set up this incredible plot to have him killed. I can fake a fair Eurusian accent, so I just asked which councilor might harbor a grudge for what Baldassare knows about him.

"So he went through them all one at a time: Grand Councilor Vanidestine keeps a harem; Councilor Taaffe hasn't paid taxes in ten years; Councilor Dromgoole is an alcoholic; Councilor Undergrewp is falsifying the palace financial records. By the time the driver stopped a few miles outside of Eurus, Baldassare had just about settled on one Councilor Molyneux as the blackguard," Graeme ended.

DeWitt, who had been writing furiously during this recital, asked, "Why Molyneux?"

"Because Baldassare couldn't pin any shenanigans on him," Graeme replied.

"Well, that stands to reason," DeWitt said, looking over his list.

Detler broke in to say, "Oh, and was he furious about being let out to walk into Eurus. The driver was firm, though; he told 'im that the last time he had driven a customer into Eurus, his horse and carriage almost got confiscated."

DeWitt asked in concern, "Is that true?"

Detler shrugged in ignorance and the others shook their heads. Detler clarified, "I don't know, Administrator. But the poor lord in his silk jammies had no choice about it, so we left him there and turned off on a side road to get to the lady's Featherstone. Wonderful place, that."

There were affirming nods all around the table, then Efran said, "Well, unless there are other questions, I believe we can let you go rest up from the rigors of a visit to Featherstone." No one had anything else to offer, so the group broke up.

Efran and Minka took Joshua out to the woods for his (and Efran's) lesson in Polonti language and history from Pia. The lesson was short today because having passed the pens on their way here, Joshua was fixated on riding and refused to listen to anything else. When they returned to the fortress grounds, Joshua pointed to the training pen with a cry of desire, so Efran saddled up Soup again and had Minka lead him while Efran walked beside him. The warrior in training balanced on the saddle like a seasoned rider, then allowed himself to be taken into the fortress for fresh wraps.

The following day, April 10th, Ryal sent a message to Efran asking him to come down. After searching the fortress and grounds futilely for the Captain, the messenger, Melott, found him with the children and the Lady Minka on the southernmost road talking to the snobbles-eater Jonguitud. He hadn't bothered to produce his three kings second skin today.

Upon hearing Ryal's request from Melott, Efran glanced across the road. "Very well; I'll just step over. Can you pull Joshua in the cart all right?" he asked Minka.

"Better than you. I'm not so tall," she said primly.

"Don't brag," he said, bending to kiss her head. Then he told the bodyguards, Teschner and Chilcott, "I'll be down at the notary's."

They acknowledged this with salutes, then turned back to hear the hydra explain why he ate snobbles but not fish, generally: "Snobbles are good small crunches but fish skin is bad for crunching, and tails get stuck." Here one of its heads pantomimed retching, and the children laughed and laughed. So did the bodyguards.

Efran walked back to Main, crossing properly at the crosswalk. Before entering the notary shop, he glanced back at Minka and the children just to reassure himself that all was well. And all was well, partly because Minka had not tried to make a pet of Jonguitud. Efran wondered why. Finally he decided that was because Jonguitud was not very pettable.

Entering the shop, Efran glanced around the empty front room and leaned on the counter to wait. "Hello, I am here, and there is no one here," he called halfheartedly, glancing at the shelves full of volumes.

Ryal entered from the back room. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Efran. Having Giardi here all the time spoils me. When she has to run errands, I forget to stay close to the front."

"Where has Giardi run off to, now?" Efran asked idly.

"To get us something for the midday meal from one of the vendors. Goodness, they're all so busy," Ryal said. "At any rate, what I wanted--"

"Why are fortress meals not good enough for you now?" Efran asked, mildly offended.

Ryal blinked. "It—they stopped sending meals, so we—"

"What?" Efran straightened off the counter. "Why?"

"I don't know," Ryal shrugged. "But it's not that important—"

“It is to me. I ordered three meals a day sent down to you, and never changed that order. How long ago did it stop?” Efran said, his jaw hard.

Again, Ryal shrugged. “I—can’t remember. Three weeks? I’m not sure. It’s not an issue, Efran.”

“I’m glad you’re not suffering. Someone will be, shortly. Now. What did you need?” Efran asked.

Somewhat disoriented, Ryal had to think a moment. “Oh,” he exhaled when he remembered. “I sent one of your men, Fellowes, down to Follriott’s and Reinagle’s streets to knock on doors and ask questions, specifically, if anyone saw a man in a mask loitering about. He thoroughly canvassed the area, but no one saw anything. And Tourse came to pick up the mask, so I asked him where it had been stolen from. He then confessed that his wife reminded him that he had accidentally left it on a table at Croft’s, and that’s where it disappeared from.

“So,” Ryal ended, “unless something further comes to light, I don’t see anything more we can do for either Follriott or Reinagle, except ask them to hide their money and lock their doors.”

“Right, unfortunately,” Efran said.

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Chapter 9

Giardi then entered the shop with a food basket. “Oh, hello, Efran! Where is Minka and your baby?”

“Hello, Giardini.” He turned, smiling. “They’re talking with the ridiculous snobbles eater. Oh, that smells good.” He looked on as she opened her basket to take out two boxes.

“I’m sorry, I only got two dinners. Else I would love for you to eat with us,” she said.

As Ryal opened his box, Efran blinked at it. “You have ham.”

“Yes,” Giardi said. “It’s expensive, but Croft’s seemed to have plenty.”

“Really,” Efran breathed. “All right, then. Happy dining. I’ll be by again later, Ryal.”

“Yes, Efran,” he said, nodding, as he opened his lager. “Oh—” Ryal remembered. “Did you see DePew’s statue? Or rather, what’s left of it.”

“I’ll have a look,” Efran said cautiously. It was two days ago that he and Ryal had seen the gold disappearing from it.

Taking care for the cross traffic, Efran went to the middle of the street where the statue had stood. The commemorative stone was still there, but behind it was a blackish lump that barely resembled the shape of DePew pointing upward in his luxurious robe. Even that lump was dissolving now.

As he was studying this, the butcher Lowry pulled his cart to a stop beside him. “Lord Efran, can you make DePew’s people haul off this stone? It’s in everyone’s way.”

“Yes, I’ll send someone to talk to them,” Efran said distractedly. He then glanced up at his fully laden cart. “Are you taking all that to the fortress?”

“Yes. Goodness, your people have tripled their order of meat in the last few weeks. Your army up there must have exploded,” Lowry noted.

“What all have you got there?” Efran asked, looking.

“Everything. Beef, chicken, duck, lamb, pork,” Lowry ticked off.

Efran studied him. “And you’ve been delivering all this for weeks?”

“Yes. Haven’t you been eating it?” Lowry asked.

“We will be,” Efran muttered. “Carry on.” With a nod, Lowry guided his cart around the obstructive stone.

Retreating to the western sidewalk, Efran glanced up for the nearest soldier. Down the block, Mohr saw him raise his face, so he trotted over. “Captain?” he saluted.

“Yes, Mohr,” Efran said, “Go tell DePew’s people to remove the stone from the street. And—what’s left of that wooden notice. Tell them to clean all that up.”

“Yes, Captain.” Mohr turned to dart between buildings to the new northbound road, weaving around carts and horses.

With set jaw, Efran returned to the bottom of the hill where the children had been talking to Jonguitud. The hydra had gone back into the caverns to hunt snobbles, and the children were now progressing toward Main with their bodyguards. They stopped upon Efran’s approach, Toby asking, “Will you come to the hut with us, Efran?”

“It will have to be later, Toby; I’ve got some work to do right now,” Efran replied. Toby nodded and Efran took up Joshua from the cart. The baby patted his shoulder. “Will you walk with me, Lady?” Efran asked Minka, who still held the cart handle.

“Of course,” she said, studying him. His formality meant bad news for someone.

So while the children and their bodyguards progressed north on Main, Efran carried Joshua beside Minka as she hauled the empty cart up the switchback. Seeing Lowry drive his wagon through the grocer’s gate, he told her, “We seem to have a great deal of meat going into the fortress that’s not making it to the tables.”

“What? Why?” she asked.

“Wait; we’re going to find out,” he said, the wheels turning behind his eyes. They went down the fortress corridor to drop off Joshua in the nursery for fresh wraps and a nap. From there, she left the cart beside the steps at the back door, and they went across the grounds to the gate in the iron fence leading to the woods.

“Are you looking for Pia?” she asked, as they passed into the shade of large trees.

“No, Lwoff,” he replied. “Ah. Evrard,” he said, raising his face to Lwoff’s assistant. He had just emerged from the first of two armories on the hilltop.

“Captain,” Evrard said, saluting. “Lady Minka,” he acknowledged, and she smiled at him.

“Where is Lwoff?” Efran asked.

“At the new pig enclosures, just over there, sir,” Evrard said, pointing to the west.

“New pig enclosures,” Efran repeated.

“Yes, Captain; there’s been such a high demand, we bought two more sows. There he is,” Evrard noted.

Lwoff was ambling happily toward them. “Ayah, Cap’n! Lady Minka. Come to see our new ladies?”

“Yes,” Efran said, following him with Minka in hand.

“We can hardly keep you stocked, but I know the men got to have their pork,” Lwoff said happily.

“Yes, we do,” Efran said. Minka looked over with wide eyes. Although she didn’t care for pork herself, she was aware of the conspicuous absence of it in any form on the tables.

They stopped by a large, stone-reinforced pen with two sows and their litters. In the area were three more pens. “You’ll let me keep the sows to breed, won’t you, Cap’n? It costs a lot to keep buying ’em,” Lwoff said.

“Of course,” Efran said. “Who in the kitchen gives you the orders?”

“Ah, Dwan, usually, sometimes Hiskey,” Lwoff said.

“Very good. Carry on,” Efran said, patting his shoulder. Lwoff saluted with a mildly quizzical look. But Efran turned with Minka back toward the fortress.

He took her to the door of the kitchen, placing her firmly in the corridor out of sight of anyone within. “Wait here,” he said. She nodded blankly.

Efran stuck his head into the kitchen to look around, asking, “Did you have a rat catcher back here?”

Several people looked over, including Goyne. He said, “That’s me, Captain. I’m working on it.”

“Good, I’m going to pull you away for a minute to catch a few upstairs. Oh, Madea. You come with me, too,” Efran said lightly.

She sighed, “Efran, can it wait? I have so much—”

“It’ll only be a moment; I promise,” he assured her. He did not like her weary, haggard look.

“If you insist,” she said, tossing down an accounts book. As Dobell was reaching for it, Efran stepped in to pick it up. Then he placed a hand at Madea’s back to escort her out, only checking to see that Goyne was following.

Minka silently accompanied them to the second-floor workroom, where he seated Madea at the large table while Estes and DeWitt looked on. When Goyne and Minka had sat, Efran shut the door.

He tossed the accounts book to DeWitt. Estes leaned over to look at it as well while Efran threw himself down to

his chair. "I apologize for hauling you out early, Goyne, but the situation seems to have become a little more urgent. You've had only—what?—four days? Have you found out anything?"

Goyne replied, "Yes, Captain, I was about to request a meeting." He glanced uncertainly at Madea, who had turned to study him.

But Efran said, "Speak freely, Goyne."

"Yes, sir. Well, the upshot is, three of Madea's assistants appear to be over-ordering and then reselling the excess to various eateries around the Lands, particularly Croft's and Firmin's, but also Imelda's and Elvey's, strangely enough. Averde was apparently approached, but declined. It probably looked suspicious to him," Goyne began.

Madea said angrily, "Dobell. He's been doing that behind my back, which is why I finally asked to look at the books." She nodded toward the one that Estes and DeWitt were scrutinizing.

DeWitt muttered, "This is ridiculous. There's enough purchases here to feed our army at its height. Lavishly."

Efran went to the door to tell the sentry, "Get me six men up here quickly."

As the sentry saluted and ran off, Efran looked back at the table, where Madea sat crying. "I kept asking why we weren't getting enough meats in, and they always had an excuse about the weather or the competition from the eateries. And then I didn't have enough ingredients for the baked goods that the ladies prefer—oh, I can't believe this is happening. All I wanted to do is cook, but this record-keeping is a nightmare."

Efran said, "Don't worry, Madea; we'll take care of it. You'll have what you need to cook, and someone reliable will look after your books."

To the first two men who appeared at the door, Tiras and Whobrey, Efran said, "Go stand at the front door and back door of the kitchen. No one is to take anything out."

"Captain!" They saluted and sprang away, and Efran did not tell them not to run down the stairs.

As the remaining four men arrived, Efran instructed each of them in turn to go to Croft's, Firmin's, Imelda's, and Elvey's to ask what they were ordering from the fortress and from whom. When they had departed, Efran sat again, but left the door open to the two sentries who were standing outside.

Efran sat thinking, eyes on the faerie tree. Then he looked to Goyne. "Who was doing the reselling?"

Goyne replied with a nod to Madea, "Dobell, as the kitchen mistress said. Also Dwan and Hiskey."

"As Lwoff told us," Efran remarked to Minka, who nodded. He exhaled, "Who in the kitchen is reliable?"

Goyne answered, "A girl named Maryton does the work of three people."

"Maryton's reliable," Madea agreed. "Loghry was a good worker, but he left. I think Dobell ran him off because he was seeing too much."

Efran turned his head to whistle, and Finn stepped in. Before he could speak or hardly salute, Efran told him, "Find Loghry, who used to work in the kitchen. Bring him back."

“Captain,” Finn saluted before disappearing.

“Who else is worth keeping?” Efran asked both Goyne and Madea.

Goyne deferred to her, and Madea said, “Durgin. He’s been fighting with Dobell; I didn’t know what about until today. Cioffi has been a good friend, but I think she’s about to leave because Dwan has been horrible to her. Asti is also a good worker. I don’t know what Tubridy has been doing.” She looked questioningly to Goyne.

“Lying around, mostly,” Goyne said. “But he knew about the scheme; occasionally helped Hiskey make deliveries, for which he got tipped.”

“All right, he’s gone,” Efran said. “Who does that leave?”

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Chapter 10

Madea, distracted, looked to Goyne, who said, “Rynne and Bua, who mostly show up to eat. They occasionally made deliveries, as well. ”

“They’re gone. Does that leave you enough staff, or do we need to hire more?” Efran asked Madea.

“Oh, Efran, can I have my children help me in the kitchen? I miss them, and they’re good workers,” she said.

He looked confused. “I thought they were here.”

“They were, but Dobell told me the fortress didn’t allow children in the kitchen, so I sent them to stay with my sister down below,” she said.

Efran began swaying. “How long ago was that?”

“About a week,” she exhaled.

Efran whistled again; Eustace sprang in, saluting. “Captain!” Realizing that something was afoot, men had begun gathering outside the workroom.

Efran said, “Take two men down to Madea’s sister’s house—” He looked to her for more information.

“Bari,” she said. “She’s in number thirty-three in the western section.”

Efran resumed, “Get two men to go with you to Bari’s house at number thirty-three in the western section to collect Madea’s children and their things and bring them back up here. Estes, help me find where in the fortress to put them.”

“Of course, Efran.” Estes stood to pull out a large book of fortress layouts, which he brought over to Madea.

While those in the workroom waited, discussing options, the men that had been sent to the eateries began coming back with their reports. Croft’s purchasing agent Gilhooley was buying a lot of meats from Dobell.

Firmin often bought meats from Hiskey, who also sold a great deal of fresh greens to Imelda. Dierksheide at Elvey's frequently bought prepared, packaged dinners from Dwan.

"Prepared dinners," DeWitt repeated in disbelief. "They're running several businesses off the Fortress."

Efran sat back, laughing bitterly. "This is amazing. They would have fit right in at the palace in Westford."

Estes said, "I'm afraid this surpasses what could have been done at Westford. No, this rises to EurAsian heights." Goyne snorted; DeWitt nodded in agreement, eyebrows arched.

Madea daubed at her wet eyes. "Thank you for helping me, Efran."

"Madea," Efran said through gritted teeth, "why didn't you *tell me*?"

"I didn't realize. . . ." She shook her head. "I didn't know what was happening. I thought it was my fault."

Estes said, "Madea, from now on, you must come tell us when something makes you uncomfortable."

"I know. Thank you, Estes," she said.

There was a brief silence, then Efran mused, "Croft's, Firmin's and Elvey's have been longtime friends of the Fortress. Why would they do this?"

DeWitt said, "They probably think it's all above board, Efran."

"Really? There's nothing slightly suspicious about kitchen help selling Fortress provisions? Well, then. We'll nudge that perception along," Efran said, smiling tightly.

Turning to Dango at the door, he asked, "How many men have we got here?"

Dango glanced back in the corridor, then said, "At least ten, Captain."

"Shove in the first two," Efran said, smiling at Minka. She raised an eyebrow at his devious face.

Jehan and Coish appeared, saluting. "Yes, Captain?" Coish said.

But Jehan, grinning, looked down the table to add, "Hello, Lady Minka."

"Hello, Jehan, Coish," she said fondly.

Efran said humorously, "At ease, Coish; greetings to the Lady are permitted. But today your task is to collect Dobell from the kitchen. He's to gather his belongings quickly, then you will escort him to Croft's as his new purchasing agent. All you need do is announce it and leave him there; let them work out the details."

"Yes, Captain!" The pair saluted and ran out, as this smacked of something fun.

Those at the table were left with jaws hanging or heads shaking. "Efran—" DeWitt began, laughing in disbelief.

"Shut up," Efran said in satisfaction.

Two more men were enlisted to take Hiskey to Firmin's, and another pair were to take Dwan to Elvey's. At this point, Efran looked at DeWitt. "Dierksheide at Elvey's? Who's that?"

DeWitt shook his head; Minka said, "I believe that's her accountant, Efran."

"Oh," he said, enlightened. "So her accountant is buying prepared dinners from the Fortress since Dwan charged him less than what they would cost from Croft's or Firmin's."

"Probably, yes," DeWitt agreed, and Estes nodded firmly.

"Then don't take Dwan to Dierksheide," Efran told Stourt and Bennard. "Take him to Elvey herself. Dwan will be her new purchasing agent for cheap prepared dinners, with or without Dierksheide; I don't know. Anyway, you're just to announce it and leave them to figure it out." His soldiers saluted and departed with malicious smiles.

"Oh, yes, I forgot," Goyne began, and the administrators looked at him in astonishment: there was *more*? Goyne went on, "All these businesses also bought ales and lagers from all three—Dobell, Dwan, and Hiskey. Since the Fortress buys great quantities wholesale from Delano's, the kitchen assistants could sell them cheaper than the businesses could buy them straight from Delano's themselves."

Efran looked at DeWitt. "Do you remember how quickly the new Goadby's vanished that Gabriel, Stites and Numan bought at Crescent Hollow?" That was a little over four months ago.

"Yes," DeWitt said, nodding slowly. "This reselling scheme probably started with the ales, and expanded to food later on."

Efran's face was hard. "You can't tell me that Croft and Elvey and Firmin thought it was fine for Fortress kitchen helpers to sell cases of Delano's."

"It looks bad," DeWitt admitted. Estes looked depressed.

Since they acknowledged that, Efran moved on. "Now, we need to get rid of . . . who else?"

"Tubridy, Rynne, and Bua," Goyne said.

Efran whistled again, and the next pair of men appeared in the room, eager to hear their assignment. "Now," Efran began, "you're to collect Tubridy, Rynne, and Bua and their belongings from the kitchen environs and take them to. . . ." His brow creased, and he looked around for suggestions.

Minka said, "You left out Imelda's Beauty Potions. Surely she needs help."

Efran looked at her in delight. "You are so right, my celestial object, my lodestar. Yes, take those three to Imelda's. They'll procure greens for her, and possibly charcoal." Minka snorted.

As the men saluted and left, DeWitt sank back helplessly. "Efran, I don't know how much more of this I can take."

"Oh, I've only just begun," Efran assured him. "Estes, can we make Goyne kitchen administrator? To take care of all the paperwork so that Madea can cook?"

“Yes, if he and Madea are willing,” Estes said.

Madea and Goyne looked at each other. She said, “That would be wonderful.”

“I’d consider it an honor, Captain. Steward. Administrator,” Goyne said.

“All right, go on down and help her get organized, once the kitchen is cleaned out,” Efran said. As those two stood, he asked Goyne, “Oh—did you catch any rats?”

“Three, Captain,” Goyne said proudly.

“Are there more?” Efran asked.

“I don’t think so, but if there are, I know what to do,” Goyne said confidently.

Efran laughed, “Pay him well, Estes.”

“I’d say he earned his annual salary three times over today,” Estes agreed.

Efran stood in satisfaction, extending a hand to Minka. As she stood, he told DeWitt, “Route any reports to me at the training pens.”

“Very good, Efran,” DeWitt said dryly. “Nice to see you, Minka.”

“And it’s nice to see you all smile so much,” Minka said warmly.

Efran told her, “Just wait until we have ham at dinner again.”

He and Minka went down to the nursery to get Joshua. Before they even got there, they heard him banging on the door, calling, “Papapa! Wide! Wide!”

Efran turned a delighted face to Minka, and she grinned back. He arrived at the half-door to look down on his son. “Do you want to ride, Joshua?”

“Wide!” he cried happily.

“Well, let’s do that. We don’t need a sling today, Cordelia, but probably a teething rag,” Efran said.

“Very good, Lord Efran,” she said, handing the baby a fresh rag. He chomped down on it furiously.

After hoisting the chunky toddler to his shoulder, Efran paused to look down at Minka’s feet. “Let’s stop by our quarters to get you some boots,” he suggested.

“Yes, oh, yes,” she said.

This they did, and when she exited their quarters properly shod for the training pen, they went out the western door, which led directly to the pens. Efran put Joshua down beside Minka outside one pen while he went back to the stables to saddle Soup. Joshua pulled himself to his feet by means of the lowest railing, then hung on it to watch for Papapa to come out with his ride.

Minka was excited to watch with him. When he saw Papapa leading Soup out of the stables, he raised a hand to cry, “Wide!” and Efran looked up with his beautiful smile. Minka fell in love with him all over again.

While Minka led Soup around the pen with Efran walking beside Joshua in the saddle, his men began bringing reports of the great kitchen clean-out. Jehan and Coish led one agitated man in a suit to the pen railing. When Efran reached them, Coish saluted and began, “Captain—”

But the suited individual interrupted, “Efran, what is this? Why are you sending us kitchen help that we’re supposed to hire?”

“I don’t know you,” Efran breathed.

The Polonti guards looked at the visitor in contempt. He paused, realizing that he had possibly overstepped. “Pardon, Lord Efran; I am Croft’s Purchasing Agent Gilhooley, and this Dobell shows up, telling me that I’m supposed to hire him.”

“Yes, after you bought a great deal of stolen Fortress supplies from him, you probably do want to give him something for keeping his mouth shut,” Efran said.

As the blood drained from his face, Gilhooley stared at him. Then he glanced around, blinking. “Well, ah, I didn’t realize—but, we’ll see what we can do.” Then he quickly walked off.

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Chapter 11

Grinning, the irrepressible Polonti youngsters looked after Gilhooley, then Coish said, “Give us another one, Captain.”

At the same time, Jehan was patting Joshua’s back. “You’re doing right well, Joshua.”

“Wide!” Joshua cried, thrusting forward so that he almost fell off.

Efran caught him, righting him on the saddle. Then he told Coish, “Keep me apprised of reports from the workroom.”

“Yes, Captain!” Coish and Jehan saluted, then ran to the western door. Efran and Minka resumed walking Joshua around the pen on Soup.

At this time, the Librarian was alone in the library, waiting. A young maid entered timidly, looking around. She evaluated the Librarian, who was now a small, elderly man with a kind face. “Good afternoon, Miss. I am the Librarian. How may I assist you?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “My name is Asti. I work in the kitchen. I’m supposed to be there now, but—it’s getting so—and, I don’t have any friends. No one cares about me. I don’t know how long I can—” She dropped her head as tears rolled down her face. “Oh. I’m sorry; I didn’t intend to drop all that on you. This was—”

She started to turn out again, but he said, "Please don't go." He lifted his hand, and the great old book of the Holy Canon threw itself down from the stand in the keep and began flopping unseen down the corridor. It groaned in the effort of keeping its old, fragile pages together, and did inadvertently knock the legs out from under a young Polonti guard running in the opposite direction. The boy lay there stunned for a moment, until his partner helped him up, chastising, "Don't run, stupid."

By this time, the great old book had reached the library for the Librarian to lean down and pick it up. Opening it, he said, "I believe you will find something helpful here, Asti."

Wiping her face, she turned dubiously to look at it. "Oh, that's just an old book." She paused as the pages spread out before her, then she blinked. "How is it getting so big?"

"It is very full of good things," he said. She watched, incredulous, as the book grew to practically encompass her. Peering at the pages, she saw a living, moving scene before her. There was a man sitting on a rock above a meadow where many people were sitting. He was speaking to them, and she heard him say, "Come to me, all you who are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Share my yoke, and learn from me, for I am gentle and kind, and will give your soul peace. You'll find my yoke easy, and your burdens lightened." [Matt. 11]

"What is this?" she whispered, surveying the edges of the page around the scene before her.

"It is a doorway," the Librarian said.

Then the man who was speaking to the crowd slipped down from the rock and turned to wave her over. Hesitantly, she stepped through the page to go to him. While those seated before him watched, he put an arm around her shoulders, lowering his head to speak to her. She listened, nodding once or twice, then he placed a hand on her head as though imparting something.

He gestured to the doorway of pages, and she turned to walk back into the library. But her face was different; she was free of the pain. Smiling, she looked at the Librarian, and reached out to hug him. He almost lost his glasses for surprise.

"I can do it now," she said, breathing deeply. "I don't know what happened, but I can go back and face whatever's there. Thank you," she said. Her eyes were teary again, but they were tears of a different kind.

And when she walked out of the library, it was with a new aura of peace and self-worth. Then the doorway shrank to become an old book in the Librarian's arms again.

"She hugged me," the Librarian whispered in awe. No one had ever hugged him, not even Lady Minka. He grew several feet in joy, hugging the book he held. But it ruffled its pages in aggravation, so that he said apologetically, "Oh, yes, you're due back."

Earnshaw stuck his head in the door. "Pardon me, Librarian, but it's almost time for readings and I can't find— oh, you have it. Are you done with it?"

"Yes, Earnshaw, and you're welcome to it." The Librarian extended the great old book to him. Earnshaw took it with a nod and hurried back to the keep.

"She hugged me," the Librarian mused again, listing slightly.

Shortly thereafter, Jehan and Coish were running back to the pen from the fortress. They saluted the Captain,

then followed on the outside of the pen as he continued to walk his son on Soup with Minka leading. Coish said, “Captain, the kitchen administrator Goyne has found a great stash of all kinds of food and ale and even bags of royals in a cold storage room. It was all hidden behind a divider that said, ‘WARNING: SNOBBLES’ on it. And the best part is, there were receipts!”

Efran almost stopped walking, but Joshua threatened to bounce on the saddle, so he continued around the pen as he asked, “Receipts for what? Who from?”

Jehan interjected, “From the places that bought the supplies, and how much they paid! The goods weren’t delivered yet. Some of them were supposed to go out yesterday, more today.”

Efran breathed, “They paid in advance? Oh, that’s rich. I assume that Goyne is sending the money and receipts up to the workroom.”

Coish said, “Yes, Captain, and all the food and drinks are being taken back to the kitchen. The workers are all just laughing themselves silly. Madea is crying.”

“Oh my,” Efran said, looking back to Minka, who was grinning. “All right; go find out more,” he said, nodding to the boys, who ran off again.

When Joshua almost fell off from exhaustion, Efran surrendered Soup to Jasque and carried his son back to the nursery for a bottle. Minka held Efran’s arm, chortling, “How fun is all this?”

Efran kissed her head. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself. I suppose we’d better get back up to the workroom. But let’s check the kitchen, first.”

“Yes!” she said, sounding like Jehan.

At the kitchen door, they looked in at a happy tumult—Maryton, Cioffi, and Asti were talking excitedly over baskets of fresh salad greens, asparagus, and peaches which they were washing by the bucket loads. Loghry was back at work, carrying in crates of live piglets while Durgin hauled in loads of firewood. Madea’s four children ran among them, delivering water, tools, fresh towels, or yet more produce from the back gardens.

Madea was directing them all like a music conductor, but she stopped upon seeing the two in the doorway. “Oh, Efran. Minka! Dinner will be a little late, but it will be special.”

“That’s wonderful, Madea,” Efran said, smiling at her son Wardly, who had paused just long enough to greet him. Efran told her, “We’re so glad to see you happy again.”

She hardly heard him for addressing a question about lard for the pastries. Efran sighed in contentment as he took Minka’s hand to lead her up the stairway. “Now let’s see what those receipts look like,” he said.

“I can hardly wait,” she said, brows lifted.

They entered the workroom to see Estes and DeWitt conferring over a notebook as Goyne stood over them, placing loose sheets of paper beside them one at a time. (Jehan and Coish were standing by, waiting for orders.) Estes glanced up at the newcomers to say, “This was a rather sophisticated operation. And they had orders ready to go out today that totaled almost seventy royals.”

“Seventy royals,” Efran whispered. “And they paid in advance?”

Goyne said, “Yes, Captain. Dobell and his crew demanded the money up front, and then delivered by the clients’ deadline. Your men allowed Dobell to take only personal belongings from his room. When he had gone and they searched it, they found almost a hundred royals hidden in the wall.”

“How long has this been going on?” Efran asked.

DeWitt hesitated. “It’s hard to tell. We’re finding bookkeeping entries from as far back as mid-February [two months ago, *before* the insurrection]. But apparently that’s just when they got serious about it.”

Pleyel appeared at the door, saluting. “Captain, the kitchen just received this note from Croft’s.” And he handed a folded, sealed paper to Efran.

Efran glanced at the folded paper. “It’s addressed to ‘Kitchen Supervisor Dobell.’ Did he have a title?” he asked Goyne.

“No, Captain. Only Madea has a title, that of ‘Kitchen Mistress,’ which she never uses,” Goyne said.

“Of course not,” Efran muttered. He held it up thoughtfully. “What kind of letter does one send to a Kitchen Supervisor that must be sealed?”

“Love letters,” Estes said.

There were restrained gurgles in response. Efran said, “Well, let’s see who Dobell’s amour is, then. Ladies may want to stop their ears.” He and everyone glanced at Minka—the only lady in the room—who grinned.

After breaking the seal, Efran opened the paper to skim it, then laughed in disbelief, “It’s an order!”

“For what? And how much?” DeWitt demanded.

Efran read off, “Twenty pounds of beef, ten pounds of pork, ten pounds of venison steaks—which our men procure—and various vegetables for a total of thirty royals.” He looked up to add, “Which is far cheaper than what it would cost from Lowry, and one hundred percent of that is profit. Wait. There’s a postscript, which says, “For which you were paid yesterday.”

“So Dobell presented himself as Kitchen Supervisor to make it seem legitimate,” DeWitt mused.

Efran practically flailed the order. “He could call himself Emperor and they should still know to check with the Fortress administrators, especially for meats!”

“Agreed,” Estes said. “Apparently their bookkeepers didn’t want to bother.”

Minka asked, “That just now came from Croft’s?” Efran looked at the order again, then nodded. She said, “But his Purchasing Agent Gilhooley just talked to you an hour ago about Dobell coming to him for a job.”

Efran burst out in a laugh, “You’re right!”

“Well—could that order be from Dobell?” she asked. The men stared at each other, then collapsed in disbelieving laughter.

“Probably,” Efran finally sighed, wiping his eyes. “He took a shot at it, just to see if it works.”

Another sentry, Shane, appeared at the door, saluting. “Captain, the kitchen worker Hiskey has returned; says that Firmin’s Staffing Coordinator threw him out with violence when he asked for work.”

The administrators looked at each other, laughing again. DeWitt said, “If I tried to make a story out of this, I’d be pilloried, it’s so unbelievable.”

“Well, Efran, what do we do with Hiskey?” Estes asked. The room stilled, everyone looking to the Captain.

With a glazed smile, Efran gazed at the faerie tree for inspiration. “What to do with Hiskey, who got thrown out of his former customer’s shop when he got caught. . . .” Then he turned his eyes back to the notebook in front of DeWitt. “Do any of those orders have Firmin’s name on them?”

“Yes. Seven or eight, at least,” DeWitt said, pulling out several loose sheets.

“Give me a nice fat one,” Efran said, extending his hand.

“Well . . . here. This one’s for twenty royals for the most desirable cuts,” DeWitt said, handing him a sheet.

Efran glanced at it, then handed it to Shane. “Tell Hiskey to take that to Firmin himself and offer to sell it to him. But Hiskey’s got to make sure Firmin knows that he was buying stolen supplies.”

Shane lost control of himself and guffawed. Then he quickly righted to salute. “Yes, Captain.”

“Dismissed,” Efran said, and Shane ran out. “Don’t run down the stairs,” Efran added quietly. DeWitt was holding his head in one hand.

Looking at Goyne, Efran said, “Go back to the kitchen; keep an eye on the activity and make sure to send up any more messages. Oh, and, resume sending meals to Ryal and Giardini, three meals a day, starting with dinner tonight. Shortly the price for meat will be going way up at all the eateries—if they can get it. Lowry makes fortress deliveries a priority, bless him.”

“Yes, Captain,” Goyne said happily, saluting.

They watched him walk out, and Efran noted, “That man was a good find, Estes.”

“Yes,” Estes agreed. “Oh, by the way, our dinner crowd thinned by over a third after the insurrection, so Madea will have that many fewer to cook for.”

“Oh, very good. And I’m sure DeWitt is still charging for guests,” Efran said.

“Yes, and the price just went up,” DeWitt said. Efran nodded in approval.

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Chapter 12

At that time, Krall came to the doorway of the second-floor workroom to salute. “Captain, Lady Elvey is here, asking to talk to you.”

A murmur went around the room. “Ah, Elvey,” Efran said, looking at Minka. She raised indifferent eyes to him. “All right, I don’t want to humiliate Elvey publicly, so—tell her Minka and I will meet her in the small dining room.”

“Yes, Captain.” Krall saluted and turned out with a professional bearing.

Turning to Estes, DeWitt asked, “Efran will come tell us about it, won’t he?”

“Yes, no fear,” Estes replied.

“Of course I will. Give me some of those receipts from her accountant,” Efran said, gesturing. DeWitt flipped through the loose pages, removing four to hand to him. “Very good,” Efran said as he glanced over them.

Taking Minka’s hand, he looked back at Jehan and Coish, who were watching with doglike eagerness. “You two may come stand at the door.”

“Yes, Captain,” Coish said, elbowing his partner before he could blurt anything. So he merely saluted with his partner.

As Efran and Minka preceded them out, Efran glanced back over his shoulder. “We will not run down the stairs.”

“No, we will not, Captain,” Coish said. Jehan kept quiet.

On the first floor, Efran and Minka approached the small dining room, where Jehan and Coish took up their positions outside the open door. Elvey was waiting impatiently, drumming her fingers and shifting. Seeing her alone, Efran spoke to Jehan, who peeled away from the door. Then Efran entered to seat Minka, and himself beside her.

Elvey exhaled, “Efran, what is this silliness—sending this ridiculous kitchen helper to demand a job ordering prepared dinners? I don’t understand.”

“I see that you don’t,” he said quietly. “Do you know how long you’ve been ordering prepared dinners from the Fortress?”

“From the Fortress? I thought they came from Croft’s,” she mused. “But what difference does it make? I don’t have anything to do with that; that’s Dierksheide’s job.”

“I’m sure it is. That’s why I’ve sent for him. We’ll just wait a moment,” Efran said.

Elvey exhaled, “Well, I hope this won’t take long; I’ve got to get back. We’re having a company-wide strategy meeting on how to compete with Trina.” Elvey looked grimly determined.

Efran squinted, looking aside. “What happened to Trina *and Challinor*?”

Elvey waved. “Oh, Challinor’s not with her anymore; I don’t know what happened. She did offer to come back and design for us, but her dresses were not very successful. What happened to Livy?” she demanded of Minka. “She came up with some good designs,” Elvey mused. She seemed to have forgotten not only who Livy reminded her of, but also the debacle with the EurAsian women’s expensive dresses. Nor did Elvey know that the best of Livy’s designs were borrowed from Ennemond and Minka.

Rather than address Livy’s whereabouts, Minka said, “I’d love to have some new riding dresses, and a pretty cloak to wear when—”

Elvey waved. “Oh, that’s not enough to sustain us; we need something boldly new and dynamic to compete with the ridiculous designs she comes up with. The ladies quickly get tired of yesterday’s clothes.”

Minka began, “But, that seems like a good reason to go back to the styles that endure, for when—”

“Oh, Minka,” Elvey said, rolling her eyes. Minka accepted defeat graciously and they waited in silence. But Efran noted the slight, and did not forget it.

Some minutes later, a winded Jehan appeared at the door to announce, “Elvey’s Dierksheide, Captain.”

And the irate, rumped, breathless accountant entered, casting a black look at the unrepentant sentry. Efran said, “Thank you for coming, Dierksheide. Have a seat next to Elvey, there.”

“I’m very busy, Efran. What is this about?” Dierksheide said.

Elvey told him, “It’s those boxed dinners, Dierksheide.”

“Boxed dinners,” he said stonily.

Efran brought out the receipts to lay them in front of the accountant. “When did you begin ordering from the fortress kitchen, Dierksheide?”

The accountant looked irritated. “I don’t know, a month ago?”

Efran looked at one receipt. “This is dated February eighteenth.”

“So two months ago,” Dierksheide shrugged.

“How did that come about?” Efran asked.

“What do you mean?” Dierksheide asked.

“How was it that you began ordering meals from the fortress kitchen?” Efran said slowly.

“Oh,” Dierksheide looked off in vague thought. “I believe one of your men suggested it.”

“Dwan?” Efran asked.

“Perhaps. I don’t know,” Dierksheide shrugged again.

Exasperated, Elvey asked, “Efran, why is this a problem?”

Efran replied. "You were buying stolen meals. The man who sold them to you stole food meant for the fortress residents and kept the money for himself."

After a brief silence, Elvey said, "Well, that was your problem, Efran. You shouldn't have allowed it."

Minka's eyes widened. Efran turned to Dierksheide again. "How did you place orders?"

"I sent a message up to Dwan," he replied.

"No one else?" Efran asked. Dierksheide shook his head, and Efran asked, "Why not?"

Dierksheide grunted, "He said it was most convenient to contact him."

"Why only him?" Efran asked.

"He didn't say," Dierksheide said blankly.

Efran then looked at Elvey. "What do you do with bills for dresses that you make for Minka or Ella?"

"We send them up to you," she said, irritated.

"To who?" Efran pressed.

"Anyone!" she said, even more irritated.

"Yes," Efran said. "Because anyone knows to take bills to Doane or Estes or DeWitt, as they are the only ones in the fortress authorized to pay for goods or services. But if you gave orders for prepared dinners to Doane or Estes or DeWitt, they would say, 'We don't supply dinners to Lands' businesses, you have to go to other Lands' businesses for that.'"

Elvey and Dierksheide were silent. So Efran asked him, "Who did you pay for these dinners?"

"Dwan," Dierksheide said woodenly.

"No one else?" Efran asked.

"No," Dierksheide said. Elvey looked at him, then.

"Why not? Why couldn't you just pay anyone at the fortress?" Efran asked.

Dierksheide sighed, "Dwan was my contact."

"Dwan was a thief, and no one but the other kitchen thieves knew what he was doing until today," Efran said. "I understand Elvey leaving that to you, but it's your responsibility to ask questions about where the goods you buy are coming from."

"I disagree," Dierksheide said. "It's my job to help Elvey's business make money. It's your job to keep track of your own workers. Besides, the Fortress can afford it; you're sitting on a Treasury full of gold."

“Ah,” Efran said, leaning back. “A like thief. Elvey, if you continue to employ him, you won’t see any more business from the Fortress.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Efran,” she said, perturbed.

“There it is,” Efran said, standing. “Thank you for coming by.”

Elvey and Dierksheide rose. He said, “I paid for an order that I haven’t received yet.”

“So?” Efran said. “Your supplier got caught.”

“Then I want a refund,” Dierksheide said.

Minka gaped at him in disbelief, but Efran replied, “Since Dwan is the one you paid, you have to get your refund from him. Goodbye.”

Elvey and Dierksheide both left disgruntled. As Efran and Minka emerged from the small dining room, he was accosted by another disgruntled group, that of ejected kitchen helpers. The only one Efran recognized was Dobell. Another entered the fortress doors from the courtyard while Efran was pinned in the foyer. Jehan and Coish watched eagerly for the Captain’s command to evict this disreputable group, all of them, all at once.

Efran said coolly, “Hello, Dobell. I assume these are your former coworkers. What can I do for you?”

Dobell said accusingly, “Croft had me thrown out; told me to not ever come back.”

The man beside him seethed, “Dierksheide laughed in my face, said I was to get him his order or refund his payment!” So this was Dwan, then.

The man who had just come in with a bright red spot on his cheekbone bawled, “Firmin punched me!” So that was presumably Hiskey.

One of the remaining three cried, “That crazy lady at Imelda’s stabbed me with her scissors!” And he pulled out his ripped shirt with spots of blood on it.

“She wasn’t having us to do anything,” one of the others grumbled, while the third looked on, aggrieved. So this group must comprise Tubridy, Rynne, and Bua.

As these six angry men converged on Efran with Minka pressing into his side, Jehan and Coish pushed in front of him, fists clenched and teeth bared. Other soldiers began collecting behind the men to wait on a word from the Captain.

But Efran nudged Jehan and Coish apart to clear the space in front of him. They stepped aside to watch him survey the six complainers. In restrained anger, he began: “What did you expect to happen when you got caught? Did you never stop to think about what we’d do? How did you justify enriching yourselves at the expense of the people who grow that food, who harvest it, catch it, clean it, butcher it?—but can’t eat any of it because *there’s none left*. It’s a shame these businesses didn’t throw you out the minute you suggested this scheme. They should have, because they’re all out a lot of money, and I’m glad!” he spat.

Mute, the six hesitantly backed off.

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Chapter 13

The observers in the foyer, increasing by the minute, watched the Captain eviscerate the kitchen thieves. The door guards, engrossed, blankly opened the doors for the gate guards to lean in and listen. Ella and Soames slipped up to watch. Captain Rigdon had entered from the back door. Estes, hearing the shouting clear up in the workroom, came off the stairs to look. Kitchen workers, including Goynes and Madea, stuck their heads out to witness their vindication. Doane could have heard every word sitting in his cubicle, but he limped to the door for a view.

In controlled rage, Efran went on, “Worse than your stealing from the Abbey is the grief you caused Madea, a widow caring for four children, a good woman and a wonderful cook. What were you thinking to tell her that she can’t have her children in the kitchen? Our charter is to *care for children* and you’re going to toss out our own so they won’t expose you?” he flamed Dobell, who flinched.

Efran took a moment to collect himself. In the silence around him, he went on, “I should evict you from the Lands for this, but there are working families in the eastern Lands I want you to leave alone. Also, Rimbault and Lemmerz always need laborers; you have permission to work for them, but not for the Fortress. You’ll never do any work for the Fortress again. And if anyone has a complaint against you that Ryal finds justified, I’ll have you stripped to your breeches before you’re evicted.”

In the utter stillness that followed, Efran lowered his head to whisper, “Now get out.”

The six turned to shove their way out the fortress doors, which stood wide open. The onlookers began to stir, looking at each other. Minka wrapped her arms around Efran’s chest as far as she could reach, so he put an arm around her and kissed her head. Looking up to the faerie tree roots descending from the ceiling, he said, “That was fun.”

A ripple of laughter crossed the foyer. Efran blinked in mild astonishment at the crowd, then said, “As you were.” They began dispersing, casting glances. As word spread through the fortress and grounds about what had happened, a silent seismic shift appeared in the relationship of the Fortress to the businesses on the Lands.

Those who remained at the Abbey fortress or in the army after the insurrection--and today’s eviction--were intensely loyal to the Abbey and to Efran, as its Lord and Captain. So they simply stopped going to Croft’s, Firmin’s, Elvey’s or Imelda’s. When they wanted to eat, they went to Averno’s (who had refused Dobell’s advances) or Shurtleff’s (who hadn’t been approached, given his temper and his possession of sharp knives). Also, one of the cattle-farming families on the eastern Lands headed by Minogue had just opened an eatery on the main road beside Lemmerz’ office and behind the new chapel. They were immediately besieged by meat lovers.

Fortress families who needed clothes patronized The Lands Clothing Shop. Fortress workers who didn’t have much to spend for clothes shopped at Flodie’s Oddities and Articles of Worth—a place Minka loved, considering what all she had found there. As for cosmetics—lip and cheek rouge, charcoal eyeliner, and face powder—Enon’s mother Dallarosa began making her own from raw supplies provided by other Lands businesses. These she packaged nicely and sold along with her tatting jewelry. Since she was a beautiful young woman, she had instant customers as well.

The effects of all that were not seen right away, not for days. Today, Efran paused in the foyer to watch the crowd disperse, then said, “All right, I suppose we had better go back upstairs.”

Coish saluted. “Permission to accompany you, Captain?”

“Granted,” Efran said distantly. Minka directed a subtle smile at Jehan behind her.

Madea’s oldest child Wardly was watching from the door of the kitchen when the Polonti Captain abruptly started walking toward him. After hearing the Captain savage a group of grown men, Wardly was motionless for fear until the Captain, seeing him, smiled at him in approval. Ruffling the boy’s head, the Captain said, “I’m glad you’re here to take care of your mother, Wardly. You’ll come tell me if anyone upsets her, won’t you?”

“Yes, Captain,” Wardly said.

“Good.” And the Captain started off again as his beautiful young wife smiled at Wardly as well. With that, he thought he would die of happiness on the spot.

As Efran and Minka approached the stairs, they heard the pounding on the nursery half-door and the toddler shouting, “Papapa!” Nakam was sitting by the door; seeing them approach, he stood to bark.

Minka looked laughingly at Efran. Exhaling, he came to the half-door to look down. “What can I do for you?” he asked facetiously.

Leaning on the door to stand, Joshua looked up, grinning. “Nakam, Papa!”

His parents exchanged pleased glances at another new word. Minka picked up the dog while Efran leaned over the door to lift the toddler. With Joshua patting his shoulder, Efran told the nursery worker, “I have him, Felice.”

“Very good, Lord Efran. Do you need the sling?” she asked.

“Not now, but a teething rag might help save the furniture legs,” Efran said. Laughing, she went to the supply closet for a tough rag, which Joshua accepted.

Followed by their bodyguard, Efran and Minka took their respective babies upstairs to release them under the worktable. Efran dropped into his chair at the head, reaching over to catch Minka before she made it to another chair. Jehan and Coish positioned themselves in the corridor on either side of the door, which meant that Corwyn and Serrano, who had been there, were displaced to the opposite wall. This they accepted because all of them were expecting, or hoping for, further turmoil.

As Efran pulled Minka down to his lap, DeWitt leaned forward on the worksheets in front of him. “Do you feel better?”

Smiling, Estes glanced at both of them. Efran said, “Yes.” He thought for a minute, then said, “Minka helped me see how the insurrection was—something of a necessity. A—pruning. It was something I couldn’t do myself, but for the integrity of our mission, it had to happen. So all I had to do today was enlarge that, a little.”

“I can see that,” Estes said. DeWitt nodded. Minka grinned.

Dinner that evening was like coming home. There were three kinds of meats—ham, venison, and beef—plenty

of ale and lager, custards, pies, twisty rolls (always a favorite), asparagus and fresh greens, all at once. The hall was considerably less crowded, as well. Reinagle came alone, and grudgingly paid, but his former bodyguard Lambdin and his son Henris ate for free with the men of their regiment (Captain Towner's), who accepted both Eurusians as worthy members.

Ella's half-brother Cyneheard, also Eurusian (having attended University there) was something of a celebrity, being Regiment #3's javelin champion. He was also developing proficiency with the sling, which the Polonti were teaching him. Incidentally, the former Featheringham guard Dolivo was hardly aware of the insurrection, much less a part of it, as his humorously abusive classes instructing the Polonti in reading and writing had continued without interruption.

The best part of dinner, however, was Madea's flowing through the hall to greet diners and receive their warm appreciation for the wonderful dishes she and her crew had prepared. Another best part was her children greeting their friends after their week-long absence. And afterward, when Toby, Noah, Tarrant, Hassie, Jera and Wardly went roaming over the tables for leftover desserts, some diners deliberately left theirs unfinished. But the children were not snitching; they paid for the privilege by cleaning tables and washing dishes.

By the following day, April 11th, the two longest-established Lands eateries, Croft's and Firmin's, began to feel the effects of the sudden shutdown of their months' long reliance on good, cheap meats from the Fortress. Croft's Gilhooley had been quick enough to put in orders with Lowry late yesterday, but having defected from Lowry once, Croft's was put at the back of the line, and that for inferior cuts. As always, the Fortress was at the top.

Tragically, Firmin's ordering agent Humblecut had decided just yesterday to stop ordering from Hiskey. Unlike his competitor Gilhooley, however, Humblecut was unaware of the great kitchen awakening that had taken place yesterday. Humblecut had had a bad feeling about Hiskey for some time, but when every fulfilled order of prime meats and cheap Delano's resulted in praise from customers and a raise from Firmin, Humblecut always submitted one more order. Just one more, and then he'd go back to the regular system.

However, when their prepaid order of yesterday never arrived, he decided now was the time to drop the hammer. And when Firmin had asked him yesterday in great indignation about this idiot Hiskey, Humblecut had prevaricated, "We're not ordering anything from him."

"Well, what the devil was that idiot thinking, trying to blackmail me with this fake order?" Firmin ranted, upon which Humblecut almost passed out.

But today, they were out of all Delano's except the hard ale, and the kitchen was asking for their usual prime cuts for their most requested dishes. So Humblecut had a job before him.

First thing, he sent an errand boy to Delano's to order a case of mild ale and a case of lager to be paid at the end of the month. Then he took out the strongbox to see what Firmin had allotted for ordering today. With a sick feeling, he saw that the apportionment was based on what had been spent over the last month or so. Humblecut doubted he could get those same deals without Hiskey.

At that time, the errand boy returned to say, "Heya, Madgwick says they got so many orders, yer can't get 'em unless yer pay. She give me the price list here."

Humblecut took the paper in shaking hands, then gasped, "That's—that's twice what I was paying! It's—oh, dear. All right, think. Think. All right, here." He gave the boy two royals. "Get us a half-case of mild ale and a half-case of lager. But you've got to bring it back with you."

“Right-o,” the boy said, and left again.

“All right, now. Meats.” Humblecut wiped his sweating brow. Emptying the day’s apportionment into his pocket, he took up his walking stick and placed his fine tall hat on his head to venture into the markets. He had been spared this plebeian undertaking by his arrangement with Hiskey.

First, he stopped at Lowry’s storefront. Here, Humblecut was a little nonplussed to see no one waiting in line. So he walked right up to Lowry’s son Hux standing behind the counter, juggling three boning hooks. “I need your best cuts of beef,” Humblecut said, sweating.

“We got flanks, shanks and rounds to your left, there,” Hux said, eyes on his flying hooks.

Humblecut looked at the slightly browning cuts in dismay. “No, no—I need tenderloin and ribeye.”

Hux emitted a high-pitched laugh, dropping two of the hooks. “Leave a deposit of five royals and come back tomorrow afternoon. Maybe the day after.” He bent to pick up his boning hooks and resume juggling.

“Five royals,” Humblecut gasped. That’s all he had in his pocket for ordering meats for the whole day. “Well, then. All right, give me the—the flank, shank and rounds.” The kitchen could use those, surely.

“Will do.” Hux laid aside the hooks to wrap up the six cuts. “That’s six royals.”

“What?” gasped Humblecut.

Hux eyed him. “Six. Royals.”

“Oh. Then, forget the—the flank. Just give me the shank and rounds,” Humblecut said, extracting his fine linen handkerchief to wipe his brow.

“All right.” Hux laid aside two wrapped packages, then said, “That’s four royals.”

“Four. Yes. Here you go.” With a trembling hand, Humblecut handed him the four coins, which Hux studied before handing him the wrapped meats.

“There you are, then. Have a good day,” Hux said, only mildly sardonic.

“Yes, you as well,” Humblecut said, attempting courtesy as he took the two small packages in hand to return to Firmin’s by the back door.

Almost as soon as he had walked in, the boy returned with two sacks of Delano’s. When he set them on the table, Humblecut waved the shanks and rounds angrily. “What is this? I ordered two half cases, which together make a case!”

“Yeah, but yer give me only two royals. That buys yer fifteen bottles, so Madgwick gives yer seven of ale and eight of lager, as the lager seems most popular right now,” the boy lectured.

“Fifteen bottles for the rest of the day,” Humblecut breathed. On a busy day, Firmin’s would go through that many in an hour.

The boy looked at him in concern, as Humblecut suddenly looked catatonic. “Sir?”

“Yes.” Through force of will, Humblecut snapped out of it. He knew what to do. “Take these to the kitchen, and the bottles to the bar. We’re owed an order, and I’m going to retrieve it.” His bearing became that of steel.

“All righty,” the boy said dubiously. With the bags of bottles on one arm and the leaky packages in the other hand, the boy went off to the kitchen first.

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Chapter 14

Humblecut went to his private quarters in the back of Firmin’s to freshen up. He washed his face and smoothed back his hair, surveying his reflection in the silvered glass mirror. “Now,” he said to himself, “I don’t know what they’re about, but I paid twelve royals for meats and ale which should have arrived yesterday. Oh, dear—if something untoward happened to Hiskey, my order is sitting in a storage room somewhere, probably unlabeled. So they don’t know who was to receive it. Yes. But, I don’t have a receipt. I can’t prove that was my order. Oh, but the Fortress keeps the receipts, as they gave one to Hiskey, who attempted to show it to Firmin as proof. Why did that make Firmin angry? Blackmail? Ohhh—because our order wasn’t delivered. Well, Hiskey thought it best to keep Firmin out of it, just between him and me, so that was it. I see.

“Now. I should take a carriage, as I will certainly need a conveyance for that much. I can’t carry all that down the switchback. Well, I have one royal left to tip one of the Polonti monkeys to carry it for me. Yes. Still, I wish Firmin hadn’t taken his carriage. I don’t have time to go hire one right now. So, walking it will be. Here we go.”

Setting his hat properly straight up, Humblecut brandished his walking stick before him to march up Main to the switchback. He did almost falter looking up the length of the winding road, but knowing the wrath of Firmin should Humblecut not secure the order that was missing, he straightened his waistcoat to begin marching upward.

He glanced up once or twice at the Polonti gate guards who were watching him without moving to offer any assistance at all. This only drove him all the more resolutely on.

When he finally reached the gate, red-faced and huffing, it was still closed to him. The insolent Polonti were looking at him in great curiosity. “What do you want?” the older and much larger of the two asked him.

“I am here to retrieve my missing order,” Humblecut said in his most authoritative voice.

“Order?” Both Polonti looked confused. “Order for what?” the elder asked.

“For Firmin’s Delightful Eatery,” Humblecut rumbled.

The two inhaled in instant recognition. “Firmin’s,” the younger laughed.

The elder said, “I’m sorry. You have no order waiting.”

Enraged by the youngster’s laughter at the hallowed name, Humblecut drew himself up to his most impressive height to state, “I certainly do have a *twelve-royal* order waiting for which I paid *in advance*, you sniveling monkey, and I fully intend to retrieve it.”

The younger looked at the older, who said without inflection, “The kitchen gate is to your left there, sir. You need to enter there to knock on the door at the end of the path and state your claim.” The younger looked back at Humblecut to nod affirmatively.

“Hmmp!” Humblecut straightened his waistcoat and marched over to the small gate in the fence, which he opened himself without difficulty. “I wonder why they don’t have that gate guarded. Hmmp.” From there, he took a curving path to the east side of the fortress. “Well. Here we are. The back kitchen door, evidently. It will be noisy inside, so I must make myself heard.” So he raised the brass knob of his cane to beat on the door.

In moments it was opened by a burly man in an apron who looked at him in puzzlement. “What do you want?”

“I am Humblecut, and I demand the order you have waiting for me,” he rumbled.

“Order . . . ?” the brute in the apron said carefully.

“Yes, for Firmin’s, you sniveling—” That’s all he got out before glimpsing something flying toward his face. Then he saw stars.

When he awoke a few minutes later, he was lying at the top of the switchback outside the gates. “Well, that’s. . . .” Humblecut struggled up to a sit. “They do not have my order, then. Well. All he had to do was say, ‘I do not have your order.’ So.”

The gate guards watched without expression as Humblecut got to his knees, then his feet, swaying. He collected his hat and walking stick that had been laid carefully beside him, and trod down the switchback.

At this time, Efran decided to take Joshua and Minka for a ride around the Lands. After asking for horses and bodyguards in the courtyard, he collected Minka from Law class with apologies. Soames said without exasperation, “We’re done, anyway.” Already in work clothes, Ella went flying to the training pens. She had a new foal to start on groundwork.

With Minka in hand, Efran stopped by the nursery where Joshua had just received a change of wraps. Cordelia asked, “Do you need the sling, Lord Efran?”

“Not now, Cordelia, thank you,” Efran said.

Grinning, Joshua said, “Wide, Papa!”

“Yes, but we’re doing it a little differently today,” Efran told him. So Joshua looked toward the front doors in anticipation.

In the courtyard, Efran was mildly surprised to see six horses and four bodyguards waiting. There had apparently been some contention as to who would serve as bodyguard today, for the four—Hawk, Doudney, Krall, and Eymor—broke off an obvious argument upon his appearance. They were also uncomfortably arrayed as Southerners versus Polonti.

Efran glanced at their salutes as one of the gate guards, Conte, assisted Minka up onto Gaunter. The other guard, Chilcott, watched them while occasionally checking on Firmin’s representative as he stumbled down the switchback. When Efran took hold of the pommel with his left hand while holding Joshua on his right arm, Kraken noted, *We’re leading a parade today. Yay.*

Efran did chuckle, glancing at Minka's arched brow. They all knew he disliked pulling men away from their duties to act as bodyguards for him, but he didn't want to reject anyone and Minka clearly expected to take them all. As he settled into the saddle, he glanced back at the four and muttered, "All right, there are going to be some eateries mad at me today, so be watchful. No swords? Then we'll need especially stern words."

The four laughed; Efran checked Minka to see the adoration in her eyes, so he was satisfied. Then she looked to see what he was going to do with Joshua when he didn't have the sling.

Efran sat Joshua on his left thigh, holding him steady with his left arm while taking up the reins in his right hand. Kraken looked back, and Efran told him, "If you buck, you'll find yourself immediately a rug."

Kraken protested, *I've no quarrel with the boy. Just teach him to be respectful with the reins.* Grunting, Efran nudged him forward as Conte and Chilcott opened the gates wide. The others flowed down the switchback at a walk behind him. Joshua screeched in joy, raising a hand to Mama at his right and the men behind him. They waved back.

Efran took no note of the suited individual they passed walking down the switchback, only taking care to not crowd him. Rounding the next-to-last bend looking east, Efran checked the new switchback, now finished but for the paving, which had yet to be completed on the lower half. For all their angst in getting that started, it had gone quickly, once the men were motivated to dig. Efran let go of the reins for a moment to feel the healed stitches on the back of his head.

As they came off the switchback through the faerie trees, Efran was mildly startled by the number of people who waved or called greetings to—him? Minka? One of the bodyguards? Whoever they were calling to, Joshua looked over to wave and call, "Hiya!" back at them. This created such a sensation that people began coming out of shopfronts to wave particularly at the toddler. Efran looked inquiringly to Minka, who laughed at him. Men didn't understand the allure of babies.

Efran had to rein up quickly with one hand when Croft's Purchasing Agent Gilhooley stalked across Main outside a crosswalk. Kraken nipped at him in passing, barely missing the long tails of his coat. With a half-smile, Efran noted the anger in his stride, but didn't know that he was on his way to beg good beef cuts from Minogue at a premium price.

Croft, meanwhile, had stepped over to Delano's to inquire about the sudden doubling of their prices. Blinking, Delano explained that their prices had been the same since opening in the Lands five months ago. As Efran started Kraken walking again, he noted that the only remainder of DePew's golden statue—or DePew—was a dark gray stain in the middle of the road. The commemorative stone and crushed wooden board had been removed. The rest of it had evidently just blown away.

Efran raised his eyes in contemplation. How could it be that so many dire threats to their existence had just evaporated?—over and over again. *You have turned my mourning into dancing,* Therese's voice whispered from long ago. [Ps 30] "I wish you'd stop being right," Efran murmured.

I can't help it, Kraken replied.

"Shut up," Efran said.

"Shaup!" Joshua chortled, then looked over to Minka to cry, "Shaup!" Her eyes widened and Efran grimaced.

Firmin was standing outside of his shop, looking around in frustrated anger. He called out to Efran, who declined to notice. The bodyguards grinned at each other, Polonti and Southerner.

Efran began leading his group toward the wall gates to get a report from the gate sentries. One, Gaul, had just asked if anyone knew anything about the commotion at the fortress yesterday. Clough, who'd had a front-row seat, began a blow-by-blow account of the Captain's chastisement of the scamming kitchen workers. Commander Wendt, with his Seconds Barr and Gabriel, paused outside Barracks A to hear all this. While the front door stood open, they were shortly joined by Captain Towner and his scribe Viglian.

As Clough finished an animated recital of yesterday's proceedings, the Captain's family and bodyguard rode up to greetings, questions, and comments. But then they heard voices raised from halfway up Main, and everyone at the wall turned to look.

Humblecut, having made it down the switchback in rising anger, stumbled upon Gilhooley with an obvious armload of wrapped meats. Humblecut shouted, "Hey, there! What have you got?"

Gilhooley stared at him. "None of your business!"

He started to go around the irate, sweating obstruction, but Humblecut grabbed his arm. "Where did you get those?"

"Let go of me!" Gilhooley roared. Heads all down Main whipped around. Due to Humblecut's tugging, two packages slipped out of Gilhooley's arms to hit the street. "Look what you've done! Help! Thief!"

"I'll pay you for them," Humblecut gasped, taking them up to stuff under his jacket and run.

"Thief!" Gilhooley cried. He ran after Humblecut to bring him down by a coattail, losing the rest of his packages in the process. And they began grappling each other in a parody of two men fighting.

Everyone looked at Efran, who sighed, "Captain Towner, please send several men to take both gentlemen to Ryal, with their packages, to hear their complaints. And make sure that they do not abuse the notary."

"Yes, Captain," Towner said, saluting, and turned to gesture two nearby men to run up the street.

"I'm done here," Efran said (not having seen Wendt, who declined to draw attention to himself). Efran had a good idea of what the brouhaha was about and felt he'd contributed enough to it.

"We'll report to you, Captain," Towner said.

"Eh," Efran said, which caused more laughter. So he directed Kraken west on the last northern street of the walled Lands. Joshua turned on his father's arm to continue watching the fisticuffs up the street.

Efran, Joshua, and Minka, with their bodyguards, continued riding until they came within view of Flodie's. Efran said, "It's been a while; I thought we'd check to see what Flodie has."

"You don't want to go back to the fortress," Minka observed.

"Not quite yet," he admitted. "But Flodie's is still interesting."

The bodyguards drew straws to see who would remain outside, which turned out to be Hawk and Krall. So they

two entertained themselves flinging stones into the roaring Passage while Doudney and Eymor went in with the Captain, his Lady and their son.

They greeted Flodie, who was pleased to see them again. Then Efran took Joshua over to the toys to see what he liked. He looked around, patting several in halfhearted interest, as they were all like the toys that filled the nursery. Efran drifted over to the bookshelves while Joshua leaned over a box to dig around in it, then pulled out a snake that looked to be made of rubber.

Joshua laughed, waving it. Glancing over, Efran asked, "Did you find a snake?"

"Snek!" Joshua said, whipping it happily. And it began to curl around his arm.

"Oops." Efran trotted back over to unwind the snake from Joshua's arm and take it to the door. Hawk and Krall turned as he tossed the snake twenty feet into the grass. "Not a toy," he told them, and they looked cautiously at the place where it had landed.

Reentering the shop, Efran found Joshua pursuing him on hands and knees, crying, "Snek!"

Efran picked him up. "Let's see what Mama has found."

"Snek," Joshua sniffled.

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Chapter 15

Efran carried Joshua over to where Minka was picking out small shirts and pants. "Oh, good. Bring him here," she said. And she held up pieces to gauge how well they might fit him soon.

"Doesn't the nursery have clothes?" he asked, remembering the trunks of children's clothes he had found early on.

"I'm sure they do, but he's about to start walking, so I want to keep walkabout clothes for him in our quarters," she said. With that, she draped six or eight selections over her arm.

"Snek," Joshua complained.

"You're lucky it wasn't a biting snek," she told him, but he still looked disgruntled.

Minka took the clothes to Flodie at the counter, where Efran overpaid, as usual. Then he, Minka, and Joshua, with Eymor and Doudney, went out into a gorgeous early afternoon. They paused to take in the roiling Passage that rushed through the sluice gates of the mill toward the tannery and then the Sea. All around them, the greenery was varied and alive, with the dark green of the oaks and hickories across the Passage giving way to the swaying light greens of the meadowgrass and the bi-colored green and silver leaves of the faerie tree near the shop.

Handing Joshua to Krall, Efran strapped the bag of clothes behind his saddle. Then he looked toward Minka,

who was studying the faerie tree. He walked over to stand beside her, taking her hand. She murmured, "I don't remember seeing a faerie tree here."

He glanced up at it. "They seem to have gotten comfortable enough to spring up wherever they want."

"Probably," she said, turning. But she kept glancing back at it.

He helped her mount Gaunter, then hopped up on Kraken before reaching down for Joshua. Krall sat him on Efran's leg as before, and he began bouncing. "Wide!"

"We're on our way," Efran told him, turning Kraken. Joshua bounced in his desire to go faster, which Efran declined to do.

They all arrived back at the wall gates, where Efran paused to study Main as if it were enemy territory. "Anything from our street fighters?" he asked.

Gaul replied, "No, they're still in the notary's shop, Captain. But we saw Soames go out to bring both Croft and Firmin into the shop as well."

"Ah. Ryal getting to the heart of the issue, as usual," Efran noted. Then he mused, "So the question is, which is the safest route for us? Do we go on up to the fortress, where we may be ambushed on the way? Or do we hide among the crowds on Main and wait until our path is clear?" This speculation provoked laughter among the soldiers at the gates.

"Averne's has pie," Minka said.

"It is decided that we will shelter in place at Averne's," Efran directed his bodyguard, who nodded, saluted, or smiled.

As they turned, Joshua said, "Pie."

His father glanced at Minka. "Why is he talking so much all of a sudden?"

"Because you talk back to him," she said.

"All right," Efran said, digesting that. As they rode up the street, Joshua pointed to Averne's with the cursive lettering on its signboard. "Now you're scaring me," Efran muttered.

Although the midday rush had passed, Averne's was still crowded. Nonetheless, when Efran's group presented themselves, they were shown to prime tables in the front corner near the pond. "Oh, this is lovely," Minka said appreciatively.

Averne spread like a peacock. "We're delighted to serve you, Lady Minka."

She insisted that all the men eat, ordering them chicken pies and ales. They were glad to accept. Minka ordered tea and apple pie for herself, and a small piece for Joshua. Kraken whinnied from his post, so Efran requested that their horses be watered.

So they sat, talking and eating while Efran continually scanned the street. He noted Croft and Firmin coming out of Ryal's shop agitated, and both carrying packages. They were followed by their glum purchasing agents.

Then Efran watched Trina ride down the street on a liveried white horse, accompanied by two liveried attendants, all in purple. Embroidered on the horses' livery in gold was the appellation, "Empress Trina." She was wearing purple pants that looked suspiciously like Minka's except for the color. Also, she wore a short purple cloak trimmed in gold, with a gold crown on her elaborately coiffed head.

The diners at Averno watched her and her attendants ride by. Efran's men were silent, but someone behind them tittered, and soon there was muffled laughter from all over the outdoor dining area (except for Efran's party). Minka glanced up, but was concentrating on the wonderful pie and mint tea. Efran murmured, "There you go, being right again. Elvey should have listened to you." She shrugged indifferently.

Reinagle, spotting Efran, began to stride across Main outside the crosswalk toward him. Trina and her entourage had to pull abruptly out of his path, and she glared at him. One of Efran's men quietly groaned as Reinagle stopped in front of them, blocking their view of anything else, to sputter, "Efran, it's been *three days* since my gold was stolen, and you haven't done a thing!"

Efran sighed faintly, glancing away. But Folliott, having just emerged onto Main, saw his father Reinagle talking to Efran and ran over. "What? What have you found out?" Folliott demanded.

"Nothing!" Reinagle told Folliott in outrage. "He's done nothing about it but sit here and eat!"

They both looked at Efran in scandalized disbelief, who indifferently turned up his mild ale. At that time, Reinagle's servant Kustka ran up. "Master Reinagle, Croft has sent a notice that he's raising his price for boxed dinners, and they must be paid in advance."

"What?" Reinagle turned wrathfully to his servant.

Staring at Kustka, Folliott said, "You—you smell of onions! You're the one! You're the thief in the mask!"

When Reinagle turned a derisive eye to his son, all Kustka had to do was deny it. But he went pale, his face sagging in guilt-ridden dismay. While Reinagle began berating Folliott for the outlandish suggestion, Efran asked the servant, "Where did you hide it?"

"It's all still in the house," Kustka admitted dully.

Slack-jawed, Reinagle turned to him, and Efran said, "Go show them."

So Kustka shuffled back toward the house. Reinagle and Folliott followed him, talking excitedly. Kustka showed them both pouches of royals hidden in the back of a kitchen cabinet. Folliott took his pouch to his house, and Reinagle counted his. Finding it all there, he kept his servant because no one else would wait on him. Since Kustka must be punished, however, Reinagle diminished his dinners. But Kustka just ate off Reinagle's dinners before serving him, and the old man never knew.

When they had left the party at Averno's in peace, Minka turned her blue eyes to her husband. "What a brilliant detector of crime you are."

Efran raised his face to laugh, so Joshua did, too. "Pie," he said.

Still laughing, Efran said, "One piece is enough for you. Only Mama gets two."

“If you insist,” she said, looking for the waiter.

After Efran had overpaid Averne and they were rising to leave, Croft and Firmin jointly approached the Captain. His group had begun to sink back to their chairs, but seeing the Captain standing, they remained upright behind him. Minka noted uneasily that he had spread his feet in his fighting stance. He was tired of an issue he should have nothing to do with.

Croft requested plaintively, “Efran, may we speak to you?” Efran, holding Joshua, did not reply. He merely looked on Croft without expression.

As the Captain had been an early, effective supporter of Croft’s, this coldness was alarming. When Croft said nothing more, Firmin jumped into the gap. “Efran, you’ve put us in a bind, yanking supplies from us like this with no warning or opportunity to negotiate. Our purchasing agents are pulling out their hair. We feel you owe us a reset, or at least an explanation for this heavy-handedness.”

Croft heard Minka draw a sharp breath, and looked at her shocked face. Then he looked at Efran’s men behind him, who had been regular customers. Their faces were hard, pensive, or derisive. And Croft realized that something was very wrong.

Incognizant, Firmin made the near-fatal mistake of turning to Minka for support. Her eyes widened in warning, but Firmin opened his mouth. At the same moment, Croft took his arm, interrupting, “Let’s not bother them any more right now, Firmin; I think we need to clarify one or two points with our agents.”

Offended, Firmin turned on him. “Yes, Humblecut told me about this fake invoice—” He paused, as something didn’t seem right. “A fake invoice,” he repeated.

“An invoice? Who signed it?” Croft asked in alarm.

Firmin gazed off into the distance. “Hiskey,” he whispered. The man who had come to him threatening blackmail.

“Hiskey?” Croft repeated. “Who is he? At least Gilhooley has receipts signed by Kitchen Supervisor Dobell.”

“Dobell?” Firmin said derisively. “He’s just an assistant. He—” Firmin broke off as he and Croft stared at each other’s sick faces.

Averne approached to address the two. “Excuse me, gentlemen, but you’re impeding my customers, so I would appreciate it if you would be so kind as to take your argument elsewhere.”

Croft, pale, said, “Pardon us, Averne. Please pardon us, Lord Efran.” Then he turned to walk stiffly back to his establishment.

Firmin stood still for a moment, his mouth slightly ajar. Looking at Efran’s cold, unblinking eyes, he said tonelessly, “Excuse me,” and walked away unsteadily.

Efran’s bodyguard glanced at each other in amused gratification, and Minka breathed out in relief. “Oh my goodness, I was actually afraid for a moment there. Efran, that was very harsh of you.”

“Too overbearing?” he asked, putting his free arm around her.

“Oh, very severe. I was terrified,” she said.

“That I’d say something?” he asked.

“Poor Croft. I thought he was going to faint,” she insisted.

“Ah. I apologize for upsetting you,” he said, and they grinned at each other.

Within the hour, Gilhooley was packing his bags at Croft’s. “Ingrate,” he muttered. “What I saved him over the last three months should carry him over future costs for a year. All he has to do is raise prices. Everyone else is in the same boat.”

Then he paused to think through his options. First, he’d go stay with his sister’s family for a while. She owed him; he’s the one who encouraged her to come to the Lands. So he set out grimly.

Humblecut, sunk in the depths of despondence, was also packing at this time. “Oh, dear, dear. That just didn’t work well at all. And we never did get that last order, blast them. If we’d only gotten that last order, I would’ve ended it right then, and none of this would have happened. So now what do you do, Humblecut? Hmmm? With your very nice suits from Elvey’s.”

He stopped to ponder. Elvey’s. Wouldn’t she need a purchasing agent? Thinking on this, Humblecut left his bags half-packed while he went to Elvey’s to request an interview with her accountant, Dierksheide.

Out of curiosity, Dierksheide invited Firmin’s former purchasing agent to his cubicle just to hear what he had to say. He regarded Humblecut’s black eye in a mixture of interest, amusement, and—what was that? Pity? Yes. At any rate, as he listened to Humblecut ramble on, Dierksheide realized that it was possible to use him to continue procuring boxed dinners or other amenities—if not from the Fortress, then from somewhere. And this would insulate Dierksheide himself from the taint of fraud.

So Dierksheide hired him on the spot as Purchasing Agent for Elvey’s. As he would be provided a room in her sprawling complex, Humblecut hastened back to Firmin’s to finish packing his bags and move down Main Street to a better position.

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Chapter 16

Once again, Efran, Joshua and Minka, along with their four bodyguards, went to their horses to mount in preparation for ascending the switchback to the fortress. As they began up Main, they heard a whistle from behind.

All of them turned to see Martyn riding toward them at a lope. He drew his horse around to salute. “Captain, the men that took Lyte to Sasany Fields have returned. They’re on their way to the lower barracks mess to make their report; Commander Wendt wondered if you’d like to hear it.”

“Yes,” Efran said, nudging Kraken in an about-face toward the barracks. Since he had to walk with Joshua perched on his leg, he told his bodyguard, “Go on ahead; the Lady and I will be there shortly.”

“Captain,” Krall said. He, Hawk, Doudney and Eymor saluted, then rode ahead at a lope with Martyn while the Captain and his family came behind. Disliking the order, Hawk and Krall rode a little slower to keep the Captain and his family within view while not overtly disobeying him.

Joshua, seeing themselves lagging behind, grunted, “Ungh!” to urge the horse on faster. Kraken took that as a command, and began to smoothly lope. Efran held Joshua firmly around his midsection with one arm while the boy raised both hands in delight, screeching. Minka had to kick Gaunter several times to convince him that they were really truly loping here. Their bodyguards comfortably fell in line with them.

When they arrived at Barracks A, the soldiers were waiting with accolades: “Nice riding, Joshua!” “Well done!” “Good form!” “Was that fun?”

Joshua threw back his head in exultation as Efran dismounted, holding him on his left arm. He handed Joshua to Krall so he could tie the reins at the water trough. Kraken shook his head, lapping sloppily in victory over his stunt. Efran eyed him to mutter, “Don’t push your luck,” and Kraken spread his lips in a grating horse laugh. Minka, dismounting from Gaunter, watched this interchange in laughing wonder.

Efran reclaimed Joshua and they walked around Barracks A, entering the mess in Barracks B to a cordial welcome. Efran saluted Commander Wendt and greeted Captains Stites and Towner, then they all sat to hear the report from Lyte’s transport crew. Goss, leader for the return trip, paused in preparation for giving the report as he gestured for Mathurin, Pleyel, Dango, Routh, and Teschner to continue eating.

Having been on the road all day, they did. Efran did not eat, because he wanted to have dinner in the fortress dining hall. So Minka waited with him.

Goss began, “Well, Commander, Captains, we did our job. We arrived at Sasany Fields with Lyte early in the evening of April sixth [five days ago] and handed him over to the camp disciplinarians. I watched them put him in a holding cell. Then we sat down with Hob and Wymond, and I handed them your written instructions.”

He paused, looking at his travel party. They returned meaningful looks or raised brows, but kept eating. So Goss went on, “That night, after we’d all hit our bed rolls, there were—flash bang fires that broke out in three—or four?—areas of the camp. Everyone hustled to put them out, but, we couldn’t see what had started them. There were no storms, no lightning. So then someone thought to check on Lyte, and—the door to his cell was broken open. He was gone.”

His listeners looked at him in astonishment. He shrugged, “There was no use trying to track him, or who had come for him, that night. So the next morning we set out to search, and found tracks of four horses and three men north of the Fields. And they left a little surprise for us.” Goss nodded to Teschner, who reached under the table for a box which he handed to Efran.

Opening it around Joshua on his lap, Efran looked at a canvas ball about three inches in diameter wrapped with twine. This was nestled in a bed of cotton and straw. “It smells of sulfur,” Efran murmured.

“Yes, mixed with saltpeter, we think,” Goss said. “Just a tease, leaving us one of their fireballs. So, we tracked four horses northeast to the Passage, where the prints stopped. We don’t know how they crossed the river; it’s certain they didn’t try it on horseback, but there’s no bridge for miles, the closest being from Dansington straight across to Eurus.”

“A barge, then?” Efran asked.

“That seems likely, Captain, but it would call for a team of men and ropes,” Goss acknowledged.

Efran said, “So someone in Eurus knew we were sending him to the camp and made arrangements to retrieve him.”

“Again, Captain, that seems likely. Since we weren’t equipped to cross the Passage, we rode up and down the banks for a few miles both ways, until we hit rocks or mire. No prints, which means they had to cross at the point the prints stopped,” Goss said.

The officers looked at each other, and Wendt said, “So it seems to be a question of who in Eurus wants Lyte and why.”

“Yes, Commander,” Efran said. “He certainly knows a lot about us, but nothing particularly valuable, like how to get into the Treasury.” He shifted Joshua, handing the box with the incendiary to Stites.

Studying it, Stites said, “There are not many people who can make these without setting themselves on fire.”

“Reminds me of Arenado, but he’s dead,” Efran said. Goss turned his attention to his plate at that time, and the fireball was passed around the mess.

Efran was drawing a breath preparatory to rising when a gate guard entered to hand him a sealed letter. “Message from Lord Justinian, Captain.”

“Oh, excellent. He was just here. When did he leave?” he asked Minka. Joshua settled down sleepily on his father’s leg as Efran broke the seal.

She thought back, then said, “That would have been three days ago.”

“Oh, he’s being prompt,” Efran said in satisfaction, opening the letter. He began to read out loud, “‘To my captivating moonflower’—Justinian addresses his letters to Minka. I am ‘the Gargoyle,’” he informed his hearers, who smiled or chuckled. Then he asked her, “What is a moonflower?”

She shook her head slightly. “A plant that blooms at night, is all I know.”

“All right,” he said, returning to the letter. “‘To my captivating moonflower: So much news! First, the faeries who look suspiciously like Abbey Lands faeries which inhabit the faerie trees here that also look like those of the Lands continue to have their fun with us poor defenseless Eurusians. Among the flora they have introduced are these beautiful white night-blooming flowers that exude the most intoxicating scent. Anyone who stands too close to the moonflowers for too long—barely a minute—will fall madly in love with the next person they see. And these effects persist for days, creating the most uncomfortable scenes you can imagine.’”

At this, his hearers broke into laughter. Efran turned to Minka to say accusingly, “So that’s your secret!”

“I doubt it,” she laughed.

“No, Justinian knows,” he insisted, then returned to the letter. “‘On other fronts, we are seeing the strangest upheaval in the history of Eurus. Webbe the Destructor has apparently decided that, having vanquished all his invisible enemies, it remains for him to subdue his visible enemies. Therefore, at the last Council meeting, he—’” Efran suddenly went silent, staring at the letter.

After a few seconds, Wendt asked those around him, “Did Efran pass out?”

Stirring, Efran said, “No, Commander. Ah, ‘he entered to declare Grand Councilor Vanidestine an enemy of the throne and ordered him hanged. Since he *is* the Surchatain, and the Councilors *are* subject to him, his command was carried out.”

His hearers looked at each other in shock. Efran paused to shift Joshua on his arm before continuing, “As you can imagine, this turn of events is highly unsettling to us, in that Vanidestine was the most sane and balanced authority Eurus has seen since—well, Loizeaux, in fact. And Webbe is now evidently set on taking out the rest of the Council to leave himself in a position of unimpeded power.

“There is a glimmer of hope in that, by law, the remainder of the Council can come together and proclaim Webbe unfit to rule by unanimous consent. But they must act quickly, before Webbe can issue another death edict. Also, they must produce a suitable replacement for the Surchatain, which, by definition, cannot be one of them.

“The intriguing and terrible thing is, they have apparently found such a man—in fact, a son of Loizeaux’s named Wyse. Since Loizeaux was clearly murdered by a usurper, his son Wyse would have legal standing to replace Webbe on the throne. Also, the people are looking back to Loizeaux’s rule as a halcyon period of peace and prosperity, so they should be eager to support the man. That is the hopeful part.

“The terrible part is, Wyse is one of your own who allied himself with DePew. And I have heard that when Wyse saw the chance to climb over DePew to rule Eurus and the Abbey Lands both, he enlisted secret allies in the Lands who have sworn to kill your Gargoyle upon Wyse’s ascension as Surchatain of Eurus. But surely all of DePew’s cadre are dead? At any rate, if your Gargoyle hasn’t put Wyse to death yet—who had taken the name Lyte—he’d best get on it.

“Your Enchanted Captive,
“Justinian,”

Efran quietly finished. Joshua was spread out on his lap, asleep.

His hearers sat in silence. Then Wendt leaned over to Barr to whisper, “Get me that letter.” Barr stood to reach over and gently tug on the letter in Efran’s hand. He released it without hesitation as he looked over to Minka. When Barr pressed the letter in Wendt’s hand under the table, he quietly held it there.

Minka’s eyes filled with tears as she looked back at Efran. He shrugged, “Well, that’s inconvenient.” She opened her mouth to protest, and he said, “What’s different now than the way it’s always been? There’ve always been enemies inside the gates. I’m not going to hide; I’m not going to walk in fear. After what God has done, am I supposed to cower in our quarters?”

Lips flushed, she lowered her eyes and shook her head. Efran stood with Joshua cradled on his arm. “We’d better go fill in Estes and DeWitt. As you were,” he generally said to the men around the table. “Except for you, Commander. Pardon me,” he corrected himself.

“You’re dismissed,” Wendt replied with a touch of humor. Minka glanced at him, then accompanied Efran, Joshua, and their bodyguard out the door. “Everyone else is dismissed as well,” Wendt said, turning his head. “Except, Barr and Gabriel, you sit here a moment longer.”

“Yes, Commander,” Gabriel said. Barr, right next to Wendt, needed to say nothing.

While Captains Stites and Towner saluted and left, as well as a few other lingerers, Gabriel moved his chair slightly closer to the Commander so that he could speak in a low voice. Wendt whispered, "Is anyone else within hearing range?" He hadn't forgotten that they were in the mess hall.

Barr replied, "No Commander."

"Read me the last part of the letter again, beginning with Webbe killing Vanidestine," Wendt whispered, handing Barr the letter. While Gabriel glanced around, Barr read the letter back to Wendt. The Commander interrupted, "Spell 'Wyse' for me."

"W-Y-S-E," Barr whispered.

"Interesting," Wendt murmured. "While we can admire Efran's faith, I'm going to assume that the Almighty will permit us to take our own precautions. We are going to find and kill Wyse's agents. First, Gabriel, I need you and Connor to ride immediately to Eurus. Dress Eurussian; take money and trip provisions. The minute you see Wyse made Surchatain, ride back to let us know. Stay until you hear something definite one way or another." Wendt was addressing a man he knew well: both Gabriel and Connor had served under him at Westford.

"Yes, Commander," Gabriel said, rising. He walked out.

"He's gone, Commander," Barr said.

Wendt replied, "Good. Now, tell me frankly: is it possible that any of the Polonti here are in league with Wyse?"

"No, Commander," Barr said stonily.

"As I assumed," Wendt said. "No Polonti supported DePew, did they?"

"None, sir," Barr said.

"Good. That gives us a loyal base to start with. Keep the letter on you; show it to anyone you think needs to see it. But take care to not say the names 'Lyte' or especially 'Wyse' openly. Now, I want you to quietly communicate to the Polonti what we are looking for. There will be certain tells that are unavoidable when Wyse's men have to talk to each other. These are what your men need to pick up on." And Wendt enumerated several points as Barr listened, nodding.

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Chapter 17

After giving up their horses in the fortress courtyard and dismissing their bodyguard, Efran and Minka took Joshua to the nursery to hand him over to his caretakers. Then he and she paused at the foot of the stairs. She looked toward the keep, but he took her hand. "You can pray on my lap," he quipped. She exhaled.

They went up to the second-floor workroom. Seeing Estes alone, Efran asked uneasily, "Where is DeWitt?"

Estes half laughed, "It's disturbing to walk in and not see him in his chair, isn't it? He had questions for Ploense, so just took them up to the third floor."

Efran sat, pulling Minka down to his lap. “Ah, I see. Well, I’ll tell you, then. We had some news from the crew we sent with Lyte to Sasany Fields, and from Justinian. Where is his letter? Oh, yes. . . .” He looked off, thinking. “Well—”

DeWitt walked in at that time. “There you are, Efran. Hello, Minka.” He stopped dead. “Why is she crying, Efran?”

“I’m all right,” she said, sitting up and pretending to be all right.

“That’s what I was about to tell Estes, since you so irresponsibly walked off the job,” Efran told him.

DeWitt sat carefully in his usual chair. “Just confirming with Ploense what I had suspected: about one sixth of our kitchen budget over the last two, three months has been going toward supplies for Abbey Lands businesses and lining the pockets of kitchen assistants.”

“Are you serious? That much?” Efran breathed while Estes stared at him.

“That’s just a preliminary estimate Ploense made from the receipts and recovered monies, as well as the deliveries that didn’t go out yesterday and the day before,” DeWitt said.

Efran seemed shaken for a moment at the—the treachery on every hand. Kitchen assistants made a small fortune defrauding the fortress and depriving the residents of the meals their labor had paid for. Then DePew rebelled, sweeping Neale with him, and Lyte, who was now poised to take over where DePew had left off—

I will not do this, Efran thought. I will not succumb to the paranoia and fear.

“What were you about to tell us?” Estes asked. DeWitt looked over.

Efran said hazily, “Goss and Teschner’s group delivered Lyte to Sasany Fields, but he was taken again by someone else who apparently wants to make him Surchatain of Euruss.”

“What?” DeWitt demanded.

So Efran told them about Goss’ report and Justinian’s letter. But he left out the part about traitors in the army waiting for the word to kill him. Minka studied him with downcast eyes.

When Pieta and Koschat came to help DeWitt restore the kitchen budget, Efran rose, taking Minka with him. They went out of the fortress, looking for a safe place to talk. Finally, Efran took her out to the western hilltop woods again.

They walked until Efran was sure they were alone. Then he held her lightly to whisper, “Before you ask, yes, I trust DeWitt and Estes completely. But it’s safer for them to not know the whole story. They’d try to do something about it, which would just alert the traitors that their plans have been exposed.”

“But, Efran, *someone* has to do something. You can’t just pretend there’s no threat,” Minka whispered back, her voice shaking.

He looked down at her, stroking her hair. “Did you notice what happened to the letter?”

She glanced around, exhaling, “No. Yes, someone took it.”

“Yes,” he said, rocking her. “I have allies. I am not alone.” She buried her face in his work shirt.

For the next four days, they waited, watching. During that time, the new switchback was completed and paved, so DeWitt closed the old switchback to repair parts of it and pave the whole. To make the plan plain, he had a large sign posted on the blockade at the end of the switchback that read, “USE NEW SWITCHBACK” with an arrow pointing to the left. There, the new switchback ended at the intersection of the main east-west road and the new northbound road.

The great majority of cart drivers and riders did just that, but there were a few who naturally attempted to ride up the old switchback despite signs, blockades and work crews that made passage impossible. One of these was Elvey’s new purchasing agent Humblecut.

His attempt to ride up the old switchback was accidental. Being given the use of a horse in his new position, and unaccustomed to riding, he found himself on a headstrong animal that had always gone up this switchback to the fortress, and why was the fool on his back pulling so hard on the reins? That hurt his mouth, making him all the more determined to advance up the preferred route.

So he brushed past the barricade, knocking it and the sign aside, to plop through freshly laid paving until being stopped by shouting workmen. It took one of them leading the horse by the bridle back down the switchback and east on the road for a ways, until he was committed to the route. From there, it was up to Humblecut to direct the animal up the new switchback.

Observers watched with bated breath as the large horse balked at the new thing required of him, even rearing ever so slightly. But when his hooves detected the paving, and he liked the feel of it, he went on up. So Humblecut arrived victoriously. The gate guards gave him entrance to the courtyard without question. Following, he managed to get off the animal before trudging up the steps to address the fortress door guards.

Taking off his hat to bow to them, he said, “Please excuse me. I am Humblecut, the Procuring Agent for Elvey’s, and I request to speak to someone in your kitchen to inquire about the possibility of purchasing prepared box dinners from you.”

Verrin and Clough looked at him dubiously, then Verrin said, “I can’t guaranty you anything, but we’ll ask.”

“Thank you, my good man,” Humblecut said, doffing his hat, and the two guards stared briefly at the unexpected courtesy.

As promised, Verrin took Humblecut to the kitchen door opening into the corridor. Loghry paused, placing two baskets of eggs on a table beside him. “Yes?” he asked suspiciously.

Verrin opened his mouth vaguely, but Humblecut took off his hat to the kitchen worker. “Pardon my intrusion. I am Humblecut, the Procuring Agent for Elvey’s, and I wish to inquire about purchasing prepared box dinners from you.”

Loghry’s mouth dropped open, then he said, “Let me get the kitchen administrator.”

“Thank you kindly, sir. That would be appreciated,” Humblecut said, inclining his head.

So Loghry went off and returned shortly with the promised authority. "This here's the Kitchen Administrator Goyne," he said.

Humblecut bowed to him. "Good afternoon, Administrator Goyne. I am Humblecut, the Procuring Agent for Elvey's. We are desirous of purchasing prepared box dinners from your kitchen."

Goyne paused a moment in stupefaction, then said, "I'm afraid I'll have to take you to the Fortress Administrator DeWitt for that." The fact was, Humblecut's excessive politeness had aborted an abrupt refusal from Goyne. He decided to let DeWitt be the brutal one.

"Thank you kindly, sir; that's very good of you," Humblecut said, bowing again. Verrin nodded and returned to his post as Goyne walked Humblecut up to the second-floor workroom.

Entering the workroom, Goyne opened his mouth as DeWitt and Estes looked up from their work. Swiftly perceiving which one Goyne was looking at, Humblecut removed his hat again to bow deeply to him and say, "Good afternoon, Administrator DeWitt. I am Humblecut, the Procuring Agent for Elvey's. This gentleman has graciously allowed me to ask you for the privilege of purchasing prepared boxed dinners for our guests from your kitchen."

DeWitt and Estes stared at him silently a moment, then DeWitt leaned back to say, "They would be ten pieces a box, which would include one serving of meat, vegetables, bread and dessert. An ale or lager on top of that would be an extra five pieces. Prepaid."

"Very good, sir. May I ask that the meats be prime beef, chicken, veal, pork or fish?" Humblecut asked in deep concern.

"All of that except fish, which we can't guaranty. And you have to give the kitchen one day's notice," DeWitt said.

"That would be most satisfactory to us, Administrator," Humblecut said with another gracious bow.

"Good," DeWitt said, almost laughing. "Goyne, you'll be responsible for payments and receipts, fulfillment and delivery. If any questions come up, check with me."

"Yes, Administrator," Goyne said, smiling.

"I am most grateful, sir," Humblecut said, bowing again.

"You're welcome," DeWitt said, and the visitors departed. Looking over to Estes, he added, "The fortress will make a nice profit on those."

"Don't forget to tell Efran," Estes said, laughing, and DeWitt nodded with a pained smile.

Because Humblecut needed four dinners today and had the money on him, Madea waived the requirement of a day's notice and sent him down with four lovely dinners, two mild ales and two lagers. She included a vase of beautiful asters that were making one maid sneeze. Since Humblecut had come on horseback, the gate guards conscripted two idle soldiers to carry the order down for him.

Delivering all this to Elvey's on the spot made Humblecut a hero before Dierksheide had a chance to see how much it cost. By the time he did find out, the accolades lavished on the Procuring Agent made revoking the

practice impossible. So the accountant just had to budget for it.

When other businesses heard about the luxury meals Elvey's was procuring from the Fortress kitchen, they wanted in on it, some as suppliers and some as customers. When Croft and Firmin found out what the Fortress was charging for prepared boxed dinners, they raised their prices to match. But since ordering from the Fortress carried a certain cachet, other businesses such as Rimbault's Construction Company approached the Fortress for similar privileges.

This DeWitt allowed, but gave Madea veto power over any customer or particular order that stressed her or her help. So amiability was greatly restored between the Fortress and the Lands' eateries.

At this time, Gilhooley was having difficulties with his younger sister. "How long am I supposed to support you, a grown-up, able-bodied man with nice suits?" she said angrily. They were standing beside the kitchen table at which her husband and two children were finishing breakfast. "You eat as much as three people, and haven't given me a piece to pay for it."

"It won't be long; I'm having difficulties finding a comparable position," Gilhooley said tightly. "It's only been two days."

She countered, "Well, I'm not responsible for feeding you while you dally about for 'acceptable' work. You start paying me five pieces a day for your board or find yourself another place to eat and sleep tonight."

Muttering angrily to himself, he reached in his pocket for coins, and counted out five silver pieces into her hand. "That covers you through tonight," she announced. He jammed his hat on his head and turned out the door. His brother-in-law looked up in smiling affirmation at his wife.

Her oldest child held up his plate. "May I have more pancakes, Mum?"

"Yes, I'll have to cook a few more," she said, patting the coins in her pocket as she turned for the milk jug.

Meanwhile, the Polonti were fishing for would-be assassins. According to the instructions handed down by the Second Barr, the first criterion was to single out Southern or EurAsian loners in the army—men who talked to no one except one or two other Southerners. When they were identified, one Polonti would shadow the man to see what his duties were and how he performed them.

Loners who came under scrutiny seemed seldom to be posted on guard duty, which required interaction with a number of people. It should be clear from any man's activity what his duties were. Any loner who appeared to have ill-defined duties was then approached by a Polonti with a message in his hand. Professing to be new, the Polonti would say, "*I'm looking for Collymore*"—or any made-up name.

If the loner pretended to recognize the name so as to send his questioner on a fake trail, he was taken down for a chat with Commander Wendt. If the loner disavowed any knowledge of the name, the Polonti would accept that, and ask, "*What is your name?*" It was impossible for a man to not give his name to a fellow soldier, so whatever name the Polonti was given, he would search the enlistment rolls for it. If he found it, he would go talk to the loner's captain about him. This sometimes turned up sufficient reason to take him to the Commander. If the name was not found on any roll, the man was taken to the Commander.

No one under suspicion got away during the research process, for another Polonti would watch the suspect while the first went off to study the rolls or ask questions. And any loner who was spooked enough by this process to try to run was caught and, taken to the Commander.

Since this process took a lot of time, some of the Polonti adopted a shortcut. Finding a suspicious man, a Polonti would make a show of working nearby, possibly at the same task. Then he would look up, or toward Main, or at the gates, and gasp, “Wyse!” Any reflexive recognition by the loner got him taken to the Commander.

In the first four days of this Polonti dragnet, five men were brought to the Commander. After Wendt heard what they had to say, four of the five were taken out of the Lands on nebulous assignments and not brought back. As for the fifth man, Wendt determined him to be genuinely clueless about what he was supposed to do in the army. So he was handed over to Greves—the soldier in charge of the stables—to be put to work there.

Three of the four guilty men had been with Lyte in the beginning as a part of Loizeaux’s army that had attacked the fortress when only the Westfordian Captain was there to defend it. It was a point of great amusement and speculation among Loizeaux’s men that the Captain had gathered children there—as well as the Chataine Sybil, whom he had been warding. These three Eurussians spilled all this to the blind Commander as a kind of father confessor, a man who listened without censure.

The second man, in particular, poured out the story to the attentive Wendt: “Yeah, Chatain Wyse had something to prove to his father—that was Loizeaux, you know. The woman leading us in the attack was just a beautiful, stupid figurehead. And when it failed—cripes, the wild animals!—Wyse saw a better chance to work his way up from inside the Abbey Fortress. He was the model man, courageous and loyal to a fault. So when Graduliere hires this stupid chemist, this Arenado, to blow up the hill, Wyse knew he had to put a stop to that—and got himself a Meritorious Cross in the process. It was the most beautiful thing ever, because he really had to put himself on the line to get those fireballs up.

“Then when his father Loizeaux was killed by that worm Cennick, that just set Wyse’s plan in concrete. He was so patient, so heroic, riding after that stupid Sybil in the thunderstorm—he put on the greatest act we’d ever seen. We were in awe. And Efran made him Commander!” he crowed. “Well, that was just the icing on the cake. That made everything so easy. Wyse was able to send up regular messages to his friends in Eurus—rich men who kept well in the background. You can torture me all you like, but I won’t give you those names,” the man smiled. Wendt nodded in acceptance.

This spurred the man on with his story: “Now, DePew almost wrecked everything by jumping in with his stupid plan. Wyse saw right away it’d never work, ’cause DePew thought he’d just kill Efran and make himself Lord with Sybil—‘Minka,’ you know,” he snorted. “She’s a witch, by the way, calling up those masks in the air to make the men crazy. Yeesh, that black shadow was something scary,” he admitted in a sudden burst of fear.

Getting a grip on himself, he went on, “Yeah, when Wyse saw that happening, we took off to watch and wait, then he had us slip back in one at a time. Yeah, Wyse won’t bother with the witch but to burn her alive.”

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Chapter 18

Wyse’s confederate paused to regard Wendt’s dark glasses. “So Efran’s put a blind man in charge of his army. That’s just so perfect. You’re all blind. None of you saw it, and none of you will see Surchatain Wyse come in the sunrise. Yeah!” He threw back his head to laugh. “That’ll be glorious, and it’ll blind you all.”

As he sat exulting, Wendt nodded to Barr, who had been listening to everything behind the man. “Take him.” So

Barr lifted him from his chair, and three men rode him out of the wall gates. He was one that didn't come back.

During these days, Efran went walking with Minka and Joshua. He avoided taking the horses because Kraken was too unpredictable, while Gaunter and Rose were too slow. Besides, half the time they stopped at Ryal's or an eatery anyway. So they walked down the new switchback while the old one was being paved. From there, they walked anywhere that caught their attention. Yes, Efran was making a point: he would go wherever he chose on the Lands.

But of course, they had a bodyguard, and the first four that always showed up when he, Minka and Joshua appeared in the courtyard were Polonti. Occasionally, a Southerner wished to come, whom the Polonti would shoo away unless Efran intervened. Sometimes he did not.

But when Arne showed up for bodyguard duty and the Polonti attempted to freeze him out, he took great offense. "What d'you mean, yer have enough? Yer can't have enough without me."

Efran looked over. "Of course we need you, Arne." The involuntary thought crossed Efran's mind: *I'd be honored to have your knife in my back*. He shook it off as stupid.

But as the four Polonti and the one Southerner began walking down the new switchback behind Efran and his family, Arne began whistling. (An old-timer, one of the Forty, Arne was entitled to be casual about protocol.) The first tune was his favorite, the heartbreaking "The Last Time I Held Her." Despite the fact that there were no words, young Salk began to blink away tears. Joshua climbed up on Efran's chest to look over his shoulder at the fount of music.

Aware of his audience, Arne began whistling "You're My Puddin' Pie," which was certainly happier, with a catchy beat. Salk and Telo began clapping to the beat, which made Joshua clap with them. So Arne was on to "Got No Time for Fools," which required snapping his fingers on the off-beat.

This was too much for Joshua. "Anh! Anh!" he demanded, pointing to Arne.

So Efran had to stop and turn around. The bodyguard stopped. Minka watched with wide eyes. Efran said, "He wants you to carry him," as he handed his son over to Arne. This was the supreme act of trust for Efran.

The big man looked complacent, not at all vindicated by his insistence on coming along. Taking the toddler on his beefy arm, Arne began whistling the crowd-pleaser "Heaphy and Livesey Are Heavy but Happy." As this tune was performed with dance steps that looked very much like a Polonti war dance, the rest of the bodyguard began dancing with him in unison. Joshua bounced on Arne's arm to the beat.

Efran glanced back at them once or twice and shook his head, putting his arm around Minka's shoulders. And this remarkable procession that wove around carts on Main made onlookers pause.

Seeing two riders arrive at the wall gates far down the street, Efran glanced around at the streetside seating available at the eateries. Croft looked to have an empty table, so Efran sat Minka there. He took a small handful of royals from his pocket to give to Telo, telling him and Salk, "Go get us ales, tea and pie for the lady—"

"Pie," said Joshua from Arne's arm.

—"and pie for Joshua," Efran ended. They saluted to trot inside Croft's. "Sit here with us," Efran told Arne, who did so.

Meanwhile, the other two bodyguards, Dango and Pleyel, stood on the sidewalk in front of the Captain's table. Minka exhaled in aggravation, wanting them to sit, but Efran shook his head slightly, so she let them be. Arne continued whistling for Joshua, who puckered his lips, watching intently.

Spotting Efran's party, the two riders loped their tired horses up the street to rein around in front of him. Pleyel and Dango stepped aside to give them a clear line of sight to the Captain. Connor and Gabriel saluted, then Gabriel said, "Captain, Wyse was proclaimed Surchatain of Eurus yesterday, with a crown and everything. Webbe was hanged the day before."

Arne had stopped whistling to sputter, "Wyse? Who the hell is that?"

Efran nodded at the pair. "Noted. Go make your report to the Commander. I will come shortly."

"Sir." "Yes, Captain." They saluted and turned their horses back to the barracks. Dango and Pleyel resumed their position, looking up and down the street with sharp eyes.

Wendt, Barr, Stites and Towner were waiting in Barracks A for Connor and Gabriel. They were all quiet until Stites said, "Four, Commander. We caught four of Wyse's allies. Do you think that was all of them?"

"No," Wendt said. "They were associates, but none of them particularly clever or—subtle. There's always one, at least one, who is a cut above the others, who remains to play the last hand."

Gabriel and Connor entered the room, saluting. "Pardon the delay, Commander, but we saw the Captain up the street, and rode over to give him the news—Wyse has been made Surchatain. Webbe is dead," Gabriel said. "Captain Efran is on his way here."

"Very good," said Wendt. Then he turned to ask that plates and ale be brought from the mess hall for the two.

At Croft's, Salk and Telo returned to Minka's table with pies and ales. Efran said, "All right. Telo, you and Salk will have to carry that up to the fortress for the Lady and Joshua. Arne, walk them up, please. The Commander probably wants a word with me."

"Yes, sir," Arne said, saluting with Joshua on his left arm. Telo and Salk looked dismayed; Dango and Pleyel waited to accompany the Captain.

The two groups broke up; Efran headed north with Dango and Pleyel toward the barracks while Minka, Joshua, Arne, Telo and Salk turned south. They walked on the sidewalk as pedestrians should, but Efran and his bodyguards walked down the middle of the street.

Minka kissed Joshua's head and patted Arne's arm. "Take him to the nursery, please," she said quietly.

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said, knowing. Telo and Salk looked stricken as she asked them, "Walk the food up for us, please."

Then she turned to run into the street, dodging horses and carts, to catch up with Efran. He didn't hear her coming because of all the noise until she landed beside him to scrunch into his side. Momentarily dismayed, he paused (as did his bodyguard), and she looked up at him, particularly at the new scar creasing his eyebrow. "I will not let go," she whispered.

He smiled, putting his arm around her shoulders to walk with her to the barracks.

The four of them arrived at the conference room of Barracks A, where Efran saluted Wendt, who was seated. “Captain Efran reporting with the Lady Minka and the Polonti Pleyel and Dango, Commander.” The other men in the room had stood to salute Efran, but he waved them down impatiently.

“Very good. Have a seat, all of you. Hello, Minka,” Wendt said fondly.

“Hello, Commander,” she said, full-hearted. Efran pulled out a chair for her; all sat as Connor and Gabriel resumed scooping up forkfuls from their plates.

Wendt leaned back in his chair. “So Loizeaux’s son is Surchatain. Fortunately, we’re not completely unprepared for it.” And he told Efran and Minka about their dragnet, with the five they caught and the four he interviewed and sent away. “That’s four who will have no further opportunity to kill you, Efran. And that’s good. But my gut feeling is that there is one more, at least one, who eluded our net. He will be Eurussian, one of those who were with Lyte—Wyse—from the beginning. But you won’t be able to pick him out by his background or his accent; he will have covered himself on that.”

Nodding, Efran looked up. He suddenly knew, or believed he knew, who that man was. He remembered watching him talk with Lyte in the dining hall, and how composed and self-assured he was—contrary to how he had presented himself to Efran. Seeing how that man comported himself with Lyte, Efran had noted the discrepancy, but hadn’t understood it. Now he thought he knew, but he had to check one point to see if his hypothesis held up.

“There’s one more thing we learned,” Wendt was saying. “After giving his allies time to kill you, it is certain that Wyse will lead an army against us. But one man we caught told me something interesting, about Wyse coming in the sunrise, so that you’ll all be blinded. I believe that means he’s going to attack from the east at sunrise. I understand that you have no wall on the east; it’s wide open. And if he launches his attack at sunrise, your men will be trying to fight while staring straight into the sun. If that’s what he means, it’s clever. I wanted to run by you our plan of throwing up a barricade.”

Efran listened as he explained what he intended to do, then said, “Yes, Commander, that’s an excellent idea. While you coordinate that, I have one other point to check.” He stood, and Minka stood with him. Looking down at her, he smoothed back her hair with one hand. Then he saluted properly to Wendt. “Thank you for the information, Commander. Please keep me apprised.”

“Of course, Efran. Minka,” Wendt said. She turned to smile at him, but kept hold on Efran’s hand. He and she left, followed by Dango and Pleyel. Wendt turned to give orders to Stites and Towner, who put out a call for all men not on critical duty to report to the easternmost part of the developed Lands where the outer wall ended. Here, they were to be equipped with horses and dragging apparatus, and sent off to a certain location in the Northeast Sector.

Efran, Minka, and their bodyguard walked out to Main, but this time Efran crossed in a crosswalk and took the sidewalk south. He paused to check that he had money in his pocket, then took her hand again to look hesitantly down a side street of the western section. He murmured, “It’s been almost a year since we were there.”

Dango asked, “What are you looking for, Captain?”

“Number Seven,” Efran said. “A shop called The Greenery.”

As they all scanned the shops nearby, Dango said, "That would be one of the earliest shops on the Lands. Probably on the second street." Practically an old-timer, he had been in the Abbey army for almost a year now.

"I think you're right," Efran said. And they progressed south on Main to the second street, where they turned west.

Minka said, "There it is, on the right. 'The Greenery.'"

"Yes, that's it." They went on down to the shopfront, where Efran opened the door for her. "Buy anything up to four royals. That's how much I've got."

"I have a royal, Captain," Pleyel said proudly.

Efran looked back, restraining a smile. "Thank you, but Lady Minka is on a budget." They all laughed.

When they entered, the shop owner's wife approached to ask cautiously, "How may I help you?" Efran was in his usual shabby work clothes and Minka in her usual nondescript riding dress. The last time they were here, they had worn Abbey finery.

"I'm Captain Efran; it's been so long since I brought the Lady Minka here, she's been wanting to come again," Efran said easily. As the woman looked dubiously at the Polonti guards behind him, Efran jingled the gold coins in his pocket and told Minka, "Take your time."

"Oh, thank you! I will," Minka said, looking over the plant arrangements.

Dango accompanied her while Pleyel stood by Efran as he made small talk with the woman. "I see you've added a few displays. The silk trees are new, aren't they? And shells. Those are nice. Do you get them from the Sea here?" he asked idly.

"Well, not those; they're from a supplier in Prie Mer," she admitted, glancing uneasily at Pleyel, who certainly looked benign.

"Oh, excellent. I hope they're rebuilding from the hurricane—what—three years ago?" Efran asked.

"I don't really know," she said, straining to keep an eye on Minka with the other Polonti.

"It's a shame Westford burned down. Do you get much stock from Eurus?" Efran asked.

"Eurus?" She looked at him in mild bewilderment. "No."

"Aren't you from Eurus?" Efran asked.

"No, Westford," she said, unsmiling.

Efran looked confused. "Oh. I talked to your son, who told me—"

"We have two daughters. Excuse me," she said coldly. Then she went over to Minka. "May I help you find something?" she asked.

"Oh, I love this!" Minka indicated a large potted plant.

When Dango reached for it, the woman stopped him. “It’s expensive. Two royals.”

“Efran?” Minka asked with a bright smile.

He walked over to hand the woman two royals from his pocket. She studied them, then said, “Thank you. Good day.”

Efran nodded at Dango, who picked up the plant to carry it out behind Efran, Minka and Pleyel.

When they were safely on Main, Minka said, “Good heavens, what a shrew. Did you learn anything?”

Efran replied, “Yes. She doesn’t have a son.”

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Chapter 19

Minka looked questioningly at Efran, but he didn’t explain at this time. About half of the old switchback was paved, but with workers on it now, the four of them went east to the new switchback. They climbed it silently.

When they emerged into the courtyard at the top, Efran took the plant from Dango and told both him and Pleyel, “Get us horses; we’ll be back out shortly.”

“Captain.” They saluted and trotted toward the stables.

Efran carried the heavy potted plant into the fortress to set it beside the foyer doors. “Nice touch, Captain,” Ellor, the door guard, said with a salute.

“I’m glad you like it. You’ll be responsible for watering it,” Efran said.

“Not too much,” Minka warned.

“Thank you, Captain. Lady Minka,” Ellor said with a sidelong glance.

Efran took Minka’s hand. “I’m going to ride out to the east Lands—”

“I’d love to go, thank you,” she said with her stubborn look.

He exhaled, “Yes, that’s fine, but I’m going to stop upstairs to make sure that Estes and DeWitt have the news.”

“Oh. Yes,” she said. “I’ll meet you out front.”

He nodded, pausing to brush a curl from her face, then turned to run up the stairs.

Arriving at the door of the workroom, Efran looked in to see that not only were Estes and DeWitt here, but Koschat, Pieta, Feyer and Ploense were also handling papers. At Efran’s tentative look, DeWitt said, “We’re overhauling the Fortress budget, Efran. Just streamlining it.”

Efran said carefully, “Good. Excellent. Ah, we’ve just heard that Wyse is the new Surchatain of Eurus.” Estes and DeWitt froze, but Efran went on, “Since Commander Wendt believes there’s no reason for alarm, Minka and I are riding out to the east Lands, just to look around.”

DeWitt nodded, but Koschat was looking at him fixedly. “Do you have a bodyguard, Captain?”

“Yes,” Efran said. He backed out of the door quickly, before he could answer any more questions. Thinking of something else, he trotted (with care) down the stairs to look out on the back grounds.

He glanced around at everyone at work, almost missing the fact that Tiras and Suco, both Polonti, had slipped up to stand at his back. He wouldn’t be surprised to know that on Stites’ quiet order, any Polonti had permission to leave any duty if the Captain were seen without at least two Polonti guarding him.

Catching sight of Quennel at the archery line, Efran whistled lightly and beckoned. Quennel handed his equipment to the man at the line and ran over to him. “Captain,” he saluted.

“Yes,” Efran said, taking in Tiras and Suco in the same glance that he gave Quennel. “Wyse has been declared Surchatain of Eurus and Webbe hanged. I doubt that anyone would threaten Webbe’s children, but I want a pair of men around Ella whenever she’s out of the fortress. I want another pair around the children, especially Alcmund. The children may go down to talk to Jonguitud or anywhere in the Lands, but not out to the hut for a while. And Cyneheard needs to be warned.”

“Yes, Captain,” Quennel said.

Efran continued, “Right now, Minka and I are riding out to the east Lands—”

“With bodyguards, Captain?” Quennel asked like a reproving schoolteacher.

“Yes—” Efran said.

“Enough, Captain?” Quennel asked.

“Yes, because I’m riding out to meet friends with fangs,” Efran said.

Quennel blinked, then said, “May I hear about this when you return, sir?”

“Yes, I’ll tell you at dinner. We won’t be out long,” Efran said.

As Quennel saluted and Efran turned away, he was confronted by Tiras’ salute. “Permission to accompany you, Captain?” Tiras asked, with Suco looking on.

Efran paused. “When will the children be out?”

“Not for another hour, sir,” Tiras said.

“All right,” Efran said. “Through the fortress.”

With those two, Efran went up the corridor to the nursery, where he paused to look in. Joshua was spread out all over his too-small bassinet, asleep.

Exhaling a quiet laugh, Efran raised a hand to Felice and went on up to the courtyard.

Here, Minka, Dango and Pleyel were waiting with six horses and two new Polonti from the camp at Sasany Fields. They had arrived shortly after Connor and Gabriel, being slowed by the amount of gear they were bringing. (Part of the training at camp was the making of classic Polonti weaponry, so a team of eight men had brought hundreds of spears, bows, arrows, quivers, slings and shields on this trip.)

Efran laughed at the excess of bodyguards. "All right, the six of you have to draw straws for the horses. Four will ride with the lady and me."

The Polonti looked as though they'd been denied candy. Dango said, "Captain, we fear an ambush, and feel that six are not too many to protect the Lady."

"Ah," Efran said, drawing up in surprise. "Hit me at my weak point, will you? Then you and Pleyel may go saddle two more horses."

"Thank you, Captain," Dango said smugly. He and Pleyel ran back toward the stables.

While the rest of them were waiting, Efran looked at the two new men. "It appears that you've met my wife, Lady Minka. What are your names?"

"I am Lund, Captain," said one, saluting.

Also with a salute, the other said, "I am Nee, Captain. Thank you for allowing us to accompany you."

"I'm glad to have you," Efran said, smiling down at his wife.

"Will Joshua be pounding on the door?" she asked.

"Not for a little while. He's asleep," Efran reassured her, and she nodded.

Dango and Pleyel returned quickly with two more horses. Glancing around at the available animals, Efran saw that Gaunter was not among them. So he selected a reliable mare for Minka, lifting her up to the saddle while Kraken nosed him impatiently. After Efran had mounted, the bodyguards Dango, Pleyel, Tiras, Suco, Lund and Nee, all armed, leapt up on the remaining horses to ride out behind the Captain and his Lady down the new switchback.

At the intersecting road, they turned to lope east. Just past Cavern Lake, the northern stone wall that stretched east made a 90-degree turn south, continuing clear to the main east-west road which intersected both switchbacks. Three gates had been built into this east wall to allow access to and from the eastern Lands. (A fourth gate protected the road at the base of the hill, but it constantly stood open for now.) As development on the Lands continued eastward, the northern wall had been extended again for several thousand feet before turning south a second time.

However, this second eastern wall was incomplete, ending about a hundred feet short of the hill. Here, as Wendt had noted, the east face of the Lands was vulnerable. There were houses and shops between the two walls, and once any of the four gates was breached, invaders would have their choice of two switchbacks. Hence Wendt determined to quickly extend the outer, second wall.

Beyond this gap, Efran led his group at a steady lope past the Fortress' animal pens and fields, then past the fields and enclosures belonging to families like Minogue's who supplied the Lands with meat, grain and vegetables. As the party encountered these outlying farms, Efran stopped to dispatch two of his group to warn them that an army may pass this way. Each time, the pair came back to report that the householders had already been alerted by messengers from the Commander. Efran nodded.

When the party arrived within sight of the east branch of the Passage, Efran slowed to a stop. Here, he looked over to see teams of Abbey men and horses dragging sections of tree trunks, stripped of branches, westward. These Efran recognized as being from the half-finished military compounds that renegades had been constructing in the Northeast Sector. The Destroyer had put an end to that, but Wendt apparently had found a use for the stripped trees.

Efran guided Kraken southeast to circumvent the dragging teams. Before long, they saw a line of red flags spaced about 50 feet apart. These marked the boundary of the 5-mile stretch of land that Efran had designated wolf territory. He pulled up and turned to tell his bodyguard, "The Lady and I are going to dismount to walk from here; I expect to meet wolves who have befriended us. Decide which two of you will come with us, but those two must disarm."

As Efran dismounted and went over to help Minka down from her tall horse, Suco and Lund were the first to fall off their horses, throw down their weapons, and reach Efran's side. With those two in place, the remainder grudgingly drew back to their horses to wait and keep watch.

"Very good." Efran glanced at the pair who saluted him. "All this is territory that I granted the wolf pack. We're going to walk slowly." He turned with Minka in hand, Suco and Lund following. The men's empty hands hung at their sides.

Before long, a large gray wolf emerged from behind a tall clump of meadowgrass. He sat complacently to await their approach. Efran stopped with Minka about six feet away. "Canis, thank you for meeting us. I wanted to warn you that within days, there will be an army coming against us this way. They will be on horses, and will likely shoot any of you that they see. And they will probably come at the rising of the sun, whichever day it is."

Efran paused, apparently listening, then said, "Yes, of course you will be held guiltless for their lives. They're Eurussian, and will be wearing purple. It's possible that Venegas will see them and ride out to attack their flanks; if they do, please regard their lives. They are Polonti in blue."

He paused again, then said, "Thank you, Canis; we are ever in your debt. Please give our greetings to Lady Lupus, Bounder and Sami."

The great wolf lowered his head, then disappeared in the grass again. Efran put his hand at Minka's back and they began returning to the waiting bodyguards and horses. Lund observed, "You are *aina*, Captain."

Efran winced; he was occasionally able to communicate with animals, but had neglected to develop this capacity into the gift of command. "Not like Pia; if you want to see its full power, go to her."

"Yes, Captain. She is renowned among us," Lund acknowledged, and Suco nodded.

As they remounted to return to the populated center of the Lands, Efran explained the Abbey's history with the wolves and what he had just told Canis today. "I doubt there are enough wolves to hinder the attack, but, we need all the allies we can get," Efran said. The men silently agreed, and Efran remembered another ally whose help he needed.

On their return, the party was able to get a better picture of what Wendt had in mind. Guided by soldiers, teams of horses were dragging all those delimbed trees to the gaping eastern face of the populated Lands. Diggers were making a line of holes two feet deep along the entire gap from the end of the stone wall to the east-west road at the base of the hill, about 100 feet. Others were sharpening one end of the trees to a blunt point. As that was done, someone else went along the trunks with a hatchet, chopping out footholds on what would be the inside.

Then groups of men raised the trees to rest their sharpened ends in these holes, fill them with concrete, and smear more concrete between the trunks as they went up. Until the concrete set, the men hammered saplings into the ground on the inside to lean against the trunks as kickers. This created a sturdy barricade roughly 15 feet tall. The top of the barricade was flat but irregular, varying in height anywhere from five to nine inches from post to post—not bad for emergency construction. Young Polonti were bringing arrows by the armload, as well as bags of river rocks or clay balls to lay at the barricade as it went up.

“Oh, very good,” Efran breathed, and his men nodded. While they hovered on the outside of the rising barricade, Efran looked north along the completed portion of the east wall. He couldn’t see it from here, but he knew there was already one gate in this wall. “Wait here,” he murmured to Minka, then rode up the wall to look, followed by Dango, Tiras and Nee.

Approaching the gate, he saw the outline of a large, shallow pit in front of it. He got just close enough to see rows of iron spikes filling the pit. There’d be no crashing that gate, easily defended by archers. And ever since their supply of arrows had been exhausted when the Eurussians had attacked 18 months ago, the Abbey leadership had stockpiled many thousands more (but the Passage flooding is what had saved them then). Satisfied, Efran turned back to where Minka and the rest of the bodyguard waited.

As they passed through the rising barricade, they looked to the left, where another group was stretching high barbed wire across the main east-west road, on which it was not possible to dig post holes. This fencing would be secured to the barricade on the north and in the hillside on the south. Nodding, Efran thought, *In another four hours, anyone coming from the east will have to ride up to the north gates to get in.*

Then he glanced at Minka, as she had been unusually quiet on this trip. She looked back at his questioning glance to smile pensively. “I should be afraid, but I’m not. I’m . . . watching everything fall into place as it should.”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m sensing that as well. I just have to make sure it’s not overconfidence.”

“What more can you do?” she asked.

“A few things,” he said. “There are just a few things remaining.” The face of a particular man was uppermost in his mind: the one remaining assassin.

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Chapter 20

With their six bodyguards, Efran and Minka rode at a walk to Main, where Efran turned off at the notary's shop. Since he gave no instructions to the bodyguards before he dismounted and helped Minka down, Dango spoke to them in Polonti: "Pleyel, you will come in with me. The rest of you will remain with the horses." Because he was the longest-serving of the men here, the others obeyed.

When Efran and Minka entered the shop, Ryal and Giardi were waiting for them at the counter. Ryal looked at them over his glasses. "Efran. What's going on?" Pleyel and Dango stood quietly at the door. Anyone wishing to come in at this moment would be inconvenienced.

"Well, Ryal," Efran began, leaning on the counter. "Hello, Giardini," he interrupted himself, flashing his beautiful smile at her.

"Hello, Efran," she laughed. "Hello, Minka."

"Isn't he awful?" Minka grinned, and Giardi laughed again.

Ryal was practically rolling his eyes, so Efran said, "Commander Wendt is expecting an attack from Eurus any day now, led by their new Surchatain, Wyse."

"Wyse?" Ryal mouthed the unfamiliar name.

"Yes," Efran said. "We knew him as Lyte. It turns out that he's Loizeaux's son."

Ryal and Giardi were silent at first, then: "Commander Lyte?" Ryal said in shock.

"Yes, I made him Commander," Efran said, straightening off the counter, "when he was just waiting for the opportunity to assert himself."

"DePew . . ." Ryal began, still unable to get out a complete sentence.

"Yes, I understand that he almost torched Lyte's plans—accidentally, of course. But, perseverance wins the day," Efran said, dusting off the rim of the counter with a stroke of his hand.

"Is he not a serious threat?" Ryal asked, trying to make sense of Efran's nonchalance.

"Oh, he probably is. But the second-wisest action of my life was naming Wendt Commander. Lyte may hurt us pretty badly, but he won't win," Efran said.

Giardi asked, "That's the second wisest? What was the first?"

"Signing Ryal's book of marriages," Efran said, turning to bask in Minka's adoring eyes. He looked back to Giardi. "Pray for us."

"Yes," Giardi said.

Tapping the counter, Efran turned away. Then he stopped to ask, "Are you getting meals from the Fortress again?"

Ryal exhaled, “Yes, and I’m very glad of it. Croft’s has tripled their price for boxed dinners!”

Efran raised his face to laugh. “Good. All right.” He took Minka’s hand to lead her out.

His men hopped back on their horses as Efran and Minka came down the steps, where he pointed down the street. Leading their horses, he and Minka walked past the large community well to Delano’s. His men rode at a walk behind them to wait on the street. Inside the brewery, Efran found himself facing a line of customers. So he drew Minka to his side to wait in line, and there was no room for any of his men.

When Efran reached the counter, Madgwick said in mild surprise, “Hello, Efran. Minka. What can I do for you?”

“Can you get Wytan to run the counter for just a moment?” Efran whispered.

Her face fell. “I’m sorry, Efran, but I’m the only one here besides Ruthie’s nurse,” she whispered back.

Minka said, “Oh, let me run your counter! All bottles are four pieces each; isn’t that right?”

Madgwick said, “Yes, dear. All right; watch for fake gold. Change is in this drawer; all the bottles are over here, as well as sacks and crates.”

“Oh, yay!” Minka said, stepping around the counter. She looked at the next person in line to say brightly, “Hello! Welcome to Delano’s. What can I get you?” The customer smiled open-mouthed at her, momentarily forgetting his order.

Efran was inclined to stay and observe, but Madgwick pulled him to the back room where the nurse was rocking a sleepy baby. “What is it, Efran?” Madgwick asked.

He glanced at the baby, then said, “Madgwick, did you know that Lyte, who I made Commander, is the son of former Surchatain Loizeaux of Euris?”

“No,” she said apprehensively.

“He’s been proclaimed Surchatain now, and Wendt believes he will lead an attack on us soon. I have no idea what their strength is, but he’s in a position to unify the men better than anyone who has ruled Euris since his father. We need prayer,” he said.

“Yes, Efran.” She reached a hand up to place it on his shoulder, then lowered her face to pray quickly, almost soundlessly, for only a minute. Then she looked up to say, “I can’t concentrate sufficiently right now, but I will continue to pray.”

“Yes, Madgwick, thank you,” he said.

As he turned toward the door, she added, “Keep the window open, Efran.”

He glanced back, assuming that she meant the window to his mind, or his soul. “I will,” he said, smiling.

They went back out to find Minka doing a brisk, cheerful business at the counter. Taking one man’s payment, she said, “Oh, I know, it’s so annoying when dinners flop, but if you have enough ale, no one cares.”

The man laughed, responding with banter while Efran drew her away. Madgwick nodded goodbye, silently laughing as she took her place behind the counter again.

The customer continued to talk to Minka, following her out of the shop with his case of ale. He was saying, "Wait, let me show you what I mean." To Efran, he said, "Will you hold this a moment?" And he attempted to thrust the case of ale on him. (In the customer's defense, Efran was dressed like a laborer. Again.)

"No," Efran said, glancing back.

"Oh. Well." The man set the case on the sidewalk, still talking to Minka as Efran lifted her to her saddle. "I try not to buy fish anymore unless it's in the prepared dinners. Have you tried the ones from the Fortress? I hear theirs are the reason that Croft's and Firmin's upped their prices to the moon."

Efran mounted Kraken, who stretched out his bared teeth to eat the flower from the top buttonhole of the customer's jacket. Still talking, he barely noticed. "Anyway, you must come to my *soirée* tonight. What is your name?" he called as the bodyguards surrounded Efran and Minka's horses to begin loping off.

Nee, the last to follow, leaned down to the man to tell him, "That is Lady Minka."

Nee turned his horse to follow the others, and the man called, louder, "I'll have you sent an invitation, Lady Minkaea! It's very exclusive!"

Dinner at the fortress that evening was pleasant, despite the specter of invasion. The food was wonderful; the ale plentiful, the company warm and intimate. Efran was relaxed with Joshua on his lap and Minka close beside him as he quietly told Quennel and Ella about the recent developments.

He made sure the children heard nothing alarming when they stopped by his table for this or that, and he neglected to tell anyone about the threat to his life. With Wendt as Commander, it seemed almost irrelevant.

While he was helping Joshua dig his small spoon into the custard, a sentry came up to salute Efran's back. Since he only glanced over his shoulder, the sentry, a new Polonti named Heus, leaned down beside him to whisper, "Captain, the Commander requests your presence at Barracks A."

"All right. Is there a problem?" Efran asked in a low voice, wiping Joshua's face.

"The Councilor Baldassare has arrived, requesting asylum," Heus whispered. Minka's eyes widened.

"Oh. Um. Really?" Efran asked, grimacing.

"Yes, Captain. The Commander would like your input," Heus said.

"Ohhh, it's not my fault. Is it?" Efran asked himself. He turned to tell Heus, "Inform DeWitt or Estes up there at the front table. Do you know either of them?"

"No, sir," Heus said uneasily.

"Steward Estes is the happy Polonti with a baby on his lap and a lovely brunette wife," Efran said. "Tell him."

"Yes, Captain," Heus said, moving off.

Efran put Joshua on Minka's lap with his custard in front of her. Glancing down the table, Efran said, "Quennel, take him back to the nursery when he's done here."

Quennel acknowledged this, but Ella was watching. "Is Baldassare one of the Councilors who hanged Webbe?"

"Probably. Does that upset you?" Efran asked.

"No, but I'd like to hear what he has to say for himself," she said.

"I'll tell you at the same time I update Quennel. You can't see him face-to-face," Efran said.

"I understand," she said.

He turned to kiss Minka's head, and she looked at him thoughtfully. His face went wary and he uttered, "Don't even ask." Since Baldassare probably came down here looking for faerie Minka, Efran sure didn't want him seeing the real Minka again. She pouted a little.

Heus returned to Efran to report, "The Steward says he'll hear from you tomorrow about it, Captain."

"Yes, he would," Efran said dryly, seeing Estes smile at him from the front of the room. "He doesn't think he should be interrupted at dinner with his family."

As he got up to leave with the sentry, Heus said, "I apologize, Captain."

"Oh, no, that's entirely Wendt's doing, because he blames me for whatever we did with Baldassare, which is probably correct," Efran said. Heus studied him with a quizzical half-smile.

Kraken was waiting in the courtyard when Efran arrived with Heus, whose own horse was in the hand of the gate sentry Enon. Several Polonti ran up, but Efran said, "At ease—I'm just going down to Barracks A." They stopped in their tracks, saluting. As he and Heus mounted to begin down the new switchback, Efran muttered, "I feel that I'm being babysat."

Heus said, "You are Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, Captain. If you die, we prove ourselves useless." Efran glanced at him, nodding.

He and Heus arrived at Barracks A for another man to lead them down to Barracks C. There, they were escorted into the retaining area. "Oh ho," Efran muttered. "If you put Councilor Baldassare in a holding cell, he'll be breathing fire." Heus and the sentry chuckled in acknowledgment.

They walked down the row of cells and Baldassare lunged up. "You! Efran! Get me out of this pit and into a decent room!"

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Chapter 21

Efran was the portrait of sympathy as he told Councilor Baldassare, “Yes, I hope to get you to a nice room, but that depends on what you tell us.” Baldassare wore a good suit, which was rumpled from travel. Also, his hair was not curled tonight. Glancing around, Efran asked the sentry, “Did he arrive alone?”

“No, Captain; his two bodyguards are being held in Barracks D,” the sentry said.

“Interrogation?” Efran asked.

“Yes, sir, under the Commander,” the sentry said.

“Good. Chair, please?” Efran said, and one was brought so he could sit comfortably across from Baldassare, who reluctantly sat. Heus stood with his back to the cell next to the prisoner. “Now,” Efran began in a chatty tone, “why did you come?”

Baldassare slumped back in the chair. Efran noted an empty dinner plate and bottle of ale on the small table beside him. “Idiots. They’ve welcomed Loizeaux’s spawn to the throne, so the first thing he’s going to do is attack you. He doesn’t know the string of failures everyone’s had doing that.”

Efran leaned his elbows on his knees in thought. But Lyte did know. He was here for all of them, including his father’s first and second efforts. Did Lyte believe he had a foolproof plan, then? “Who is this spawn of Loizeaux’s?” he asked.

“His son Wyse, who was supposedly here, in service to you,” Baldassare sneered.

“Do you doubt that?” Efran asked.

“He hasn’t convinced me or several others that he knows anything special about you,” Baldassare returned.

Efran observed, “He must have some reason to think he’ll succeed.”

The Councilor shrugged. “He has men on the inside here.”

“Who?” Efran asked.

“I don’t know names. All I know is that moles are never as effective as you want them to be,” Baldassare said.

Efran sat regarding him. Everything he said was reasonable, if not true. But Efran felt that he was missing something. “So, you came here right before his attack because you’re sure of his failure? Or . . . his success?”

“Eh?” Baldassare squinted at him.

“Now that makes sense,” Efran said. He leaned back in the chair, crossing his arms. “If you’re here when Wyse sweeps through, you have instant credibility, being detained behind bars. And you’re also the first on the scene, to either be his greeter or his assassin. Yes, I can see that.”

Baldassare gaped at him in dismay. While it was nice to see him thrown off, Efran couldn’t tell whether it was because Efran’s hypothesis was right or wrong.

Another man stepped into the corridor facing the cells. He saluted Efran with, "Commander Wendt requests your presence in Barracks D, Captain."

"Yes." Efran stood to accompany him outside, Heus following like a silent shadow. Efran was beginning to like him.

After they had crossed the new northbound road, another sentry opened the door to the last barracks, where Efran was directed inside to a small room. Here, he found Commander Wendt and his Seconds Gabriel and Barr sitting at a table. Efran saluted properly. "Captain Efran reporting as summoned, Commander."

Wendt raised his face. "Thank you, Efran. Have a seat."

"Yes, sir." Efran sat in the remaining chair opposite him.

Wendt asked, "Did you get anything profitable from Baldassare?"

"No, but I didn't have much time with him," Efran said, glancing away. "He *said* Wyse doesn't know what he's in for, and that he doesn't think his attack will succeed. I can't see either of those being certain."

Wendt mused, "I suppose we'll find out. From our interrogation of his bodyguard, it does appear that Wyse is counting on your death to demoralize your men so that he can walk over them. That sounds plausible, because I am almost certain that another man remains in the background—someone you won't suspect."

"There are men I refuse to suspect, and if I'm wrong, then the Abbey is doomed anyway. Who would you guess?" Efran asked.

"I can't know, because I haven't seen the men. Some things you have to see to know," Wendt said.

"Then, sooner or later, it will be seen," Efran said. He did wonder if he were relying too much on his inner conviction of the man's identity. But he asked, "Do they know when Wyse will attack?"

Wendt shook his head. "I wouldn't trust whatever they told us. But I have men working on the barricade by torchlight. Even if it's tomorrow morning, we will be ready."

Efran exhaled, "That's why I made you Commander." Barr and Gabriel silently concurred.

The attack did not come the following morning (April 16th). At sunrise, Efran snapped wide awake. He disentangled from Minka, still sleeping, to pull on his pants and stuff his bare feet into his boots. Then he slipped out the front doors, nodding at the door sentries' salutes. He went out to the front courtyard to look to the east.

Even with a fairly dense cloud cover, the light of the rising sun was intense, so that he had to shade his eyes to see beyond the barricade. But he saw nothing on the horizon that hadn't been there every morning. So he looked to the north, where the Lands were just beginning to awaken. As there was no tumult that he could see, Efran went back inside to get dressed and have breakfast.

Although nothing unusual happened that morning, Efran began to pay special attention to the traffic coming into the Lands. He was watching at the gates (in his usual work clothes) when the peat seller rumbled through with his donkey pulling a cart full of peat squares. Efran knew him, and knew that he was Hassie's father. But he

never attempted to make contact with her; he was only diligent about delivering peat to his round of customers.

The peat seller courteously tipped his worn, flat work cap to the guards and Efran, who nodded to him. Watching the cart as it rolled up Main, Efran saw what looked like a fresh streak of white paint across the back of his cart. It was not large or conspicuous—only about seven inches long and an inch wide at the broadest part. But it was new. The wood of the cart was gray for age—all except that streak. Somehow, it did not look accidental.

Curious, Efran followed him on foot to call, “Hiya!”

The peat seller glanced back at him, then pulled his cart over to the edge of the street. “Yes, sir?”

Efran caught up with him to ask, “What is your name, again?”

“Plunkett, sir,” he said, tipping his hat again. Although Efran was wearing work clothes, as usual, Plunkett evidently recognized him.

“Plunkett. That’s right. I’m curious about the white paint on the back of your cart. What is that for?” Efran asked.

“Uhh,” Plunkett grunted, then climbed down from the driver’s seat to walk around the cart and look at the fresh paint. “I’ll tell you, sir, I don’t know. But I leave the cart at my cutting bog overnight, and walk my girl Ludy back. She stays with me at night, and we go out in the morning to load up the cart again,” he explained laboriously. His donkey looked back at her name.

“I see. Where is your cutting bog?” Efran asked.

“A few miles up the road, sir. It’s not marked but for a dirt path. But it’s not protected, either, and I have a drying stall out there,” Plunkett said as if discussing the Treasury.

“Do you ever see trespassers?” Efran asked.

“I see footprints on occasion, but they’ve not stolen any peat, and it’s not my private property,” he said, perturbed.

“I see. Well, good luck with your business. You seem to be doing well,” Efran said.

“Thankee, sir. In fact, I’m preparing my backyard to grow rice and crayfish. The fella Knapp is showing me how,” Plunkett admitted.

“Are you? Excellent. Be sure to let the fortress kitchen know when you’re ready to sell to us,” Efran said, smiling on him.

“Thankee, sir, I will do that!” Plunkett said, pleased. Efran patted his shoulder and walked back to the gates. Plunkett reseated himself in his cart to cluck Ludy forward. He smiled and tipped his cap to everyone he passed.

As Efran returned to the gates, Hawk asked, “Should we keep an eye on him, Captain?”

“Not on Plunkett; he’s fine. But on the cart. Check the back of his cart when he comes back with it in the morning. See if that white streak has changed,” Efran said.

“Yes, Captain,” Hawk said.

At this time, Minka was trying to get dressed. But she was weighted down with apprehensions, and her prayers seemed hollow. “Efran is not frightened. He’s not the least bit concerned,” she told herself. But she knew why: he had such great faith in Wendt’s leadership, he couldn’t imagine his being defeated in any battle. She adored Wendt, but she didn’t know him like Efran did, and couldn’t know if Efran’s confidence in him was justified.

As she often did, she crouched to study the beautiful crèche recovered from Featheringham. It was so perfect, so detailed, so finely crafted. Hair, faces, downcast eyes and aquiline noses were rendered delicately in shaded hues. Minka couldn’t help touching the figures, but she did try to make sure her hands were clean when she did.

The angel astride the shed over the manger was her favorite figure. Most depictions of angels she had seen were feminine, with golden, curling hair and female bodies. But this angel watching over the manger of the newborn Savior was masculine, with power rippling his form from the downward bend of his head to the sword in his hand and the forward tilt of his body. Minka suddenly laughed—his feet were spread in Efran’s fighting stance.

“That is what our guardian angels look like,” she whispered. “Like Nakham, when he finally walked down Main to confront the magician. But where is Nakham now?”

Waiting for you to fight, came the ripple of thought.

“We have to fight,” she acknowledged. “But we are not alone.”

The following day, and the next, nothing came at sunrise; nothing happened. The morning gatesmen checked the back of Plunkett’s cart each morning when it came loaded from the bog, and the white streak never changed.

The barricade was now complete across the east gap, though the concrete not fully cured. The men made refinements, hammering iron rods into the wood as steps or hangers for weapons. They added buckled leather straps in a few places, as well. At the base of the tree trunks, they piled a great many arrows, as well as stones or clay balls for the slings. And in case those played out, the men piled up rocks that could be dropped from the top of the barricade onto the heads of invaders below.

Then they waited.

And on the following morning, April 19th, Plunkett drove his cart in from the cutting bog with a red streak over the white.

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Chapter 22

The gate guards alerted the Captain to the red streak on the back of Plunkett’s cart. Efran didn’t have to see it before he ran out to the courtyard half-dressed to look to the east. Shading his eyes in the brightness of the sunlight, he saw nothing—which could only mean that it was a signal for tomorrow morning.

The barricade was continually equipped with more ammunition while barrels of water were stationed all along it in case the Eurussians tried to burn it down. The Lands army did everything they knew to get ready. Efran was in

the midst of it, checking, assessing, advising—surrounded by men on the grounds, he hardly even stopped to eat.

Finally, in late afternoon, there was nothing more to be done but wait. Efran, restless and impatient, rode back up the switchback—the old one. The paving was complete; both switchbacks ready and operational for a possible invasion. Captain Rigdon's hilltop unit would be tasked with defending them should the Eurusians breach the barricade.

The courtyard gate guards patted him on the back in praise or encouragement—normally an impermissible liberty, but Efran accepted it. All the men were pumped at the opportunity to fight, even the Southerners. Efran tapped the hands of the men reaching out to him as he ran through the foyer to the stairs.

He paused in the workroom doorway for Estes and DeWitt to look up. Efran said, "We've done all that the Commander has ordered, all that we know to do. If you see something more, tell me."

DeWitt said, "Yes, Efran, but everything looks good from up here." Estes nodded.

Efran patted the door frame and went on down the corridor. Estes observed, "He's very happy to be under Wendt's command again."

"With reason," DeWitt said, and they returned to their books.

Efran went to the south end of the corridor to open the window and look out. This window consisted of two large vertical panes that opened inward over the windowseat. For safety, there was a decorative iron grille covering the lower third of the window on the outside. The glass was clear, so opening the window wasn't necessary to see out. But Efran wanted a full view right now; he felt the need to see everything.

First, he looked down on the activity on the back grounds, especially the children running everywhere. Minka had Joshua in his cart with Nakam trotting alongside, barking at obstructions in their path. Efran watched them in satisfaction. Then it suddenly occurred to him: why the signal on Plunkett's cart?

It didn't make sense. The Eurusians wouldn't be warning them about an imminent attack. But it was clearly a message to someone here. Then Efran remembered the last assassin, the one that the Polonti dragnet missed. "He's been notified to get it done," Efran whispered.

Hearing a quiet footfall in the corridor behind him, Efran turned. A young Southerner, sweating, saluted nervously. "C-captain."

"Yes, at ease. What is it?" Efran asked, smiling as he stood at the window on the left side, his left knee resting on the windowseat cushion.

"Captain, I—I don't like what I'm seeing," the young man said, breathing heavily.

"What is your name?" Efran asked.

"Walch, sir. I usually pull guard duty, but I've been out back today. May I—show you?" he gestured nervously to the window.

"Of course." Efran stepped back, but left the window open, as he had been told to do.

When young Walch came up to the window, pointing, his obscured left hand swept toward Efran's side. Aware of

it, Efran jumped back so that the blade only ripped his shirt and scored his skin. With the momentum of the missed strike, Walch fell forward over the window grille, held back only by Efran's grabbing his sleeve. The knife clattered to the portico over the back steps. Someone below shouted in warning at the young man dangling from the grille.

They looked at each other while Efran strained to hold onto the fabric. Then he said, "The woman at The Greenery has only daughters."

Walch whispered, "She's ashamed of me." Efran started to pull him up, but Walch's sleeve ripped at the seam, and he fell.

Efran leaned over the grille to look down as people converged on the young man sprawled on the ground. The back door guard, Gaul, looked up to the window, shouting, "Are you hurt, Captain?"

"I'm all right," Efran called back, unaware that the blood on his shirt was visible to those below. Minka left Joshua in his cart to begin running to the back door. Efran withdrew from the window, closing and latching it. In rising from the windowseat, he noticed the shallow gash in his side.

So he went to the doctor's quarters to find Wallace's wife. "Efran! What happened?" she exclaimed, raising his shirt tail.

He unbuttoned his shirt. "It's not serious, Leese, but I need it covered before Minka sees it."

By the time Minka appeared at the door, pale and wide-eyed, Leese had cleaned the shallow cut and covered it with a bandage. It wasn't even deep enough to need stitches. She turned at Minka's appearance, and Efran inhaled preparatory to explaining himself.

Heedless, Minka stepped forward to rip off the bandage and look at the wound. Leese raised her hands with a light laugh and went to get another bandage. "See?" Efran told his wife. "Nothing but a little blood."

Gaul and Martyn appeared at the door. Gaul knelt in front of Efran to scrutinize the wound while Martyn evaluated his general appearance. Efran told him, "You may go tell the Commander that the lone hand has taken his shot, and bungled it. I'm good to fight."

Martyn exhaled, "Yes, Captain." Saluting, he glanced at Minka with the barest twinkle. Gaul was still studying the blood flow (which was light).

She squeezed Martyn's arm lightly in relief. As he left and Gaul stood back, Minka put her arms around Efran's neck. But then she had to move away for Leese to replace the bandage. While she did that, Minka murmured, "Must you fight?"

"Oh, yes," Efran said, smiling. He *wanted* this fight.

Over the next two days, while the Abbey defenders watched and waited, the Lands' residents went about their business untroubled. Challinor had produced sketches which Elvey and her team liked, so they took her back on, with the agreement that the new designs would be rendered in fun, breezy cotton prints (produced at Venegas) which were far cheaper and sturdier than the silks and satins that Trina used. At the same time, Trina abandoned the silks and satins to which she was now allergic. Instead, she bought fun, breezy cotton prints from Venegas, whose merchants were making a killing off them.

Humblecut had become the hero at Elvey's, able to procure lovely boxed dinners from the Fortress when all others were turned away. For Madea had delegated the boxed-dinner side business to Loghry; he, impatient with the demands, waved away many supplicants. But Humblecut's effusive and genuine gratitude got to him every time.

Meanwhile, every Lands eatery began offering prepared boxed dinners, but Firmin undercut everyone by offering his for one piece less than the prevailing price. This set off a war among them. Meanwhile, Minogue abandoned his nascent eatery in order to supply quality beef cuts to all the others. Gilhooley found steady work delivering these orders. Unknown to Minogue, he did add one or two pieces to the price as a tip for himself.

Without Trina to come between them, Reinagle and his son Folliott engaged in a cautious reconciliation. They began having meals together (boxed dinners from whoever was the cheapest that day) and discussed possible business ventures. Seeing the peat seller work in his backyard when he was done with his rounds, Folliott had stopped to talk to him.

Then he took back to Reinagle the idea of financing Plunkett's rice/crayfish farm for a cut of his profits. This interested Plunkett, so the three of them took the idea to Ryal, who offered advice and papers to sign as to what each party could expect. Shortly, Plunkett's cleaned yard was flooded, planted with rice plugs, and seeded with a bucket of crayfish bought from Knapp. Since there was very little maintenance required, Plunkett was free to continue selling his peat squares.

While Geneve was assisting Lemmerz in supervising the construction of the new, larger chapel, her husband Melchior had healed of his injuries enough to oversee the preparation of the Abbey's defense, but not enough to fight. On the second uneventful day after the warning, Melchior was at the barricade with Efran, Wendt, Barr and Gabriel. But Melchior was not looking at the barricade, he was looking at the sky. "Second day in a row it's been cloudy," he noted.

The others looked up. Wendt said, "Barr, you or Gabriel let me know what the sky is like at first light tomorrow."

"Yes, Commander," he said.

The next day, April 22nd, dawned bright and clear. And as the sun peeked out over the eastern horizon, the sentries at the barricade put out the call: "Coming!" "Here they come!" "It's on!" The guards at the courtyard gates began ringing the alarm bell.

Guards warned shoppers off Main and back to their homes. Businesses were ordered to close and lock their doors. Soldiers poured out of the barracks dressed in breastplates and helmets to climb to the top of the 15-foot-tall barricade with bows and quivers, slings and bags.

Here, they discovered the brilliance of the attack's timing. The men at the bottom of the barricade were in full shadow, but the men at the top were faced with the rising sun. "We can't see!" they roared down. "We can tell they're coming, but we can't look! We'll burn our eyes out!"

Efran, heart pounding, scaled to the top of the barricade to see for himself. "Argh!" he cried, turning away. There was no way to shade his eyes to get more than a glimpse of the horses and riders pounding toward them, the dust of their hooves rendered into a golden, obscuring fog in the blinding brightness.

At the foot of the barricade, with Gabriel beside him, Commander Wendt shouted at the men above them, "Don't

try to look! Save your eyes! You have to wait until they get close!”—which would give the attackers an early, devastating advantage.

But Efran cried to the sky, “God of heaven! Don’t leave us blind! Help us see!” He lowered his face, blinking back tears of anger.

Nothing seemed to happen for a while. The men waited tensely, feeling the vibrations in the ground grow stronger with the invaders’ approach.

But then a change was discernible. One by one, the men at the top of the barricade began raising their faces. Storm clouds were rising in the east, darkening the sky. “Ino!” the men cried in joy. “Ino comes!”

And Efran heard Therese whisper, *There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help, and in His majesty through the skies.* [Deut. 33:26] Then he looked down to call for his bow and quiver.

With the sun mostly obscured, and the sky darkening to half light, the defenders could clearly see the great mass thundering toward them. Watching, Efran thought, *To hire and equip this many men, Lyte has enormous wealth behind him. They’re still after the Treasury.* At the center top of the barricade, he called left and right, to archers and slingers, “Wait to fire on my signal!”

The men stood poised, weapons at the ready. When the lead rider was about 400 feet away, Efran lifted his bow with a whistle and shot him off his horse. Following, scores of arrows hit their targets. Even the shots that did not pierce the attackers’ armor were enough to knock them out of their saddles. At the same time, the slings were deployed. Here, the great number of Eurussians became their own liability, as the foremost riders could not retreat or even turn aside from the slings and arrows flying from atop the barricade.

Massed as they were, the attackers were momentarily stymied. Most were armed with swords, having counted on gaining quick entry to the Lands. There were a fair number of javelins among them, but throwing so far upward at a run proved imprecise, and no one on the barricade was hit. By force of those behind, the front ranks of the Eurussians were pressed into unyielding trunks cemented in place.

Seeing the stalemate, some of the invaders at the very back began peeling away to ride northwest toward the stone wall. But archers and slingers were arrayed all along the eastern wall clear to the north face, and hundreds of Eurussians fell before they could even get close.

So they predictably charged the sole gate in the far eastern wall—without seeing the pit immediately in front of it. The horse-loving Polonti were distressed by the suffering it caused the Eurussian horses, but kept firing. After losing the foremost riders in this trap, the remainder drew back to the main army, dammed at the barricade like water in a reservoir.

Because both switchbacks were inaccessible, some attackers tried riding up the hillside to get around the barbed wire. Unable to gain traction on the loose, rocky dirt of the gentle ascent, the horses began sliding or falling back down. And their riders were completely exposed to the slung stones. In fact, the Abbey archers began deferring to the slingers, whose projectiles were just as lethal as arrows, and numbered in the tens of thousands at the base of the barricade.

Given their diminishing options, the invaders started climbing the barricade. With so many men, this had a plausible chance of success, as the barricade was only 15 feet high. Also, their archers finally pressed through to get within range, sending volley after volley over the top of the barricade. Faced with this, the defenders had to stay down and wait them out.

All through the battle thus far, Efran had been looking for Lyte. But the Eurusians were so uniformly attired in steel helmets with purple tunics over breastplates, one man was indistinguishable from another. While waiting for the Eurasian archers to play out—who could carry only so many arrows on horseback—Efran studied them through a small gap between the trunks. And he spotted one rider who had a knotted kerchief of blue around his neck. Just watching his movements, Efran recognized him as Lyte. Following, all Efran had to do was keep an eye on the blue kerchief.

Meanwhile, the Eurusians discovered that the two tactics—climbing and firing—were incompatible. As long as the archers were firing, the climbers couldn't get over the barricade, and one or two actually got hit. So when the archers stopped firing so that their climbers could ascend, the defenders rose again to throw rocks down on them. Even helmets couldn't hold up under this avalanche.

Seeing their climbers drop with broken heads or necks, the rest drew back from the barricade, and the Eurasian archers began firing again—until their quivers were empty. Then Polonti boys began running around inside the barricade to gather arrows from meadowgrass and the main east road. These they stacked at the foot of the tree trunks, or hauled up to restock quivers hanging on the barricade. All this while, the clouds persisted in covering the ascending sun; in fact, they grew darker.

Under a fresh fusillade of Abbey fire, the Eurusians took shelter under their shields to conference. Shortly, several men, also shielded, ran up with flint boxes and firesteels, and soon fires were crackling at the bottom of the barricade. Trees cut down weeks ago began burning readily.

Buckets of water were urgently passed up to the defenders at the top, but men who appeared over the barricade to pour the water were then vulnerable to the Eurasian archers, and a few were hit. Then came another complication, common wherever dark clouds form: great drops of rain began splattering on the men, the horses, the ground, and the barricade. The weak flames sputtered and hissed, then went out with a puff of steam.

Upon urgent shouts from the leaders—Wyse being prominent in the front middle—the attackers pulled back again to consider their options. There were still a thousand of them, at least, and if they could just gain entrance to the Lands, their numbers would overwhelm the Abbey defenders. But they were stymied, for now.

And the rain became a deluge.

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Chapter 23

Watching at the top of the barricade through the downpour, Efran kept his eyes locked on the blue kerchief. Lyte was evaluating everything while a cool-headed man was talking to him. Just by the man's gestures, Efran could see that he proposed to draw the men back. A sweep of his arm encompassed the Lands from the hill to the Passage. And Efran's blood ran cold. For the first time, he was afraid.

If that advisor talked Lyte into pulling back for a siege, they would win. By cutting off the walled Lands from their livestock, fields, hunting and fishing grounds, they could starve the Landers within weeks. Lyte had demonstrated incredible patience for almost two years now; if he could wait a little while longer—two months at the outside—it would all be his. He would accomplish what his father, and every attacker after him, had failed to do: obtain the Abbey and its Treasury.

Heart pounding, Efran cast about for a way to distract Lyte from the intelligent counsel he was receiving. *How can I disrupt that? He knows us so well, and what we'll do.*

But—Efran knew him well, too. Lyte was patient, but he had been waiting a long time already. His backers had been led to expect quick results from this attack. And, he was proud. Oh, yes, Loizeaux's son was a proud man.

Efran turned his head as if listening, then gave instructions to the man directly below him. He nodded and rapidly descended.

In the pelting rain, Efran climbed waist-high above the barricade, and the heads of the Eurusians spun to look. He took off his helmet, dropping it below. Then he took off his breastplate to drop it likewise. In the suspense, no one attempted to spear him. His companions at the barricade were divided between watching him and aiming arrows at any rider who lifted a weapon. Some were no more than ten feet away.

Both sides of the barricade went silent. Wendt demanded of Gabriel, "What is Efran doing?"—because the silence had to mean that Efran was doing something.

"Climbing on top of the barricade, Commander," Gabriel laughed.

Efran climbed the rest of the way to stand on the barricade in the pouring rain. Besides making himself an easy target, this was dangerous in every other way: just keeping his balance while upright with nothing to hold onto was tricky, and his feet were longer than the diameter of most of these trees. They were wet and slippery, unevenly cut across the top.

When he was fully standing, Efran shouted, "Wyse!" at his old friend. It was jarring for all of the Eurusians to see the Polonti Captain look straight at him. The new Surchatain did not reply, only eyed him warily. His advisor spat, "Ignore him! Give the command to withdraw!"—which even the Abbey defenders heard.

Efran aimed to make that impossible. He called joyfully, "Fight me! You want to end this now? Come fight me up here!" (Incidentally, he had no idea that, although the barricade was hundreds of feet off from the courtyard and fortress balconies, a number of residents were there watching. While they could not discern his words, they saw him on the barricade and heard his defiant voice.)

At this challenge, the Abbey men behind the barricade roared, raising their fists as lightning seared the sky, closely followed by a shuddering boom. And the Polonti on the ground began the war drums.

This was a sustained beat they could do with or without drums. Here, hundreds of Polonti began clapping, stomping, or pounding weapons together in rhythm: *bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM!*—on and on and on. Depending on one's viewpoint, it was either exhilarating or maddening. The Abbey Southerners joined in.

All the while, Efran was standing on the wet, blunt-cut tops of two trees, laughing at the Eurusians while the rain beat down on him. "Finish it, Wyse! Throw me down, and we will open the gates to you! Are you Surchatain or water boy?" *bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM!* Lyte stared up at Efran while his advisor hissed at him.

The Eurusians at the forefront were grinding their teeth. One impetuously nocked and raised his bow, to immediately receive a barrage of rocks and arrows which knocked him off his saddle and hit the men beside him. Worse, Efran laughed, "Are you trying to cover for your cowardly Surchatain?"

Having identified Lyte by the glances of his men, the Abbey defenders on the barricade pointed at him, shouting, “Coward! Coward!” The Eurusians began seething at the taunt. (In respect of the Captain’s challenge, none of the wall defenders was tempted to try to take out the Surchatain.)

So the taunt became incorporated into the Polonti war drums: *bum bum* “COWARD!” *bum bum* “COWARD!” Still Efran stood on high, heedless of the rain, grinning maliciously down at Lyte, which roiled his men. Meanwhile, Commander Wendt was hearing it all, receiving clarifications from Gabriel.

Lyte’s men were looking at him darkly; a few said something, to which he retorted. But now his leadership was at stake, his personal courage having been called into question. His advisor continued to talk to him, but Lyte could no longer ignore the challenge—especially from the Captain. *bum bum* “COWARD!”

Spitting in anger, Lyte tore off his decorated helmet and embossed body armor. When his advisor tried to stop him, Lyte shoved him away. Then he dismounted to walk through his quiet men and begin climbing the barricade. The defenders stopped the coward chant to begin cheering instead. Everybody loved a good fight.

Climbing the outside of the barricade was difficult, because that’s how it had been constructed. More Abbey men scaled their side of the barricade to watch. Then several of Lyte’s men came underneath him so that he could stand on their shoulders to ascend. Seeing that they were invested in the match as a body, Lyte’s advisor ripped off his helmet in anger.

All of the men, Eurusians and Landers, fell silent as the first group watched Lyte grip the slippery top of the barricade while the second group waited for him to stand up. Efran himself stood apart to give him room to fairly get his footing on the treacherous stumps before the fight began. The Abbey men watching from footholds in the barricade cleared far away from the fight space.

Eventually, despite the downpour, Lyte inched up to stand facing Efran about five feet away. In size, they were evenly matched. The men on both sides of the barricade were quiet as Efran said, “I will take a step toward you; then you take a step toward me, and we engage.”

Lyte nodded shakily. Wiping the rain from his eyes, Efran looked down to gingerly move his left foot forward two stumps, then bring his right foot to the stump behind it. He had to pause to regain his balance between steps. Then Efran looked up to say, “Now you.”

Extending his arms for balance, Lyte looked down to lift his right foot. But then Efran reached out to grab him and fall off the inside of the barricade, where his men were waiting to catch them both, which they did.

The Eurusians on the outside stood gaping at this trick. Shortly, Gabriel’s unprotected head and shoulders appeared over the top of the barricade. He looked down on the stunned Eurusians to say, “Good morning, gentlemen. I am Commander Wendt’s Second in Command Gabriel, and I am instructed to advise you that we now have Councilor Baldassare and Surchatain Wyse in our possession. We will guaranty three of you safe passage to enter by the front gates to negotiate for their release. That is all.” He disappeared again.

Then numerous other Landers—not just Polonti—appeared over the barricade to monitor their response. Lyte’s evident officers talked between themselves for a few minutes, then began walking their horses north toward the gates. The remainder of the army followed—except for the advisor.

He was riding away by himself—until he suddenly disappeared off his horse in the midst of angry soldiers. By now, the rain had slacked off to a drizzle.

The barricade observers signaled to their fellow soldiers below, three-quarters of whom turned to begin running to the wall gates. Archers and slingers, re-supplied with arrows and stones, were stationed all along the eastern and northern wall to ensure that Lyte's much larger army behaved.

When the three officers presented themselves at the main gates, they were instructed to dismount and disarm to enter. This they did, ducking to keep the crests of their helmets out of reach of the faerie trees. The visitors were searched for hidden weapons, then escorted into Barracks A.

Here, they were taken through the outer office to a conference room with a large oval table. Seated and waiting were Commander Wendt, the Seconds Gabriel and Barr, Efran, Lyte and Baldassare. A mess kitchen assistant was setting out plates of flat bread, dried venison and bottles of ale at every seat. All of the men were soaking wet except the kitchen assistant and Baldassare.

The Eurusians removed their helmets and Wendt said, "Thank you for coming, gentlemen. I am Commander Wendt; you already know the Second Gabriel and Captain Efran. Next to him is my Second Barr. I presume you recognize Councilor Baldassare. Please have a seat and introduce yourselves." Captain Towner's scribe Viglian sat at a small table by himself to take notes.

One Eurusian officer glanced at Lyte, who sullenly nodded. So the three sat across from Efran, Barr and Gabriel. The one who had looked at Lyte said, "I am Commander Inglese, these are my Seconds Boughan and Cosgriff."

"Very good," Wendt said. "Surchatain Wyse, is Commander Inglese empowered to speak for the army?"

Lyte studied him for a moment. Wendt knew him well; as Efran's Commander, Lyte had conferred with Wendt frequently about all aspects of army organization. To be so comfortably addressed as "Surchatain Wyse" by Wendt in the role of Efran's Commander was surreal.

When Wendt turned his head at the silence, Efran said sardonically, "He's thinking about that, Commander."

Lyte glanced at Efran in irritation but said, "Yes, with my approval."

Efran idly replied, "That's good; I have to get approval from my Commander to say anything." Gabriel stiffened to not smile and even Barr's lip twitched. Wendt noted Efran's light tone in the presence of his chosen Commander—Lyte—who had walked him to the gallows. Efran had been known to disguise hatred with humor; his use of it now concerned Wendt a little. He didn't want Efran further improvising here.

Nonetheless, Wendt proceeded, "Good. Then any assurances Commander Inglese gives are binding. Is that correct, Surchatain?"

Lyte wavered, trying to discern the reason for this preamble. "With my approval," Lyte repeated. Inglese blinked and Efran smiled.

"Very well," Wendt said. "Here are our conditions for the release of Surchatain Lyte—pardon me, Wyse—and Councilor Baldassare: your army will never attack us again or any of our representatives, messengers, or friends." Viglian was rapidly scratching out notes while several others were rocking at the barefisted blow Wendt had delivered by apparently misspeaking.

Efran added, "Specifically, Lady Marguerite, her staff, her guests, her house and possessions are all off-limits to you."

Baldassare spoke up: “Lady Marguerite is an institution in Eurus. Anyone would be insane to harass her. Surchatain Loizeaux treated her with great respect.” Smelling blood in the water, Baldassare stepped all over the sinking Surchatain.

“True,” Efran admitted, joining him.

Wendt said, “That’s good to hear. So, do we have your agreement on that, Surchatain Wyse?”

Lyte, correctly feeling that he was being made to look like a buffoon, rocked lightly in his chair. “Yes.”

Wendt turned to Lyte’s Commander. “Commander Inglese, does that meet with your approval?”

“Of course,” Inglese said, barely avoiding a glance at Lyte. Wendt’s slightly variant wording of his questions could be construed to give greater prominence to the Commander over the Surchatain.

“Excellent,” Wendt said. “Viglian, if you’ll—”

“One more thing,” Efran said, his head jerking up. “Pardon me, Commander, but—there will be no financing of attacks on us. Money handed to our enemies will be counted as aggression, and we will retaliate against the man behind it.” Efran remembered that Baldassare had been pegged as a financier of DePew.

“That’s a good point,” Wendt said. “So, Viglian, if you’ll write up two copies of those conditions for us to sign, we’ll call it a day.”

Efran asked, “Don’t we need Ryal, Commander?”

“Oh, for his notary seal. Yes, absolutely. Who’s at the door?” Wendt asked.

Efran looked over. “Coxe, go bring Ryal; tell him we need him and his seal.”

“Yes, Captain,” Coxe said, darting out.

They settled down as Viglian began reading out his notes to get corrections for the specific wording on the final draft. As he was reading, Efran sat up, putting a hand out. Viglian went quiet so that they all heard—and felt through their feet—a rumbling.

Efran bolted from his chair, knocking it over, and ran out the door. Inglese jumped up as though to follow, but two Abbey men stood in the doorway to block him. Breathing deeply, Inglese glared, given no choice but to sit again. Wendt said, “There, now. Efran’s still a bit unbroken; he starts at unfamiliar noises.” Gabriel stifled a laugh. For a blind man, the Commander perceived a great deal. Wendt added, “Viglian, please continue reading.”

He did read as the rumbling went on, and even intensified. But minutes later, in the midst of it, Efran returned to right his chair and sit. Ryal entered behind him, carrying his notary equipment in a canvas tote. Commander Inglese asked Efran, “What is that?”

“Nothing,” Efran said, relaxing in his chair. Inglese silently turned deep red.

Ryal said, “Greetings, Commander Wendt. Thank you for summoning me. Do you have the documents ready to be signed?”

“Our scribe is working on them, Lord Ryal. Please sit here beside me,” Wendt requested. Gabriel stood to pull out a chair.

As Ryal sat, Gabriel handed him a sheet passed up from Viglian. “Here’s the first. Viglian is writing out the second copy.” Viglian glanced up to nod while Ryal looked over the document.

Scanning those seated around the table, Ryal said, “I will read it aloud and ask your highest administrators here to sign it in my presence. Lord Efran and Commander Wendt shall sign as representatives of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Who wishes to sign representing Eurus?” Ryal looked at the visitors.

Lyte said, “I and my Commander Inglese.”

Ryal looked at Lyte. “And who are you, sir?” Whether Ryal recognized him or not, it was a deep cut.

Admirably composed, Lyte said, “I am Surchatain Wyse.”

Then Baldassare said, “I am Councilor Baldassare of Eurus.”

Ryal quickly looked around. “Is the Councilor’s identity certain?”

“Yes,” Efran said, and Lyte nodded.

“Then you must sign as well, Councilor,” Ryal said. Baldassare nodded benignly.

Ryal read aloud the first copy, which was short, and asked, “Does anyone object to anything in this document?” No one did, so Ryal printed the names of the signatories at the bottom, verifying the spelling of the Eurusians’ names. Then he placed the sheet before Baldassare. “Please sign above your printed name, Councilor.”

“Yes,” he said, dipping the quill to sign with an impressive flourish. Meanwhile, everyone was listening to the rumble fade. The Eurusians studied Efran, whose face was blank.

The paper, quill and ink went around the table for everyone to sign. When it came back to Ryal, he added the date—April 22nd of the year 8155 from the creation of the world—as well as his stamp and signature.

Viglian had the second copy ready by this time, so Ryal carefully compared the two in order to ensure that they were identical. Then the process of signing, dating and sealing was repeated.

Blotting both documents, Ryal looked up. “I have neglected to bring a document pouch. Do you have one?”

“Yes, Lord Ryal,” Viglian said, standing. “Let me fetch it.”

“Thank you,” Ryal said. The others at the table were quiet.

Efran turned to look at Lyte. And when Lyte looked back, he might have been surprised at the sorrow in Efran’s face. Everyone else who saw it certainly was. Efran whispered, “You were a good man, until you weren’t.” There was—loss, grief in the words which Lyte seemed unable to read.

Efran dropped his eyes as Viglian returned with a leather pouch to hand to the notary.

Ryal rolled up one copy to insert it in the pouch, which he presented not to the Surchatain, but to Baldassare.

That was a stark indication of who he thought was most likely to retain power. “Councilor, I will charge you with making this document known to the Council as a whole.”

Taking it, Baldassare inclined his head. “This will be done, Lord Ryal.”

Ryal looked at Efran to ask, “Estes would want to keep your copy in the fortress, wouldn’t he?”

“Yes,” Efran said. Looking over to the door, he summoned, “Fennig, take this on up to Estes, please. Give him and DeWitt a complete accounting.” He handed the Fortress copy to the soldier, who saluted and departed with it.

Wendt stood, so everyone else did, as well. “Thank you for your cooperation, gentlemen. Our men will see you out to ride directly to Eurus. Good day.”

Efran saluted. “Yes, Commander.” Looking at Inglese near the door, Efran added, “After you.” Inglese went out quickly, and the room cleared.

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Chapter 24

When the treaty participants emerged from the barracks, they found the rain gone and bright sunshine making the still-wet grounds sparkle. Abbey gate guards were holding the reins of the Eurusians’ horses, who were rearing in panic. For beyond the gates sat four large gray wolves. And no other riders were in sight.

“What?” Lyte gasped, as his officers gazed in disbelief. “Where is my army? Where are my men?”

Efran replied, “On a straight shot to Eurus.” He gestured to the guards to open the gates. Then he went out to talk amiably with the wolves. They hung around him for a few minutes, and one approached so that he could stroke its coarse fur. Then they trotted off together to the east.

Efran watched them for a while, then reentered the gates, still open. “Sami’s the only one who’ll let anyone pet her,” he observed to no one in particular. Then he looked over to see the visitors’ horses calming down after the departure of the wolves. “They’ll be all right to ride now.”

Commander Inglese looked hard at Efran. “You have trained wolves?”

“Oh, no, they’re quite wild,” Efran said. “But your men thoughtlessly encroached on their territory. They didn’t like that. So they encouraged them to leave.” While the Eurusians gazed at him in disbelief, Efran tried to keep a straight face when he was just as flabbergasted as they: Why did upwards of a thousand men ride off without their Surchatain?

At that time, a unit of thirty Polonti in blue rode up from the east, well apart from the departing wolves. Efran’s face opened in gratified surprise as the leader saluted. “Captain D’Achille at your service, Captain Efran. Surchatain Sewell sends greetings. We seem to have captured a modest number of men who thought to climb over your walls, as well as some wounded. Shall Venegas take charge of them?” His tone was sardonic, the men behind him being satisfied with their contribution to humiliating a large Eurusian army.

Efran replied, "Certainly, Captain D'Achille. Please extend my warmest appreciation to Surchatain Sewell."

"My pleasure, Captain," D'Achille replied. With a departing salute, he and his men turned eastward again.

Lyte looked after them with glazed eyes, then looked north. The other three Eurusians regarded him blankly. To lose control of his army was worse than being defeated by inferior numbers. Unless the new Surchatain could assert himself quickly, he was in trouble. And he couldn't even suppress this embarrassing agreement, as it was out of his hands.

"Good luck," Efran said stonily.

Wyse, Inglese, Boughan, and Cosgriff grimly remounted to ride out of the gates after their fleeing troops. Ahead of them lay not only a seven-hour ride, but the task of regrouping their men and explaining this inexplicable drubbing to their backers. Barr and Gabriel were at Wendt's sides, narrating the events to him.

Efran then looked back at Baldassare standing off. Gesturing to one of the men, Efran instructed, "Get his carriage ready; have him packed provisions for the ride."

"Yes, Captain." The man saluted and sprinted away.

Efran went over to Baldassare with a wry smile. "I'm actually glad you came down, Councilor. I hope that you--"

"I'm not leaving without Minka," Baldassare said. Efran's heart momentarily stopped, until he remembered that Baldassare was talking about Minka's faerie impersonator. The last Baldassare knew, she was here. He went on, "I have your agreement, which you'll want the Council to see, and I am in a good position to be Head Councilor. But I must have that woman."

Half-groaning, Efran turned away to mutter, "How am I going to—how wrong would it be to—oh, I should have known better. To use faerie Minka in this way can't be—" He should have known not to invoke her audibly, but he broke off again to see her walking up Main toward them—Minka's faerie impersonator, that is.

She was dressed in a lovely rose-colored travel suit, with a brocade bag containing lady essentials. Although she still had something of Minka's face and form, her makeup and her hair style clearly differentiated the two. Baldassare rushed from behind Efran to take her arms. "There you are, Minka, dearest!"

"That's not Minka," Efran protested.

"What's her name, then?" the Councilor asked, turning. Faerie Minka looked at Efran for his word.

"Uh, she's—Solace," Efran blurted.

"Yes, that's my name," she said. And Efran watched her face change minutely so that she no longer resembled Minka so much. Also, her hair was darker.

Baldassare noticed nothing of that. "Solace. That is perfection." He raised her hand to kiss it.

Efran glanced at Baldassare's carriage arriving from Croft's, and his bodyguards being brought from their holding cells. Then he turned back to tell Baldassare, "She's from here, and will vanish if you make another move against us."

“Vanish? How so? You think to come steal her from me?” Baldassare rumbled.

“No, she is . . . Abbey Lands faerie, constrained by Faerie Law to be loyal to us,” Efran said uneasily.

Baldassare looked momentarily uncertain, then his face brightened. Efran couldn’t tell whether Baldassare believed him or not, but the Councilor replied, “Really? How interesting.” Turning to offer his arm, he asked, “Are you ready, my dear?”

“Yes, my Lord Baldassare,” she said, glimmering. He inhaled in satisfaction. But Efran was stricken by how strongly she reminded him of Minka, then. She sometimes glittered like that.

He stood back to watch the Councilor assist Solace into the carriage, and follow her. The footman closed the door and lifted the step, then mounted to the high seat. When he was settled, the driver clucked the horses out of the gates onto the northern road. They were followed by his mounted bodyguards.

“Efran,” Wendt said from some distance away.

Wincing, Efran went over to him like a child expecting punishment. “Yes, Commander?”

“Who is the woman?” Wendt asked quietly. Barr and Gabriel stood on either side of him.

“A faerie, Commander,” Efran confessed.

“Yes, I saw the aura,” Wendt said. “But what will he do when he finds out?”

“He knows, Commander. I told him,” Efran said.

“Ah.” Wendt raised his head; Barr and Gabriel suppressed malicious smiles. Faeries were unaccountable.

Ryal walked up with his tote bag of notary equipment. “Is everyone off, then?” he asked, glancing around.

“Yes,” Efran said. “Ah, Gabriel, please get a couple royals from the office for his fee.”

“Yes, Captain,” Gabriel said, turning back to the barracks while Ryal’s protest was ignored.

Once Gabriel returned with the notary’s payment and put it in his bag, Efran accompanied Ryal to his shop.

They were quiet along the way. Efran was exhausted, not just from the defensive battle today, but the stress of the last few weeks following the insurrection. He could hardly hope that all the instigators had been put out of play. “Efran,” Ryal said.

Efran’s head snapped up, and he stopped in his stride. “Yes, Ryal,” he said as though expecting a reprimand.

Ryal hesitated. Efran waited in a stupor for the notary to collect his thoughts. But the old soldier said, “Efran, I am proud and grateful for your service as defender of the Lands. You are well suited to the task. Ares would agree.”

Efran blinked heavily, then patted Ryal’s shoulder. “I’ll correct that.”

Ryal laughed in exasperation and Efran left him at his door.

Coming to the old switchback, Efran looked up past the faerie trees at a large wagon filled with kitchen supplies ascending ahead of him up the curving (and newly paved) road, drawn by a pair of draft horses. So Efran just began climbing behind it, head down in weary thought.

As he came to the third bend of the switchback on the east, he heard Minka call, "Efran!" His head shot up, but he didn't see her. She wasn't anywhere on the switchback above him, as the moving wagon disclosed.

"Efran!" she called again. He spun to look on the switchback below, but it was vacant. Only, the faerie trees at the bottom were shaking their leaves in laughter.

"Efran! Over here!" she called once more. Following her voice, he looked to his left, to the east, and saw her waving from the third right-hand bend of the new switchback. She was laughing anxiously; Allyr, pulling the cart with Joshua in it, was just grinning. When Joshua saw his father so close but inaccessible on the other switchback, he burst into tears.

"I'm coming," Efran laughed. He hopped off the switchback to begin traversing the rocky, uneven ground between them. The three on the new switchback waited, and Joshua stopped crying. He was beginning to see that his father could do anything.

Stepping onto the newly paved road, Efran, still damp, lifted her to press his face into her hair as she held his neck tightly. Joshua tried to stand in the cart, beating Efran's leg. So he reached down to bring his son up on one arm.

Minka held his other arm as they turned to begin ascending again. Allyr pulled the empty cart along behind them. She breathed, "I've never come as close to passing out as when I saw you climb on top of the barricade in the rain."

"You saw that?" he asked, peering toward the barricade in the distance.

"I saw someone do it, and knew it had to be you," she said, chastising.

He grinned. "Did you see me bring Lyte down with me?"

She almost stopped walking. "Was that him?"

"Yes," he said, still smiling.

"Where is he? Where are they?" she asked, turning to look toward the wall gates.

"Riding back to Eurus with their tails tucked. He's continuing his father's proud tradition of being beaten by us," Efran said in satisfaction.

"What did you do to him?" she asked.

"I'll tell you." And he began telling her about the conference with the Eurusians, including Baldassare.

He talked until she got him to their quarters and began stripping his damp, dirty clothes off him. Once comfortably undressed, he fell back into bed, immediately asleep.

That evening at dinner, everyone had heard about the defensive battle that had taken place that day, and the Captain's challenge to the former Commander. So all of them greeted Efran, Minka and Joshua when they appeared at their usual table. Ella pressed close to hear about the treaty signing, as Quennel had told her about the fight at the barricade earlier.

The children swarmed Efran, demanding to see his wound from three days ago. Most of them had been on the back grounds when his attacker had fallen out of the window. So Efran had to turn around on the bench to pull up his shirt so that Toby, Almund, Hassie, Jera, and anyone else passing could inspect the six-inch, narrow scab on his side.

"Did it hurt?" Hassie asked anxiously.

"Honestly, I hardly felt it," Efran said. He also realized that he never learned the fate of his young attacker.

When the children, satisfied, ran off again, Efran mouthed to Quennel, *What happened to Walch?*

He died, Quennel mouthed in return. Efran nodded.

That evening, the faeries hosted a party on the back grounds in celebration of the wonderful Polonti war drums which obviously won the day for the Abbey defenders. The faeries—all of them, all kinds of faeries, from the silly little mischief makers to the great, serious water faeries, hill faeries, and sky faeries—were intrigued by the simplicity and force of the drums, and that the drums could be performed without any drums at all.

As the faeries began to devise their own war drums, Polonti rushed to the back grounds to observe. They watched, smiling, as the different kinds of faeries struggled to simulate the Polonti original. Then Queene Kele waved a hand in exasperation. "Here, now, faeries! We have the creators of the war drums right here. Let them show us how it's done." The faeries grew quiet and the Polonti began to gather.

One pulled Efran off the bench, where he had been sitting with Minka. She snuggled Joshua on her lap in excitement—the rhythm seemed to be already in the air, pulsing with life.

Facing the bench, Efran was placed in the middle, with five men on his left hand and five on his right. He began the beat by stomping with his left foot, stomping with his right, and then clapping: *bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM! bum bum BUM!* The men on either hand fell in with the rhythm.

More came up alongside and behind him to stomp and clap. When Southerners attempted to join in, they were allowed. Children ran up to the lines, and were accepted. Minka jumped up to stand beside Efran, and the men moved down for her. Joshua crawled over to sit in front of them, waving his hands as director. Faeries thronged in around them.

When fifty or more humans were shaking the ground with their stomps, the men began chanting in rhythm: "uh huh HUH! uh huh HUH! uh huh HUH! uh huh HUH!—"

Then on top of this came variant vocalizations. In a high range, one man began a chant of ascending notes, like that of a song refrain: "aah aaaah aaaahhhh, aah aaaah aaaahhhh, aah aaaah aaaahhhh—"

And another man began what sounded like the bellbird's calls: "ah ha HA! ah ha HA! ah ha HA! ah ha HA!"

Each layer on top of every ongoing layer, all blending with the original rhythm, created a complex symphony of spontaneous sounds. Some men were clapping sticks rapidly, providing a base for all the others. The lower-range rooftop bells sounded on the heavy beat: *bong . . . bong . . . bong. . .*

As the blended sounds rose in joy, distant thunder was heard in synchronization: *boom . . . boom . . . boom*. And the crashing of the waves on the cliffs joined in. Before long, the peach and apple trees were swooshing their crowns in rhythm to the beat. The owls and nightingales were hooting and warbling in time. And far off, the wolf howls rose to join them. Kraken broke out of his stall again to run to the back grounds, kicking.

In the midst of this spiraling symphony, Efran began raising his arms at his sides. He thrust his hands up once, twice—then on third thrust, his hands closed to fists and everyone stopped dead. Only the reverberation of the drums remained in the air like a prayer. Then all at once, everyone was hugging anyone around him in the celebration of unity, of brotherhood, of fighting together and overcoming together.

Cyneheard was weeping, surrounded by his Polonti brothers; Arne clutched Lwoff, whom he'd always thought strange; the new Polonti Capur grinned at the new Southerner Melott, and they teamed up for guard duty that night. Pia called thousands of fireflies to mingle with the star faeries, lighting the whole back grounds. So the kitchen staff brought out the ale and desserts that had been neglected when everyone ran out here for the celebration.

Hours later, Efran and Minka stopped by the nursery to see Joshua and Nakam curled up in his impossibly small bassinet. Waving at Cordelia, Efran let himself in to drag the new, large bassinet over beside the small one. He lifted Joshua, still asleep, to place him in the new one, and Nakam woke up just enough to follow him over. Then Efran put the little bassinet on top of a high shelf.

“Goodnight, Cordelia,” he whispered. She smiled, and Efran draped his arm around Minka’s shoulders to walk back to their quarters. She was hardly aware when they lay down in bed, as she was still hearing *bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM!*

Efran drew her into his arms. “Did you have fun tonight?” he whispered.

“Yes! You Polonti always surprise me,” she said, snuggling into him.

“We’re like that,” he murmured, covering her, and she felt his heart beat: *puh puh POM puh puh POM puh puh POM puh puh POM*

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on April 22nd of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

He loads the thick clouds with moisture;
the clouds scatter His lightning.
They turn round and round by His guidance,
to accomplish all that He commands them
upon the face of the inhabitable world.

Whether for correction or for His land
or for love, He causes it to happen. ([Job 37:11-13](#))

NOTES:

See more on rice and crayfish farming [here](#).

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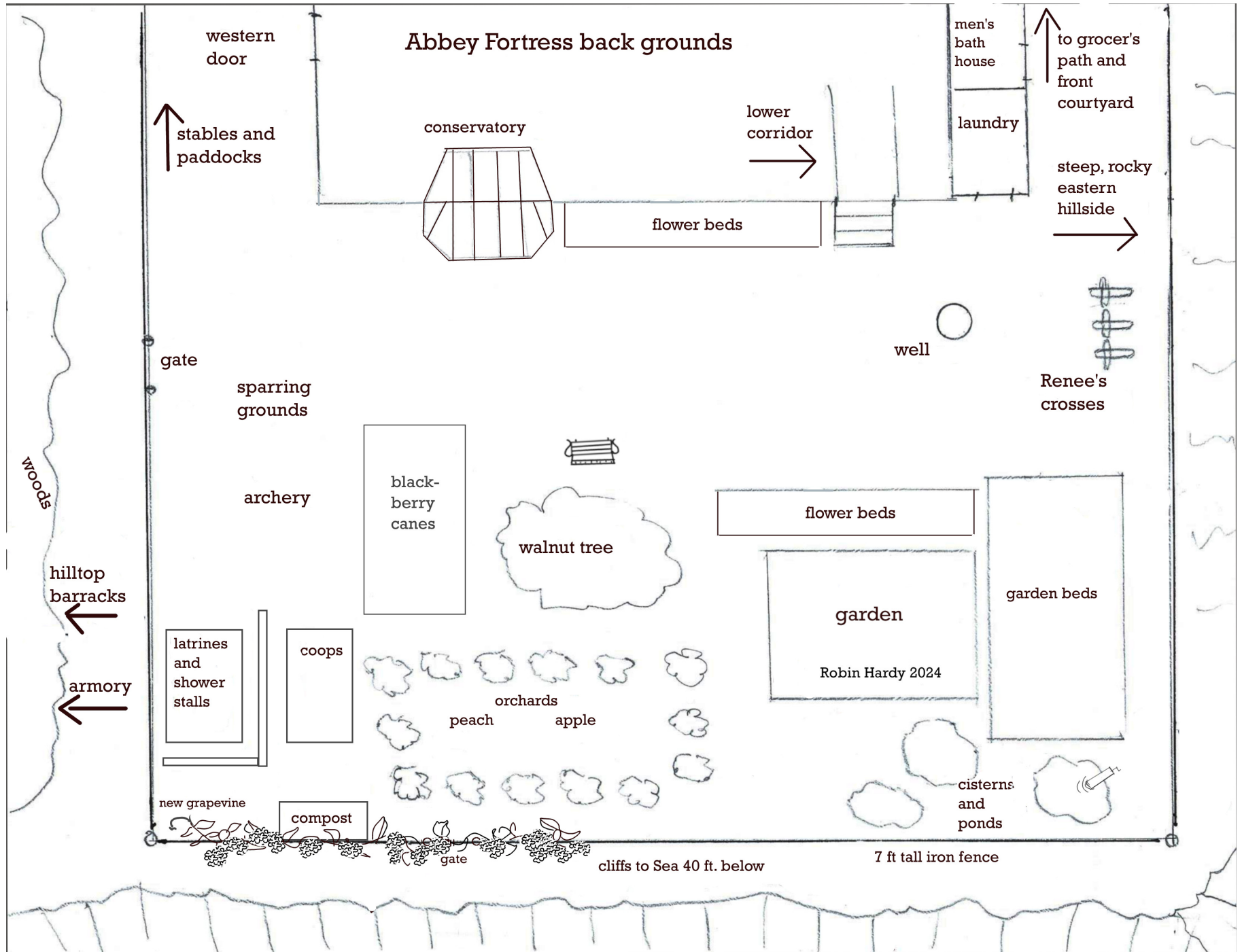
Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the War Drums* (Book 19)

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Adele—ah DELL	Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
aina—AY nah	Gilhooley—gill OO lee
Allyr—AL er	Goadby—GOAD bee
Arenado—air en AH doh	Goss—gahs
Ares—AIR eez	Goyne—goyn (hard g)
Arne—arn	Graduliere—gra DUE lee air
Averne—ah VURN	Graeme—GRAY em
Baldassare—BALL de sar	Graetrix—GRAY trix
Bennard—beh NARD	Greves—greevs
Blairgowrie—blair GOW ree	halcyon—HAL see uhn (peaceful, idyllic)
Bortniansky—bort nee AN ski	Heaphy—HE fee
Boughan—BOWE an	Heus—rhymes with the noun <i>use</i>
Bowring—BOWE ring	Heye—HAY yuh
Bua—BYOO ah	Imelda—eh MEL dah
cachet—ka SHAY (prestige)	Inglese—ENG lees
Canis—CANE iss	Ino—EE no
Capur—KAH pir	Jasque—JAS kee
Cennick—SIN ick (cynic)	Jehan—JAY han
Challinor—CHAL en or	Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
Chatain—sha TAN	Justinian—jus TIN ee un
Chataine—sha TANE	Kele—kay lay
Cioffi—see OFF ee	Knapp—nap
Clough—chloh	Koschat—KOS chat
Conte—cahnt	Kraken—KRAY ken
Cordelia—cor DEEL yah	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
crèche—kresh	Leneghan—LEN eh gan
Cyneheard—SIGN herd	Livesey—LIV see
D'Achille—dah CHILL	Livy—LIV ee
Dallarosa—dal ah ROW sa	Loghry—LOW gree
DeGrado—deh GRAW doh	Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
Delano—deh LAN oh	Lowry—LAHW ree
des Collines—day CALL en ez	Madea—mah DAY ah
Dierksheide—DEARK shide (long <i>i</i>)	Marguerite—mar ger EET
Doane—rhymes with <i>own</i>	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Dobell—DOH bull	Melchior—MEL key or
Dolivo—doh LEEV oh	Melott—meh LOT
Durgin—DUR gen (hard g)	meritorious—meh reh TAW ree uhs
Efran—EFF run	Minka—MINK ah
Elvey—ELL vee	Minogue—men OGE (hard g)
Enon—EE nun	Molyneux—MOL eh new
Estes—ESS tis	Nicarber—neh CAR bur
Eurus--YOUR us	Onfroi—ON froy
Eurusian--your uh SEE un	Pia—PEE ah
Eustace—YOUS tis	Pieta—pie ATE ah
Eviron—ee VIRE un	Pleyel—PLAY el
Eymor—EE more	Ploense—plonse
Felice—feh LEESE	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Flodie—FLOW dee	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Folliott—FOH lee uht	Prie Mer—pre MARE
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)	Reinagle—REN ah gull

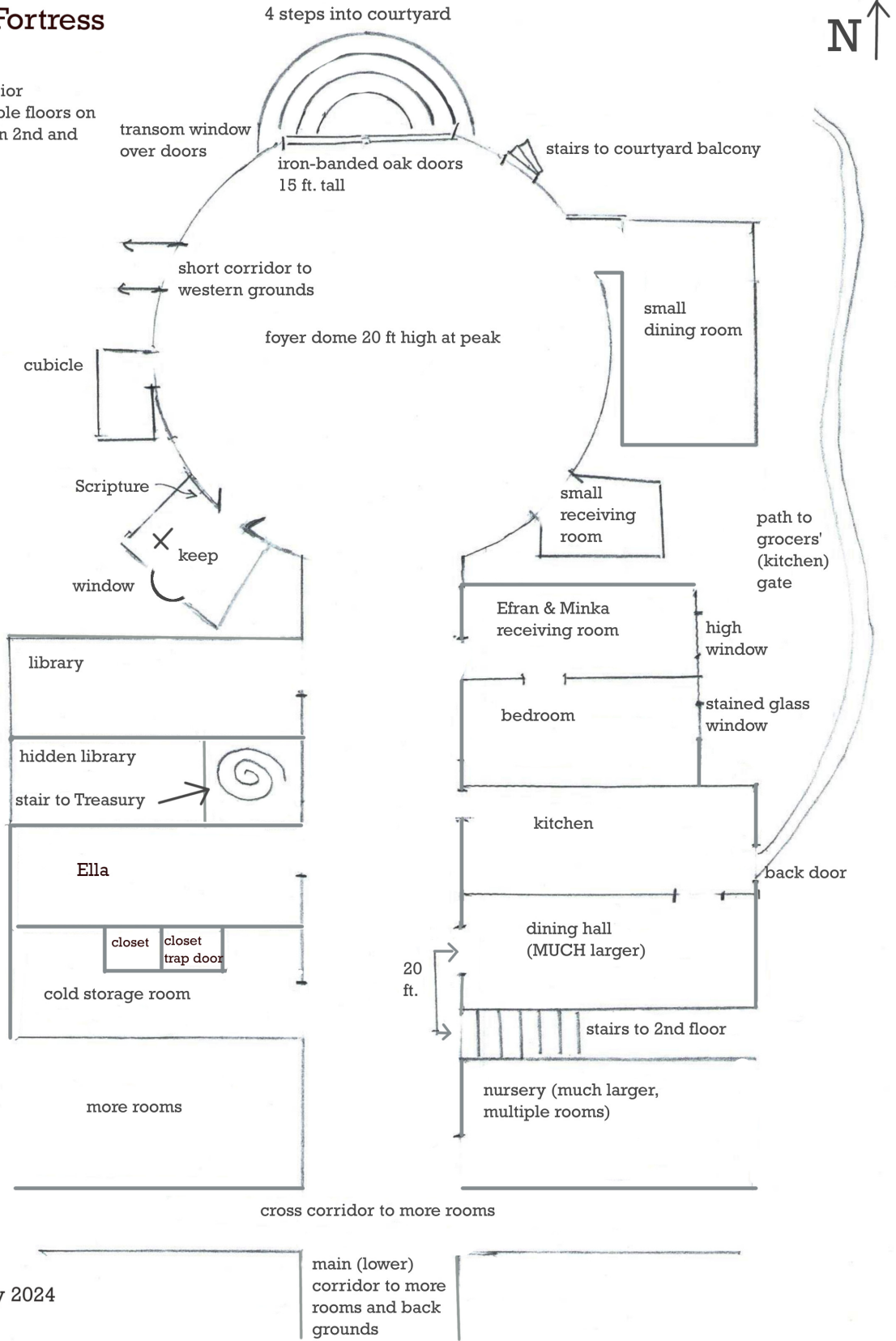
Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the War Drums* (Book 19)
© Robin Hardy 2024

Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
Rynne—ren
Sasany—SASS an ee
Serrano—suh RAHN oh
sluice—sloos
soirée—SWAH ray
Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Stites—stights
Suco—SUE coh
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Sybil—SEH bull
Symphorien—sim FOR ee in
Telo—TEE low
Teschner—TESH nur
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Tiras—TEER us
Tubridy—TUB reh dee
Vanidestine—van eh DES teen
Venegas—VEN eh gus
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
Verrin—VAIR en
Viglian—VIG lee en
Webbe—web
Wedderburn—WED er burn
Westfordian—west FOR dee un
Whobery—WAH bry
Wystan—WIS tan
Wyse—rhymes with *vice*



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



NOT TO SCALE

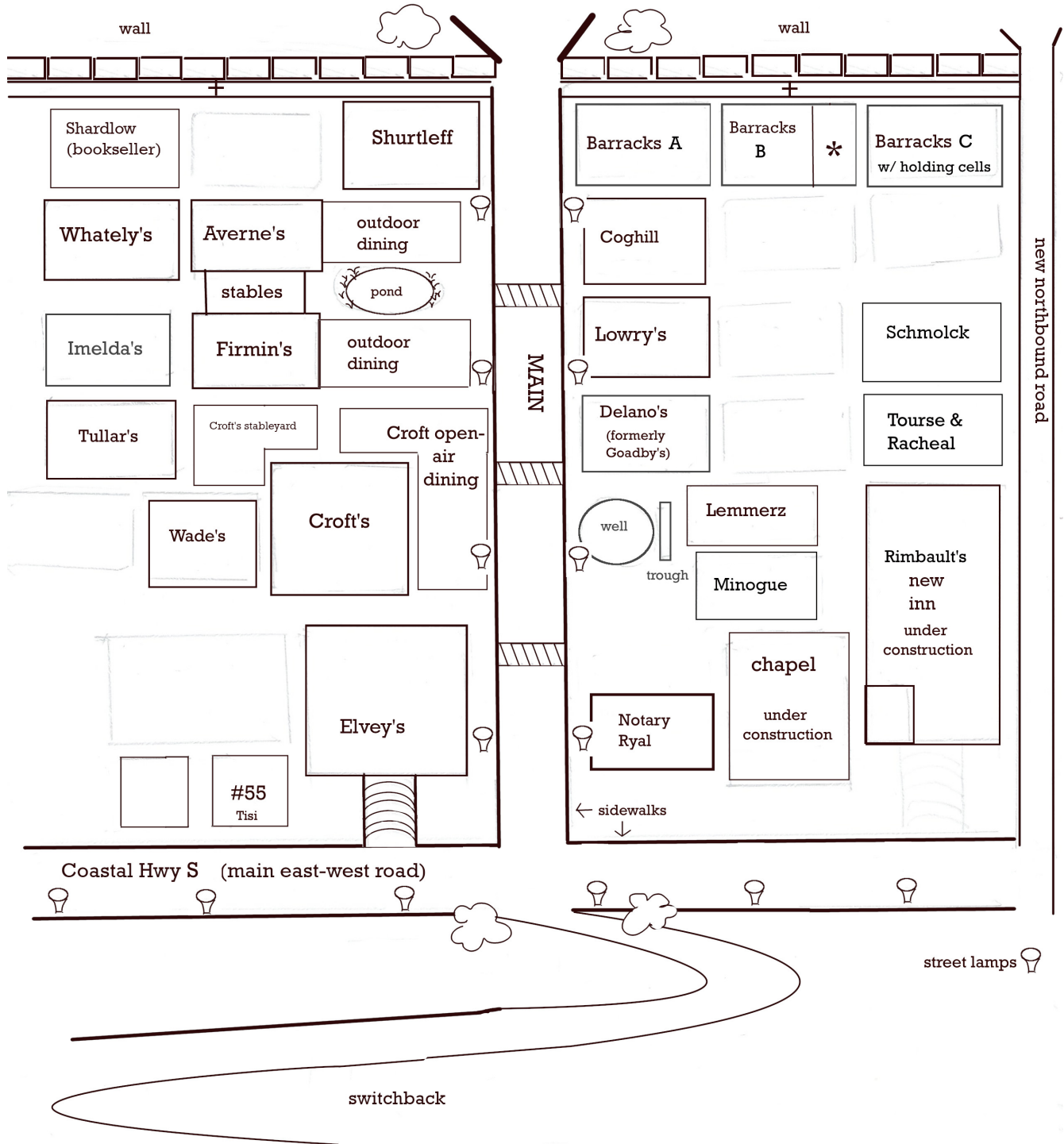
Robin Hardy 2024

main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds

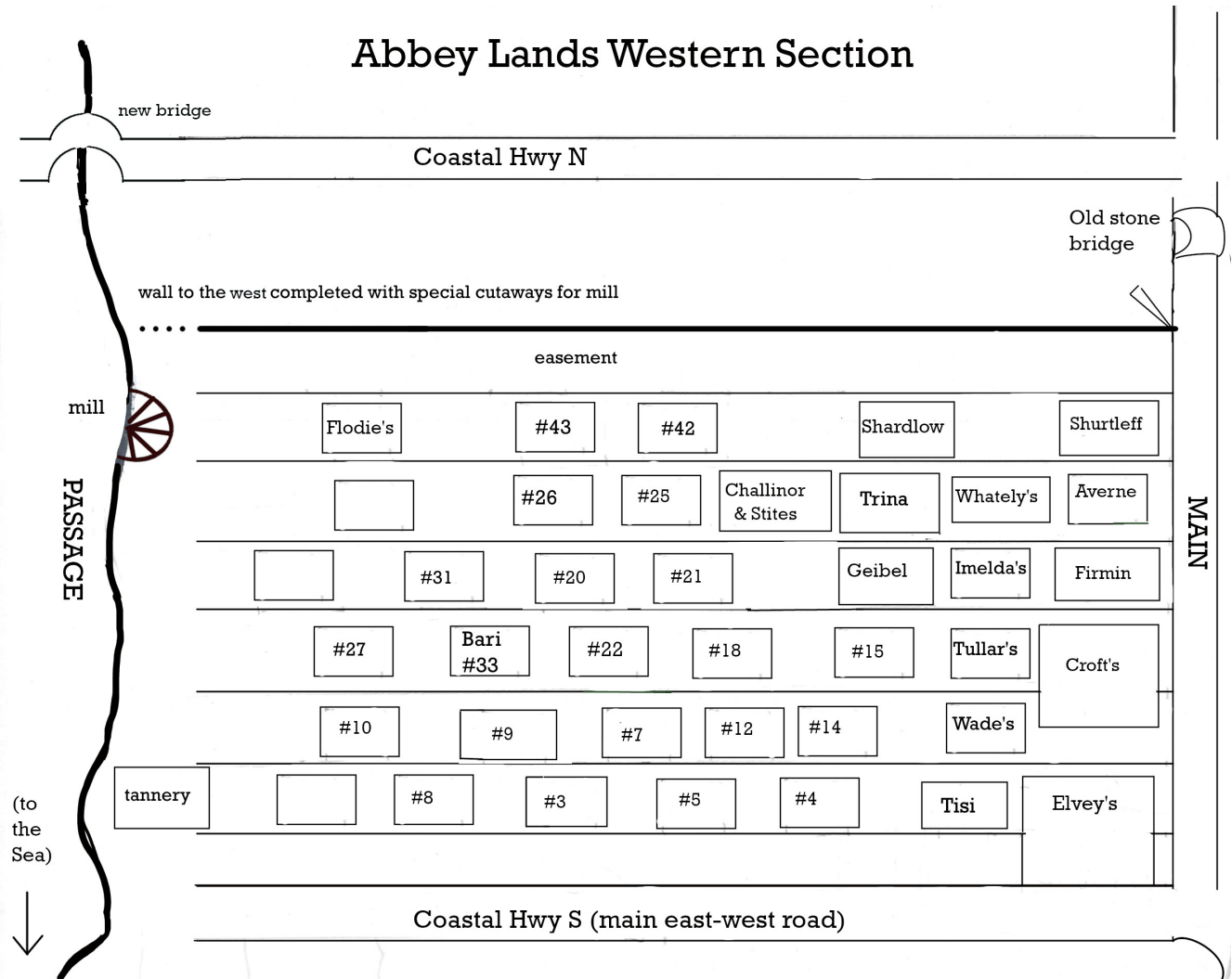
Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements



Abbey Lands Western Section



rocky NW hillside



switchback--4 bends on west side, 5 on east

KEY

- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
- 43 - Dallarosa & Enon



faerie tree

7 ft tall iron fence

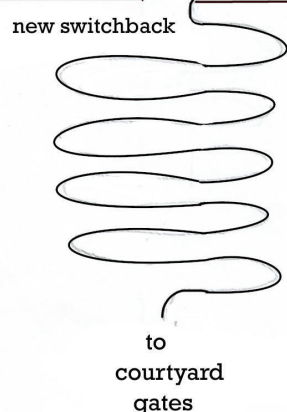
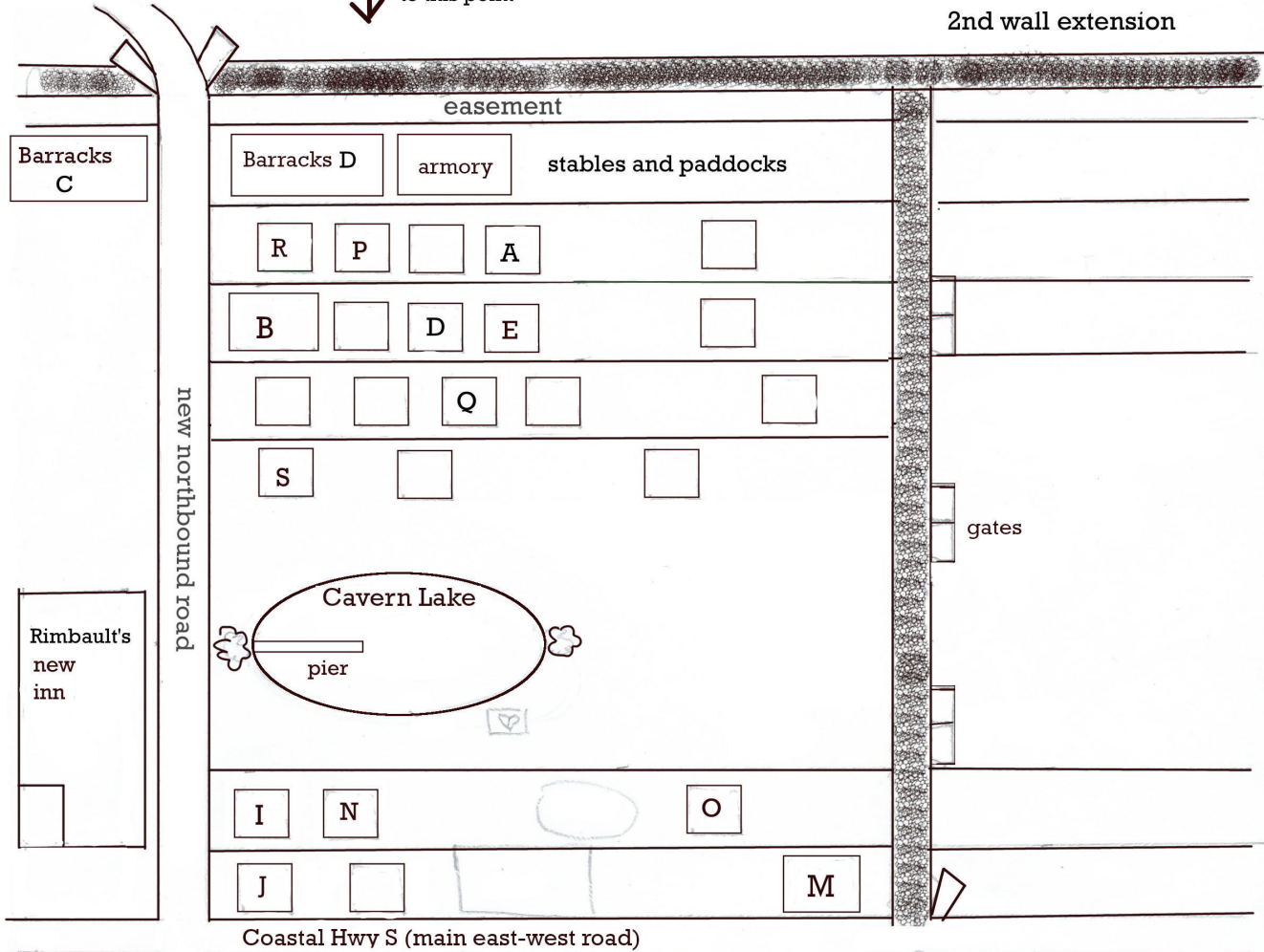
FORTRESS

woods

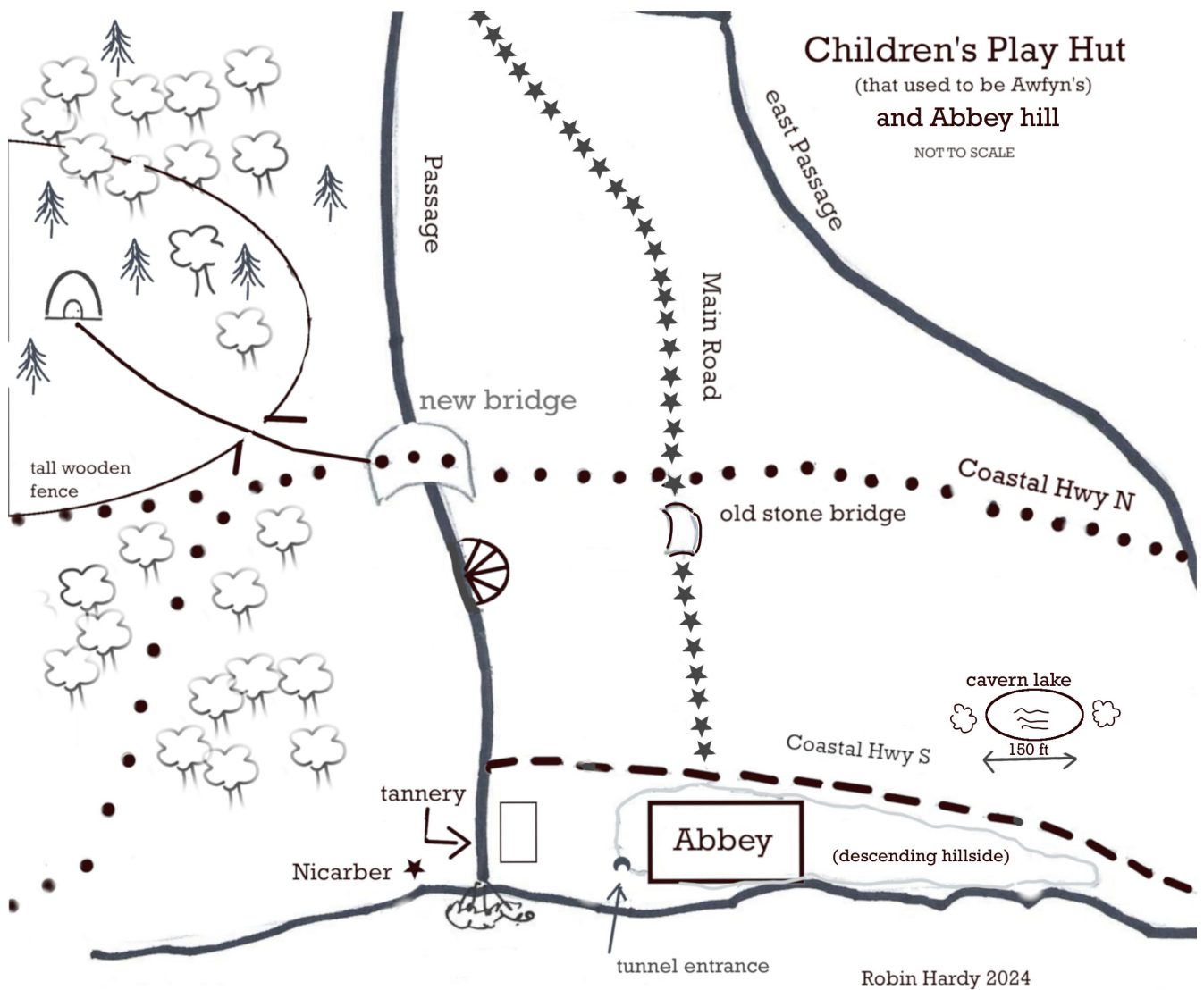
road curves to
intersect Main past
the old stone
bridge

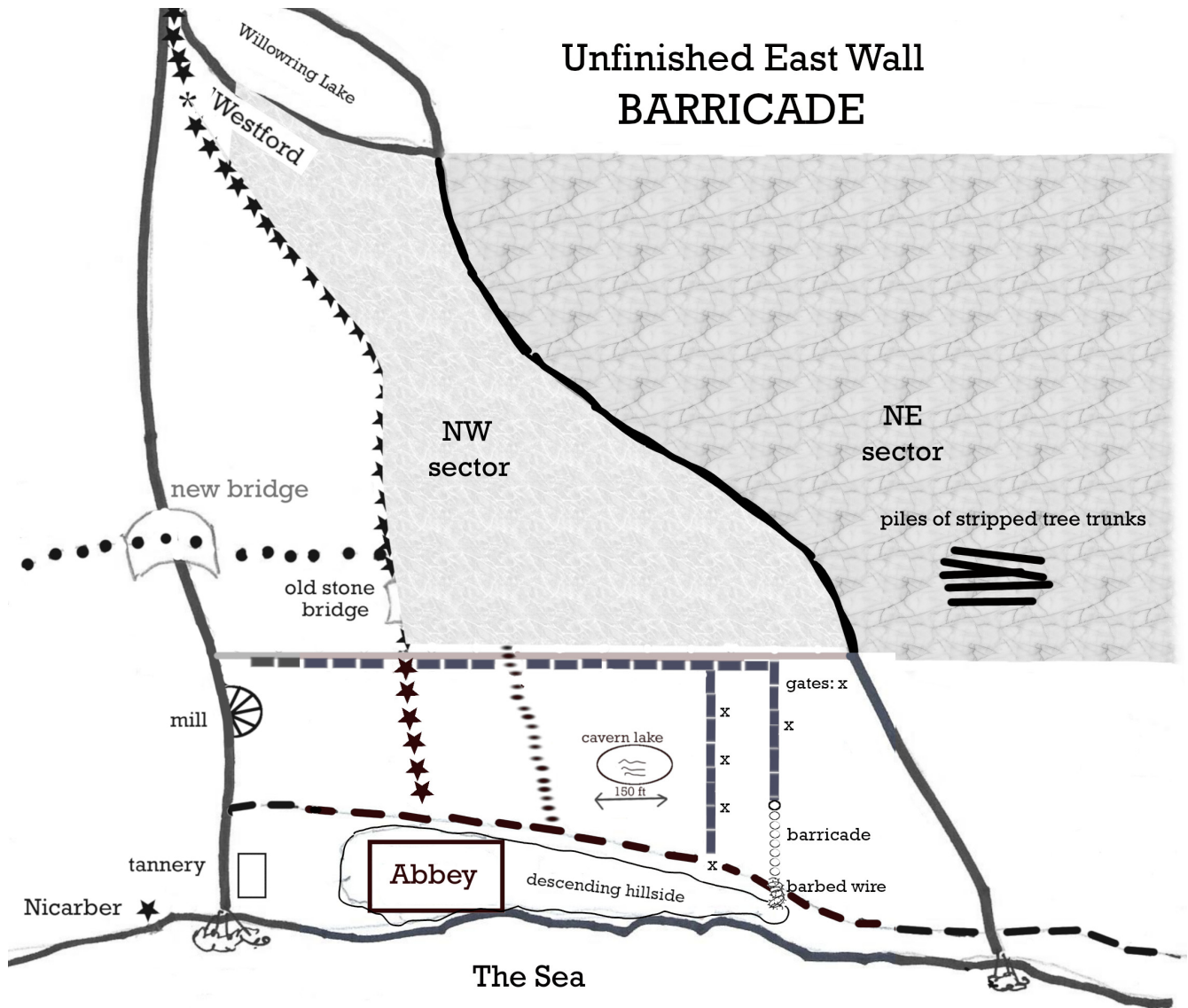
East Central Abbey Lands

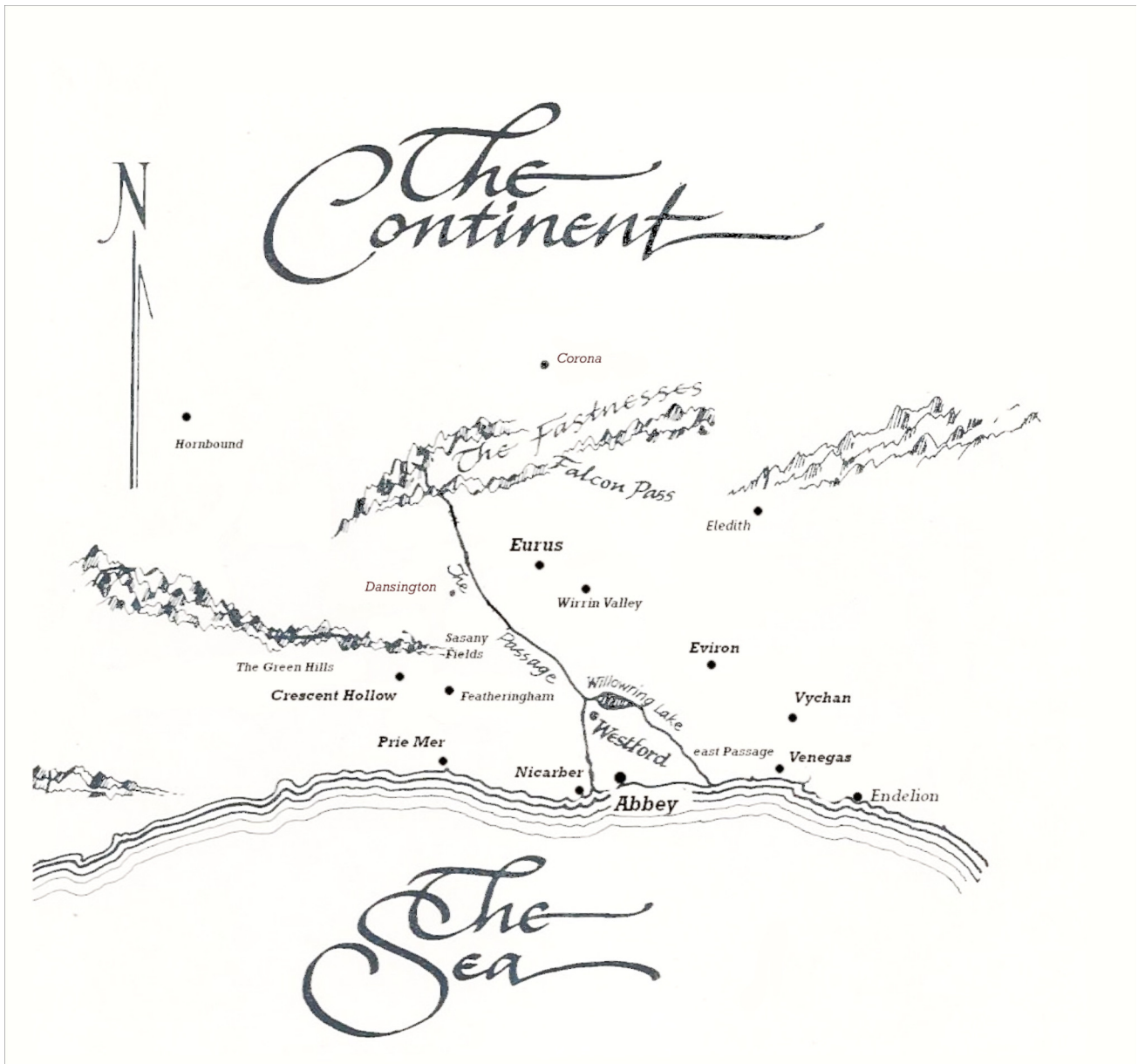
↓ 1 mile from wall gates
to this point



- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Folliot's house (#61)
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring's House
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office







Fight Me Up Here (Book 19:
Lord Efran and the War Drums)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



Author's Notes on Fight Me Up Here
(Book 19: *Lord Efran and the War Drums*)

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This one was great fun to work on, and I learned techniques for making clothes look wet. Anyway, I found the wonderful storm [backdrop](#)¹ on rawpixel and the [barricade](#)² on stockvault. Wyse was outfitted by Ivan Petrović Poljak for [Wikimedia Commons](#).³ And the rain came from [pngtree](#).

My stand-in for Efran was a great find, [here](#).⁴ I'm particularly proud of being able to airbrush out his light facial hair, which you wouldn't be able to see anyway.

I have to deal with De'Ath next, so think I'll go take a nap.

Robin Hardy
May 18, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on my illustration.

1. Which may have been AI generated
2. Created by [2happy](#)
3. Wyse is the one on the far right. Although I dinged up his armor a little, you'll note he's already bandaged.
4. Photographed by [Natan](#) on Pexels