



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

Book 17

Lord Efran and the
Featheringham Ladies

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Days after Captain Efran's stand against the water giant, the Abbey fortress residents became more aware of the Captain's visits to the library. They also heard whispered the Librarian's dealings with the deposed faerie king Alberon, caught trying to rob the Treasury. So they began cautiously sticking their heads in the library to glance around.

As the Librarian wished to encourage this interest, he subdued his appearance from flaming defender of the books to mild-mannered helper of readers. He even attempted to wear spectacles which Minka brought him from the doctor's quarters, but found that he kept accidentally knocking them off his face when he gestured. So he hung them from a breast pocket on his suit jacket, where they clung for dear life when he got excited.

The Abbey Fortress' expert in Roman's Law, Soames, was familiar with both the library and the Librarian, as Soames tutored Minka and Ella in the Law here in the library, with the Librarian's assistance. Soames was also responsible for tutoring new soldiers in the Law, which they all had to swear to uphold.

So, stopping by the library on the afternoon of February 18th, Soames said, "Hello, Librarian. I noticed the Captain reading a book on Henry the Great, and I'm terribly curious to read it myself. Is it available?"

"Yes, Soames." The Librarian turned to the shelf on which this particular book was located to reach for it. However, the book in question, eager to be read, ejected itself from the shelf into the Librarian's hand while surrounding books thrust their spines out, hoping to get noticed. All this happened so quickly that it merely looked as through the Librarian were clumsy in drawing out the requested book.

Taking the book that the Librarian handed him, Soames said, "Thank you. Er—is there a due date when it should be returned?"

"No, Soames. However, once you have read it, you are requested to return it, especially if someone else wishes to read it. If it sits unread for days or weeks, it may become restless and—demonstrative," the Librarian replied cautiously.

"I will keep that in mind. Thank you, Librarian." Soames waved the book at him, smiling as though the Librarian were joking. But he was speaking the bald truth.

Upon seeing Soames leave the library with a book, a new Polonti soldier stopped in the corridor to think. He was an intelligent man who had aspirations of leadership, but knew his deficiencies. So, summoning his courage, he stepped through the doorway to bow to the Librarian. But the Librarian inclined his head as well, asking, "How may I serve you, sir?"

The respect startled the new man, but also emboldened him. "My name is Suco; I have just joined the army. I speak your language, but do not read it. I wish to learn to read your language. Can you help me?"

Several books on the lower shelves started pushing out to get noticed, but the Librarian did not turn to them yet. He asked Suco, "Do you read Polonti, sir?"

"Somewhat," Suco said, distressed.

So the Librarian turned to the lower shelf to select a book, after having to replace a presumptuous candidate that

had flopped onto the floor. Handing the book to Suco, he said, “This is a dictionary of Polonti words translated into Southern Continental language. When you are off duty, come by and I will help you with pronunciations.”

Suco took the book, but looked at him sharply. “Are you free for a moment now?”

“Yes. Please have a seat, sir.” The Librarian gestured to the chairs and table at which the Law students sat during their lessons. So Suco sat quickly to open the book, and the Librarian sat as well. Suco paused to admire the sword of Ares in a stand beside the great book of the Law. A librarian who wielded a sword? Suco respected that.

Returning his attention to the book, he held it up to begin pointing to entries, and the Librarian read off: “*Kauoha*—Order. *Dute*—Duty. *Hana*—Work. *Kapena*—Captain. *Koan*—Soldier. *Hoopai*—Discipline. *Pahika*—Sword”—and many others, which Suco repeated after him. Other Polonti who passed by the library glanced in to observe this, noting the Librarian’s suspiciously perfect pronunciation of the Polonti language. So several of them entered to sit on the floor and listen.

An hour later, another soldier stuck his head in the door to say, “Inspection coming up.”

Suco stood quickly, as did the two who were sitting on the floor. “Thank you, Librarian,” Suco said, bowing. The others inclined their heads.

The Librarian took them all in with a glance to say, “Come back when you are free; we will resume.”

“Yes, sir,” they said, or nodded, then quickly left.

The Librarian’s eyes were alight; his hair almost crackling in excitement. As books stirred above him, he glanced up to say, “Yes, yes, be still! You must allow me to hand you out; if you fall out on your own, you’re liable to hit a reader and inflict injury.”

Someone else came to the door of the library, then. He paused at the door to scan the books, which held very still under his scrutiny. The Librarian did not speak, although he knew him: this was Snearl, one of tax assessor Geibel’s agents. “Lot of valuable books you got here,” he murmured. The Librarian did not reply.

Snearl evaluated him a moment, then left again. The Librarian expelled a breath, and one delicate volume with gold-embossed illustrations by the Master of Imola fainted onto the floor. The Librarian picked it up gently to replace it on the shelf.

A young cleaning woman paused at the door, then. The Librarian turned to her immediately to bow. “How may I help you, miss?”

“Oh—I’d just—like to browse, if you don’t object,” she said, blushing in embarrassment. She had a plain face and strong jaw that gave her a rather mannish appearance.

“Feel free, though the books’ subjects may not be apparent from their arrangement,” he said in slight anxiety.

“Oh,” she said in mild disappointment. Scanning the rows of spines confirmed this. “It’s—not important,” she said, awkwardly turning away.

“Please—” he began desperately, but a book fell from a shelf to bounce off her head before hitting her shoulder. With admirable quickness, she caught it in one hand. Fortunately, it was a small, slender book that did no damage.

Turning it to look at the title, she murmured, “The Book of Ruth, Illustrated with Hand-Coloured Pictures.” She opened it to begin reading. After a few minutes of her slowly turning pages, the Librarian gently guided her to a chair, and she sat. He stood beside her protectively as she absorbed the story with its beautiful illustrations.

When done, she held the small volume quietly a moment, then stood to hand it back to him. “Thank you,” she said.

“You may take it with you to reread, or let me recommend similar books to you,” he offered.

“I have to get back to work now, but, I may be by later,” she said with a vague smile.

“Please do return,” he said, bowing again. She smiled, and continued smiling as she went out. This heightened her attractiveness more than she could have known.

Replacing the little volume on the shelf, the Librarian looked up with hard eyes. “Because it worked once, don’t get ideas,” he said sternly. A few impudent books ruffled their pages at him: *Pffffff!*

Geibel’s agent Snearl suddenly reentered with a large sack. Snapping it open, he scanned the shelves a moment, then began pulling books out to drop them into his sack. The volume of gold-embossed illustrations by the Master of Imola was one of the first taken. “Excuse me. What are you doing?” the Librarian asked, his white hair fanning out.

Snearl barely glanced at him. “Taking some for appraisal. We need to know the value of what’s here.”

“I do not believe that to be a priority of Lord Efran’s,” the Librarian said.

Snearl snorted, “Yeah, well, I outrank you, *Librarian*, so what I think is more important than what you think.”

The Librarian stood silent. The books resisted being drawn, but Snearl yanked them out forcefully. Looking to the upper levels, he muttered, “Those on top are some of the oldest, right? Where’s that ladder?” He glanced around, but the rolling ladder seemed to have disappeared. “Eh, I’ll get those later.”

Hoisting his heavy sack over his shoulder, Snearl paused to leer at the Librarian. “Carry on.”

As Snearl turned down the corridor with his captives, the Librarian lowered his dark face and murmured, “Lady Minka, it seems that we need your help.”

On his way to the foyer, Snearl found that he might have overloaded his bag, as it was increasingly difficult to carry. In fact, passersby stopped to stare at the bundle over his shoulder in which something was struggling mightily. When he got to the front door, Eustace eyed him. “Who are you? What are you carrying?”

“I’m tax agent Snearl you fool, on official business!” he snapped. Reluctantly, Eustace let him pass.

The courtyard guards were less of a problem, as they had the gates standing open for Minka and Ella, with their bodyguards, who were ascending the switchback on horseback at that time. Descending on foot, Snearl had to pause frequently to get a better hold on his burden, which seemed to be swinging from side to side. He saw the ladies coming up, so went along the outer edge of the path, to give them plenty of room to pass.

The two women, returning from a visit to Flodie’s Oddities and Articles of Worth, didn’t see him at all, because

they were talking and laughing between themselves. But as Snearl approached, the bodyguard Shane, disliking him immediately, suddenly veered toward the edge of the switchback to block him. Upon that action, the rest of the bodyguard stopped, as did the women's horses.

Snearl, sweating and struggling with his bag, looked up at the man on a horse directly in front of him. Beside him was Krall, then Lady Ella, then Lady Minka, then Truro, then Mohr, all mounted and unmoving. Smiling as best he could, Snearl looked at the ladies to say, "Excuse me, please."

Ella said, "Oh, sorry!" And she looked over to see what the obstruction was.

But Minka blinked at the shifting burden on his back. "What are you carrying?"

Snearl pretended not to hear her, smiling at Shane and Krall as he attempted to slip between them. Krall stuck out his stirrup to block him while Shane uttered, "Lady Minka asked you a question." Seeing all this, one of the gate guards murmured to a messenger boy, who ran into the fortress.

"What? Oh, Lady Minka?" Snearl looked over innocently. "Just running errands for the Administrator."

"Who are you?" Minka asked.

"Agent Snearl, Lady," he replied. Then he had to drop his uncooperative bundle.

"What have you got in the sack?" she repeated.

"Items for evaluation, Lady. Nothing for you to worry about," he added.

At that time Efran came out of the fortress doors with the messenger. Seeing the standoff, he went over to lean on the gate and watch. He shook his head at Mohr and Truro, who were threatening to salute, and no one else on the switchback saw him.

Meanwhile, Minka was bridling at Snearl's condescension. "Show me," she ordered. Ella was watching uneasily.

Snearl expelled an uneasy laugh. "It's nothing. Just a few old books." He withdrew one from the sack to wave it.

"Books? From where?" Minka demanded.

"The library on the first floor. There seems to be a surplus. Anyway, we were told to have them appraised," Snearl said.

"Really?" Minka laughed. "Who told you that?"

"Administrator DeWitt. And since it doesn't involve you, why don't you let me do my job?" he asked irately.

Shane turned his horse to dismount and grab the front of Snearl's shirt.

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Chapter 2

Efran whistled and everyone looked at him. Opening the gate, he said, “Bring him over here, Shane. Truro, take the books back to the library; ask the Librarian what happened. The rest of you, come on up.”

The bodyguard reformed behind the women; Minka rode in with her face frozen in anger; Ella was a little nervous. Efran assisted Ella down, and she backed up to wait at the fortress steps. When Efran turned for Minka, she slid down by herself to stand off a ways. To express her displeasure, she crossed her arms with a small package in hand. He lowered his chin at her, smiling. The bodyguards saluted him, and he nodded dismissal.

Meanwhile, Snearl grudgingly gave up the sack to Truro, who had no difficulty running it back into the fortress. And Shane continued to stand with his fist wrapped in Snearl’s shirt.

Efran nodded to Shane, “Dismissed.” He let go of Snearl with a little shake before saluting. Then all the bodyguard took the horses around to the stables.

Turning to the instigator, Efran asked, “What is your name?”

“Snearl, sir. I’m an agent under Geibel,” he said calmly.

“All right; you come up with us to the workroom,” Efran said. Brows raised, he asked Minka, “Will you come, Lady?”

“If you want me to,” she said coolly.

“I do. Ella, you may come if you like,” Efran said.

“It’s time for me to change and go work with the horses, Father,” she said.

“Oh, good. Yes,” he said. With a wary glance at Minka, Ella went into the fortress with her purchases from Flodie’s.

His arm lightly around his wife, Efran escorted her up the stairs to the workroom, Snearl following. When they entered, Estes and DeWitt shoved aside their paperwork. “What is the problem?” DeWitt asked.

Efran threw himself into his chair. “That’s what we’re going to find out.” Minka went to sit at the far end of the table, partly hidden by the faerie tree, while Snearl stood before them, looking bored. Efran asked him, “Were you carrying out books from the library?”

Snearl replied, “Yes sir, on the authorization of Administrator DeWitt.”

Efran and Estes looked at DeWitt, whose brows drew down as he said, “I never authorized you to do anything.”

They all looked back to Snearl, who said, “You told Assessor Geibel to have the books appraised.”

Everyone looked back at DeWitt. “‘Appraised’?” he repeated. “No, I agreed that the library should be inventoried.”

Minka said, “Excuse me, but that’s already been done. The Librarian and I spent several days just a month ago

cataloging all the books by title and author, and rearranging them by subject matter.”

DeWitt’s face opened in comprehension. “That’s what that was about! Yes, if that’s been done, we don’t need to do it again. Could I get a copy of your inventory?”

“Of course!” she said.

Estes looked back to Snearl. “You were taking books out to have them appraised?”

“Yes, Steward, on the order of my superior, Assessor Geibel,” Snearl said.

Efran looked to the door to issue a short whistle. The door sentry stepped in, saluting. Efran told him, “Bring Geibel up here, please.”

The boy paused, a look of alarm crossing his face, and DeWitt added, “He’s in a house below; Ellor, Doane, or Detler will show you.”

“Yes, Administrator. Captain.” The boy saluted again and stepped out quickly without running.

Truro passed him on the way in. He saluted, “Captain. Steward. Administrator, the Librarian said that this Snearl took the books that looked to be most valuable and was intending to come back for more, though the Librarian asked him not to remove them.”

The three administrators looked back at Snearl in disbelief. DeWitt said, “Even had I told anyone to appraise the books, which I didn’t, there was no reason to remove them from the library to do that. Why did you take them out?”

Snearl shrugged, “Those were my orders, Administrator.”

The men were silent, then Efran looked at the door for the replacement sentry. Not seeing one, he got up and went out into the corridor. Shortly, he returned with a soldier and told Snearl, “Gaul is going to take you down to the small dining room. We’ll have you sent refreshments while we wait for Geibel.” Shrugging again, Snearl allowed himself to be led out.

Efran threw himself back down in his chair, then looked at Minka. “Is there any reason you can’t sit on my lap now?”

With a bare smile, she got up to walk over and hand him something. “I found this book on ancient Roman warfare at Flodie’s that I know our library doesn’t have.” He took it with a light gasp of delight, and she flopped down on his lap as desired. Before he could utter a word, she murmured, “I was really angry that he talked down to me like that, and you didn’t hit him or anything.”

Estes laughed and DeWitt said, “Some husband you are, and there she’s buying books for you.”

Leaning his head back on the chair, Efran lifted the book in acknowledgment and said, “So he was taking the books out to see what he could get for them.”

“Looks like it,” DeWitt said shortly.

Efran glanced over at him. “What did you tell Geibel to actually do?”

DeWitt said, "I'm trying to remember the conversation from several weeks ago. He was up here making his report—"

"On what?" Efran asked.

"Taxes collected," DeWitt said.

"He goes around collecting taxes? Why can't we let the merchants pay on their own?" Efran asked.

DeWitt regarded him wryly. "Supposedly, they won't pay without encouragement."

Efran leaned his head back on his chair again. "If Snearl came around to collect your taxes, would you want to pay?"

Estes said, "No, I'd want to hit him." Minka grinned at him.

Shortly, the sentry returned with Geibel, who entered in aggravation. Minka immediately removed herself to another chair as he vented, "Is this necessary, Administrator? I'm deep in accounts right now."

DeWitt said grimly, "I'll only keep you a moment. Please tell me what you instructed your agent Snearl to do in the library."

"The library," Geibel repeated.

"Yes," DeWitt said.

Geibel exhaled, looking off. "Didn't we have a conversation about having it assessed?"

"Assessed?" DeWitt repeated. "What do you mean?"

"We agreed that a valuation was in order," Geibel said.

DeWitt looked at Estes and Efran, then asked Geibel, "And how did you propose to do that?"

"I suppose we should have an appraiser in," Geibel said indifferently.

"But what did you tell Snearl?" DeWitt asked.

Geibel shook his head vaguely. "Probably, to have the books appraised."

Efran's eyes went glassy. He turned his head to whistle, and the sentry stepped in again to salute. "Take Geibel down to the small dining room, please. Make sure there are refreshments for him and Snearl. While you're down there with them, please send another man up here immediately."

The boy saluted, but Geibel turned to Efran in irritation. "I really need to get back to work."

Efran raised his eyes. "I'm afraid it will be a little while longer." Grunting in displeasure, Geibel went out with the boy.

Efran took a moment to collect himself in the quiet workroom. “This is not what I wanted. Badgering people to pay taxes; looking at every asset in the fortress in terms of money. I know that’s not what you intended, DeWitt.”

“No, it’s not,” DeWitt grunted.

“Why do we have to have a tax department at all? Why can’t we let people pay you directly, and let you hire *someone else* to keep track of their payments?” Efran asked.

As DeWitt was opening his mouth to answer, Estes said, “I didn’t realize that Geibel was working from home. That’s not best practice—the records and the collections must be kept here, at the fortress. Who has oversight over Geibel?”

“Pieta,” DeWitt said. “She’s reliable, but—”

“She doesn’t go to Geibel’s home, does she?” Estes asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” DeWitt said.

“Get rid of the whole tax department. Hire someone new under Pieta,” Efran said quietly.

DeWitt nodded grimly. “We need to clean out his house.”

“Who do you want to oversee that?” Efran asked.

“Koschat,” DeWitt said. Efran smiled.

They summoned Koschat, and DeWitt told him, “Take Geibel and at least ten men down to his house to bring up all the tax money he’s collected and all his records. You may tell him we’re transferring the accounting back up to the fortress. Bring everything up here; Geibel will remain at his house for now.”

“Yes, sir.” Koschat saluted and turned away.

The men looked at each other; Efran nodded slightly. DeWitt said with biting humor, “Mistakes were made, which will be corrected.”

Estes was shaking his head. “You know, that’s just another result of our—phenomenal growth. What worked when we had two hundred people on plots doesn’t work when we suddenly have thousands.”

“Thousands!” Minka gasped. Estes raised his brows at her affirmatively.

Efran was beginning to voice a thought when the doctor’s wife Leese appeared at the door. She glanced around at them, then said, “Administrator, if you’ll step out for a moment, please.”

DeWitt’s breathing went shallow. “Is this about Tera?”

“Yes, sir,” she said hesitantly, and the others in the room looked at him quickly.

“Go ahead and tell me,” he said, bracing himself.

She relaxed a little, smiling. “Well, I believe we know why she’s been so sick.” The men waited with anxious

faces; Minka's flushed lips parted, as she knew by Leese's manner. And Leese continued with uplifted brows, "She's pregnant."

Grinning, Efran and Estes swiveled to DeWitt. Efran laughed, "Well done, old man." DeWitt was about ten years older than Efran.

"I—" DeWitt sagged, unconsciously toying with a quill in his right hand. "It's—"

"Oh, dear DeWitt, you'll be such a wonderful father." Minka got up to place a hand on his shoulder and kiss the top of his head.

"What is going around?" Estes blurted. "We think Kelsey is pregnant again." Their son Malan was almost eight months old. As Minka turned to him, he added, "Her sister is pregnant and an abandoned newborn was brought to the nursery this morning."

Minka gasped, but Efran lurched up. "The nursery. Joshua will be screaming mad at me."

"I'll come with you," she said. He nodded back at her in concern. Minka wanted a baby.

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Chapter 3

Minka followed Efran as he turned off sharply from the stairs toward the nursery. Approaching the door, they slowed to see the nursery matron Nesse hand over a small bundle to a middle-aged woman. Nesse was saying, "We can get you a wet nurse, if you need."

Shedding tears, the woman said, "Thank you, but my niece has already offered." A slightly older man stood at her shoulder, looking down with wet eyes on the tiny thing in her arms.

"Very good," Nesse said. "Congratulations, and do let us know if you need any help."

"Thank you," the woman repeated. As the adoptive couple turned away, Minka glimpsed a scrunched little face peeking out from soft blankets.

Meanwhile, Efran was picking up an angry baby who had been banging on the door. "I have him, Nesse," he said.

She looked over. "Very good, Lord Efran."

As he turned with Joshua toward the stairway, he glanced back at Minka, but Ella had come to her side. "May I talk to you, Minka?"

She turned, blinking. "Of course, Ella. What's wrong?"

Ella glanced at the number of people around. "Come out back."

“Yes—let me grab Nakam; he’ll need to come out,” Minka said, starting up the corridor. Ella followed as she opened the door to her and Efran’s quarters. Her little hairless dog shot out toward the back door, so both women came along behind him. Efran watched them, then went on up the stairs with his son.

Emerging onto the busy back grounds, Minka and Ella walked toward the orchard, less busy at this time of year. Minka stooped to pick up Nakam’s droppings with leaves and toss the whole handful over the fence. Then she studied Ella’s worried face. “What is it?” Minka asked.

“I don’t want to get married,” Ella blurted.

Minka paused. “Why not? I thought you told Quennel you would.”

“I did,” Ella groaned, “but—I just—I’m scared. I don’t want to—to—be on display.”

Minka listened, baffled. “What? How?”

Ella said, “It’s hard enough being Efran’s daughter, and wondering if I’m pretty enough, or, smart enough—but then, to get married, and have everyone looking at what I’m wearing, and how I act, and—and—”

Minka said, “Why should everyone watch you? Just go to Ryal’s and sign his book. That was good enough for your father and me.”

Ella looked confused. “But I thought you wanted a real wedding for us.”

Minka was shocked. “Did I give you that impression? Oh, no, that’s silly. The important thing is that you have the love of a good man. Oh, Ella, Quennel is so much like Efran; he’ll shield you and love you so that all those things you worry about will just fade away.”

Ella thought about that. “It’s all right with you if we just—go to Ryal’s?”

Minka looked pained. “Ella, don’t bother about what I want! Do what Quennel wants. Go today. Now! It will make him so happy, he’ll be your slave for the rest of his life,” she laughed.

Ella studied her. “Just do it. Just like I told Webbe’s men to stop the first carriage they found on the road . . . which brought me here . . . and Alcmund, and Cyneheard. . . .”

“Yes!” Minka cried softly. Looking over to the archers, she nodded. “There’s Quennel, at the archery line. Go tell him,” she challenged, brows raised mischievously.

Ella regarded her, then raised her face and began to walk toward the archers. Minka watched, anxious to relieve the burden she had unintentionally laid on Ella.

Ella drew up to Quennel as he was instructing Earnshaw, and he broke off at once. “Ella. What is it?”

She studied him a moment, and Earnshaw watched silently. “Come with me to the notary shop,” she demanded.

Earnshaw grinned at Quennel, who was slow on the uptake. “The notary shop,” he repeated without comprehension.

“I’m not going to wait any longer. I want to get married now,” she ordered. The men around them had stopped shooting.

“Now,” Quennel gasped. “Now. I have to—the Commander—”

“I’ll tell him,” Earnshaw offered, but other men were already running to the barracks in the woods.

“If you don’t want to, I suppose I’ll just have to look around some more,” she said cruelly, evaluating the grinning men around them.

Quennel threw down his bow to seize her hand and begin running her around the west side of the fortress. The sparring groups paused to watch, as did the horse trainers. Tess, seeing them, smirked, “I guess I’d better tell Jasque that she’ll be late today.”

Minka watched in relief, then looked around for Nakam, who was right at her feet. She went back into the fortress with him trailing her, then out to the courtyard gates. They were standing open for lines of men coming up with boxes and going out empty-handed.

Minka and Nakam went out around them so that she could watch Quennel and Ella hasten down the switchback. He wouldn’t let her run, and was preceding her by a step to make sure that if she stumbled, she’d fall onto him. Minka and Nakam kept walking down as she watched them. The men who recognized her, and saw where she was looking, assumed that she was also headed to the notary’s, probably as witness.

When she got to the end of the switchback, however, she did not follow Ella and Quennel into Ryal’s. Preoccupied with her own concerns, she turned to walk east on the road. The gate guards did not see her, being distracted by the men coming and going, plus Geibel’s angry demands to supervise the audit.

It was a mile to the lake, but a pleasant walk, so Minka and Nakam kept walking without hindrance. However, his short legs soon gave out, so she picked him up to carry him. She went to the north shore of the lake out of habit. The Leviathan babies were gone, having flown away with their mother three months ago.

Minka sat on the grassy shore far from the others fishing, though several looked over suspiciously. Her appearance at the lake tended to create disruptions. Nakam sniffed here and there, but did not go far. She looked around vacantly, trying to understand the turmoil inside her.

Babies. The babies, for sure—everyone having a baby except her. Also troublesome was her burdening Ella with expectations of a chapel wedding. This worried Ella so much that she even considered breaking Quennel’s heart. That was bad. But worse—

Minka looked up in reluctant insight. She deliberately left without bodyguards, and came way out here on foot to make Efran worry, didn’t she? His worry was not only proof of his love, but of her power to make him drop everything else to pay strict attention to her.

Dismally, she exhaled, “That’s childish, and cruel. I will not do that anymore.”

So she got to her feet, picking up Nakam to begin walking back. Nakham, meanwhile, came out from behind the faerie tree to watch her in satisfaction. She hadn’t seen him, but she had heard him.

At this time, Elvey, with her assistant Ghislain, had called Livy (Adele) into her workroom to meet two distinguished visitors. “Livy, dear, this is Lord Kasprak and Lord Luetgen from Lady Nierling’s Fashions.” Two

suave, handsome men stood to bow to Adele, who received them graciously before they all sat around the worktable.

Elvey continued, “Lady Nierling recently moved her design studio and factory out of Crescent Hollow to a hamlet, Featheringham, in order to be a little closer to us at the Lands! She heard of the success your designs have been with the lady of the fortress, and is interested in partnering with us to exhibit your dresses in Crescent Hollow as well. Lords Kasprak and Luettgen are highly desirous of seeing more of your work on dear Minka.”

“Oh, that’s marvelous!” Adele gasped. “As it is, we’re finishing up new dresses for both Minka and Ella—Efran’s daughter, you know. She’s a little chunky for my designs, but Minka is so small, she makes for a perfect mannequin. It will only take a few more days to get them finished, then I’ll let you know when Minka is to wear hers.”

Elvey paused. “I didn’t know that either had ordered new dresses.”

“It’s a surprise!” Adele laughed gaily, then instructed Elvey, “We must get a beautician from Imelda’s to work Minka over before she wears it to dinner—hair, face, the works. She’s so young and stupid, she doesn’t realize the need for a complete ‘do.’ But I’ll address that, and have you at table in the dining hall for her entrance. Oh, this will be fabulous,” she breathed. Elvey and Ghislain were struck silent by Livy’s crude assessment of the Fortress ladies, but the men studied her in interest.

By now, Minka had begun up the switchback while Efran was sweating, looking for her. He had already asked the courtyard gate sentries if she had gone down, to which they replied, “No.” He looked in the library, but only the Librarian looked back; he passed by the nursery without bothering to check there, as that area was too painful for her. Efran had seen her glazed look of longing at the unwanted newborn that had been adopted, and with news of Tera’s pregnancy, he knew that Minka was hurting.

Carrying Joshua in his sling, Efran went out back to look, where several men told him that Ella and Quennel had gone down to Ryal’s. With that information, Efran went around the west side of the fortress to look down the switchback, where he saw the happy couple attempting to ascend around a number of men with or without boxes or bows. They were shaking Quennel in congratulation and bowing to Ella, making her laugh self-consciously. Meanwhile, Minka and Nakam were on their way up the interior stairs to the second floor.

When she found the workroom full of everything and everyone except Efran, she sat out of the way to wait. She started to put Nakam on the floor, but as Joshua wasn’t there, he expressed a preference for curling up on her lap.

It was at least a half hour before Efran swung by; when he did, she felt terrible remorse at seeing the anxiety all over him. He was addressing a sentry when she said, “Efran?”

His head jerked toward her, and he almost collapsed in relief. “What—how long—?”

“I’m sorry; I watched Ella and Quennel go down to Ryal’s, then just walked around a little,” she explained.

“That’s fine,” he exhaled, sitting beside her. He released his squirming son to the floor, where Nakam was already waiting. Then he sat back to look at her and breathe, combing his hair back out of his eyes.

“Do we need to get Routh up here to cut your hair?” she asked, smiling.

He looked distracted, or conflicted for a moment, then whispered, “I’m sorry” *that I can’t give you a baby.*

“No,” she said firmly. “You won’t keep apologizing for something that isn’t your fault. I will be grateful for what I have and let go of everything else. I will win on this,” she whispered intently.

He leaned over to lift her to his lap. She resisted, given the number of men in the room, but he said, “I need this.” So she let him hold her while they watched boxes of records and pouches of royals being unloaded and sorted.

By dinnertime, DeWitt had a new accountant, Ploense, ensconced in his own third-floor suite in the fortress. Half was his workspace, half his bedroom/living area, which suited him fine, as he was unmarried. DeWitt then sent messenger boys to inform all Abbey Lands businesses that they were to pay their taxes to Doane in his cubicle off the foyer. What he received would then be sent up to Ploense. There would be no more visits by tax agents.

Geibel and his remaining three agents (including Snearl) were released from service with two weeks’ pay (and DeWitt later heard that Geibel had set up his own accounting firm). Ploense, who had come to DeWitt’s attention some time ago due to warm recommendations, proved to be a good fit: he was a reclusive man who primarily spoke mathematics. Therefore, the ones who communicated best with him were DeWitt, Koschat, Pieta, or a few others well acquainted with numbers.

Also before dinner, Minka had been able to warn Efran not to make much of Ella and Quennel’s getting married. So when they arrived in the dining hall, he merely kissed Ella’s head and patted Quennel on the shoulder. Many others came by their table to congratulate the pair, which attention Ella received graciously, as nothing was expected of her but to look happy. She did that easily.

Minka allowed herself only to wink at her, which also was well received. Quennel caught it, and narrowed his eyes in speculation of how much she might have had to do with Ella’s sudden willingness to get it done. Minka looked off innocently; since Ella was not talking, no one could prove anything. Thus Minka’s days-old record of not being a busybody was unblemished.

That evening, Efran fell into bed with great relief over the accomplishments of the day. As he pulled her to him, Minka asked, “Are you not a little bit sad over your daughter getting married?”

“Oh merciful God, no,” he said, studying her in bemusement. “I had no idea what to do with a nearly grown-up daughter; am very glad to let Quennel finish raising her.”

“Wha—?” She lifted up in mild umbrage. “She’s just about the age I was when we got married.”

“Yes, and I’ve had to finish raising you. It’s been difficult,” he complained.

“How dare you?” she laughed, falling on him.

““Speak the truth in love,”” he quoted in satisfaction, wrapping her up in his arms for the night. “I know that’s Scripture because I copied it into my little book, but don’t make me find it in the Holy Canon.”

He closed his eyes definitively and she snorted mildly, snuggling into him.

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Chapter 4

It was three days later—February 21st—that Ploense had made sufficient headway with the accounts to report to DeWitt in the second-floor workroom. Minka was in Law class with Soames, the Librarian, and Ella (as Quennel had requested her continued education); Efran was in the workroom reading about ancient Roman warfare when Ploense walked in.

“Well, Administrator—Steward, and Captain—highly irregular. No way of verifying numbers, as your previous accountant used an idiosyncratic system known to himself alone. So. Unless you wish to put the screws to him to divulge his methods, it seems we can only start from base zero—as all accounts paid to date—and proceed from there.” He looked around at the three of them; Efran and Estes looked to DeWitt.

“That’s what we’ll do then,” DeWitt said. “What do you need from me?”

“More paper and ink would be ideal. And. Do you wish me to keep monies paid on the third floor, or bring it all down here?” Ploense studied them as though they would indicate their preference by signs.

DeWitt looked to Estes. “If we kept it all separate, wouldn’t that facilitate refunds? As well as accounting checks?”

“Yes, keep the tax income up in your quarters. We’ll audit in a month, and then monthly thereafter,” Estes said, looking back to Ploense, who bobbed his head rapidly in apparent agreement.

Estes whistled for the man at the door, who stepped in. “Steward?” he said, saluting.

“Yes, Hawk. Ploense is our new accountant on the third floor. I want him to show you his workspace. He needs a great deal of writing supplies, as well as locks for his cabinets. Ploense gets one key; DeWitt gets the other. Doane will be able to point you to all that,” Estes instructed.

“Yes, sir.” Hawk saluted Estes again, then turned to the accountant. “After you, sir.” Ploense took that literally to walk out and Hawk followed.

The three men remaining in the workroom were quiet for a moment, then Efran observed, “In short, there’s no way of knowing if Geibel or anyone skimmed accounts.”

Estes nodded, looking to DeWitt, who said, “That’s additional confirmation that a change was due.” They accepted this, returning to what was in front of them.

After finishing the short book on Roman warfare, Efran resumed reading the account of Talus’ usurpation of Surchatain Bobadil of Lystra, the grandson of Roman the Great. The chronicler laid out the events in chilling order, beginning with the early, apparently insignificant lapses of oversight. Everything had been running so smoothly for so long that no one objected when Commander Talus assumed responsibility for funds allocated to the army. It just made sense, you see, for the Commander to manage those funds, since he knew what was needed.

And since the Steward was appropriating just a tiny amount for his own special needs which the Commander knew about, then the Steward was likewise silent upon Talus’ tiny appropriations. Talus’ Captains received their share, which enabled them to convince their men that the Commander was a better leader for the province than the unserious Surchatain. And when Bobadil and his heirs were struck down, the Steward was the next to die.

The only survivor of that night of carnage was four-year-old Ares, Bobadil's grandson, who was saved by Talus' brother Reynard—but scarred for life.

Efran laid the book down on spread pages with a trembling hand. He was utterly dependent on the faithfulness of his Steward and Administrator; if they proved false, Efran would be helpless. He could not do their jobs, nor could he check them. He simply had to trust their willingness to submit to the oversight of each other, and Efran's wishes. It was comforting that DeWitt had axed the whole tax department when Efran had asked.

"Captain." The front door sentry Doudney appeared at the door of the workroom to salute, and Efran looked up. "You're requested at the wall gates, Sir. Some . . . unusual visitors requesting entrance."

Efran stood. "I'll be right there. Get me a horse."

"Captain." Doudney withdrew and Efran bent to retrieve Joshua from under the table. Estes and DeWitt barely glanced up from their work; they also trusted Efran to defend the fortress.

Carrying his son out of the workroom and down the stairs to the nursery, Efran told him, "I have to see who's there; you wait until I come back for you." The baby, almost 14 months old now, laid his head on Papa's shoulder but did not cry.

In the courtyard, Efran took the reins of the horse brought to him as he peered down to the wall gates. There were three tall men in long robes standing close together outside the gates. They did not appear to be armed. Withholding judgment, Efran swung up on the horse to lope easily down the switchback.

Having to stop at all three crosswalks on Main for pedestrians—mainly finely dressed ladies—Efran looked peevisly to the east. The new switchback on the northeastern hillside had been marked off by the engineers Thrupp and Gerard, and was slowly being dug; Efran wanted that digging accelerated. A second switchback at the termination of the new northbound road would improve movement between the Lands and the fortress considerably.

Arriving at the wall gates, Efran pulled up to stare open-mouthed at the visitors waiting outside. As he had observed from the courtyard, there were three of them, each over six feet tall, dressed in fine robes with crowns atop hats so that only their faces and hands showed. They were similar but not identical, and they looked in Efran's direction without meeting his eyes. Their hands were uniformly folded in front of them while they waited for him to speak.

"Who are you?" he asked in bewilderment. He had not dismounted, preferring to remain above them.

"Hello. We are from Jonguitud and wish to walk your Lands," one of them said stiffly.

Efran looked from one to the other, trying to discern which one was speaking. The head of the one on the left bobbed, but Efran didn't see his lips move, and his eyes appeared to be looking over Efran's shoulder. One of the gate guards, Stourt, turned his back to them to mutter, "They're not human, Captain."

Efran looked back at them to ask, "What are you?"

They leaned toward each other slightly, then the one on the right bobbed, appearing to say, "We are visitors." Again, his lips did not move, and he never met Efran's eyes. As the Captain stared at him, he made apparent efforts to align his eyes so that both fixed on Efran's chest.

With a shake of his head, Efran said, "Open your robes."

This caused the three of them to shift slightly in concert, and one of them said, "We do not wish to make ourselves naked."

"Raise your hands," Efran instructed. And everyone at the gates watched the three lift their folded hands in concert about six inches. Another gate guard snorted.

Efran leaned on his saddle in bewildered fascination. "I'm sorry; I can't let you in until I have some assurance that you mean us no harm."

"We mean you no harm," one said, at which the men laughed.

Smiling, Efran returned, "Again, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that's not sufficient. Unless you have more convincing assurances, stand back from the gates, please. I don't wish to harm you without cause."

The threesome appeared to think about this, then they shuffled back together to stand at the side of the road about twelve feet from the gates. The men noticed their long robes flowing so as to merge behind them, almost as if to cover something.

Efran squinted at them, then turned his horse, glancing down at Stourt. "Keep me posted," Efran ordered, and Stourt saluted. Before Efran rode back up Main, he watched two archers emerge from Barracks #1 to stand at either gate post and watch the purported visitors.

Riding at a walk up Main, Efran murmured, "God of heaven? Are they a threat?" He discerned nothing, so rode on uneasily. Someone near Elvey's was waving at him, which Efran deliberately ignored. So the exasperated messenger had to walk his own packages up to the fortress.

As Efran was going down the corridor toward the nursery, he heard Minka behind him: "Efran." He turned, and she drew up to him to say, "I'll be out on the back grounds until it's time to get ready for dinner. I want to watch Tess with Cloud, as well."

"So I won't worry," he said, leaning down to kiss her lightly. "Thank you."

She inhaled in satisfaction, and they were both smiling when they parted at the nursery.

The messenger from Elvey's brought up packages for Minka and Ella, which he requested a maid deliver to their rooms. She did, but never thought to notify either one. So it was several hours later that the two women came in—almost time to get ready for dinner. In fact, Minka and Nakam were lingering outside with the children when the door sentry, Gaul, came out to bow. "Lady Minka, some ladies from Elvey's are waiting for you in the foyer."

"Oh?" she said, collecting Nakam to go in.

Inside, she found Adele (as Livy) and another woman waiting at her door. "Finally!" Adele said, steering Minka into her quarters while the other woman followed. Nakam darted in to hide in the bedroom. "Didn't you get your dress? There it is. You haven't opened it yet," Adele chastised, ripping paper to remove the dress and shake it out. "Here, take that thing off."

"Wait, let me look—" Minka began, but Adele had Minka's work dress off over her head before she could finish.

Adele turned her around to drape a heavy beaded dress over her. Minka began, "It's too—"

"Hush, I'll get it fastened for you," Adele said, turning her shoulder to fasten buttons along the back. "There are special guests coming tonight to see this, and we don't have long to get you ready."

"What? Who? OW!" Minka said.

"Be quiet!" Adele ordered.

Minka persisted, "Ow! It's too tight! What—oh, no, it's too low! I can't—"

"There. What do you think?" she asked the other woman.

"Oh, that's gorgeous!" she effused.

"Sit," Adele said, pushing Minka down to a chair at the small table.

The unknown woman unloaded her bag on the table while Adele picked up a brush to begin dragging it through Minka's unruly curls. "OW! Stop it!" Minka cried.

"You're going to look beautiful tonight," Adele said grimly. The other woman opened a jar and began lathering something on Minka's head.

"What is that?" Minka asked in alarm.

"Nothing. Be still!" Adele said, popping her on the head with the brush.

"Stop it! Leave me alone!" Minka cried.

The other woman took the brush from Adele's hand and steered her out of the door. "Let me handle this." As Adele attempted to open the door again, the other woman locked it.

When she turned back to her client, Minka looked at her darkly. "I have to wash this out of my hair. Efran hates pomade."

"Of course, dear. Let me get out the excess first," the woman said calmly. Minka sat to wait while she brushed all the hair tightly back from Minka's face and secured it in a golden, crescent-shaped clip. Then she sat in a chair facing Minka to lift her chin and instruct, "Look up."

"What is that? No, I can't wear makeup. Efran doesn't want me to look like the women who cheat on their husbands," Minka objected.

"This isn't makeup. This is just very light enhancement. Let me apply it, then whatever you don't like, we'll remove," she said, coaxing.

"Let's not put it on to start with," Minka said, agitated.

"Oh, but once you see it, you'll just love it. And you won't even be able to tell that we've done anything at all to your face," the woman cooed. "Now look up."

Minka obeyed, but said in a trembling voice, “Efran won’t like it.”

“Oh yes, he will,” she laughed.

“No, he won’t,” Minka said. She started to pull away, but the woman gripped her chin firmly.

“This isn’t makeup. This isn’t like anything he’s ever seen before. It’s totally natural enhancement,” she purred, wielding the charcoal pencil expertly around Minka’s large blue eyes.

“If I don’t like it, you’ll show me how to get it off,” Minka said unsteadily.

“Of course! But I’ve never had a client ask me to undo *anything*,” she said in a throaty voice.

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Chapter 5

The beautician then laid the not-makeup aside to pick up tweezers and begin plucking Minka’s brows. It hurt, so Minka cried, “Stop!”

The woman only paused. “Listen, this helps show off your eyes more than anything. It hurts a little because you only work from the underside of your brows—you never pluck from above, so it looks natural.” She continued working until Minka made her stop again, but then she opened other jars to begin applying something else to her client’s cheeks and lips.

“Oh, stop, that’s enough. That’s enough!” Minka declared, standing.

The woman pursed her lips in a flash of anger. “All right, fine. You can do the rest yourself.” She got up, unlocked the door, and walked out. Minka stood where she was, head on her hand to make herself stop shaking.

At this time, Ella was in her room trying on her dress from Elvey’s with Sudie’s help. “Ow!” Ella said while Sudie was buttoning the back.

“Sorry! There! How’s that?” Sudie asked, stepping away with a worried look.

“It’s too tight,” Ella said, turning around to the mirror. “I can’t even breathe; I don’t know how—” When she saw her reflection, she went still. Sudie looked at the décolletage in shock.

Ella turned her back to Sudie again. “Get me out of this. Wrap it back up and have it sent back to Elvey’s—tell them I can’t wear it.”

“Oh, yes!” Sudie said vehemently. “I can’t imagine what they were thinking!”

“I don’t know, but I’m done with ‘Livy,’” Ella said tightly, and Sudie arched her brows.

In the second-floor workroom, Efran was closing the book on Talus in dismay. It was a heartbreaking tale of

untethered ambition, betrayal, willful blindness, cowardice, and stubborn inaction. And although the maimed child Ares grew up to regain the throne and rule with integrity and courage, the precedent for usurpation had been set.

Ares abdicated the throne to Henry, opening the door to an unrivaled period of Lystran peace and prosperity. After a shining reign of 32 years, Henry was brought down by an assassin. Within decades, Lystra was no more and Westford a shadow of its former self. Within a few years more, even that shadow ceased to exist.

Heartbroken for the glory that once was, Efran went downstairs to return the book to the library. As he handed it to the Librarian, he said, "Thank you. I need to think on that before reading anything else."

"Quite, Lord Efran," the Librarian said, bowing his head.

Efran went up the corridor, but before going to his quarters, he went out to the courtyard to look down at the wall gates. Once Elvey's carriage had passed out of his line of sight on the switchback going down, he saw the strange trio still beside the road, waiting. "Any word on our would-be guests?" he asked Tourle at the courtyard gates.

"Only that they're getting a little impatient; keep asking to come in. They say they're hungry, Captain," Tourle reported.

"Oh, that's not encouraging," Efran said warily. Tourle snorted.

Looking over to the new switchback being dug, Efran was also not encouraged by the scant progress. "All right, I'm going to check with DeWitt to see what kind of incentive we can offer to get more men out there digging," he muttered.

"Yes, Captain," Tourle smiled.

Uneasy over multiple concerns, Efran went to his quarters. When he opened the door, he was startled by the seductress turning from the mirror. Efran looked away to say, "Ah, these are my quarters. You may want to wait in the small dining room."

"Efran," she said in a whisper.

His head jerked around, and his mouth fell open. "Minka?" he breathed, unsure. She was frozen before the mirror, looking back at him. Seeing the eyes that he loved charcoaled and the lips rouged like a whore's, he buckled into the chair behind him, hanging his head to sob.

"Efran!" she cried. "I didn't want this—I didn't mean to! Efran! How do I get it off?" she cried, pulling on the dress. "I can't get it off!"

He collected himself at her genuine distress and stood. Wiping his face on his sleeve, he turned her back to him to begin unfastening buttons while she trembled. Swallowing, he said, "So, another dress from Adele?"

She wiped her nose on the beaded sleeve. "Yes, Livy came—"

"Adele," he corrected, dropping the dress to her feet.

She held on to him to step out of it. "Adele," she conceded. Then she yanked at the clip in anger. "And another

woman did all this while I was arguing with her. I told her to stop, but she was all, ‘Oh, he’ll love it,’ or ‘Oh, you’ll look adorable.’ And I don’t know how—” She began scrabbling among the bottles. “How do I clean it off—oh, it’s all in my eyes and I can’t see!” she wailed.

He laughed in pity. “Sit down. Be still.”

“You sound just like her,” she said tearily.

“Shush.” He was picking up bottles to look at the labels. “Here.” He opened one jar to dip a little square of cloth in it, then said, “Lift your face. Close your eyes.”

“Please don’t be angry at me,” she pleaded, tears rolling into the cream that he slathered on.

“No, you’re angry enough for both of us,” he sighed, wiping the charcoal and colored wax from her face.

Meanwhile, dinner was well underway in the dining hall. Adele, wearing the rebozo to avoid being recognized by her former coworkers, was sitting at a table near the front (across the hall from the door) with the lords Kasprak and Luetgen. “She’ll be in shortly,” she murmured, taking a swig of ale. “They sit at that table in the back with all the children.” Adele noted in displeasure that Ella wasn’t wearing her new dress, but that was a secondary matter.

By this time, the children were asking anxiously after the Captain and Minka. Ella told them, “Um, she might have had problems with her dress.” With a bemused scowl, Quennel whispered a question to her, so she spoke quietly in his ear for a minute. He nodded, getting up to leave the hall.

In a little while, he returned. “He says they’re cleaning up, and will be in shortly,” he murmured to Ella. Raising his voice to the children along the back tables, he said, “They’re coming.” Toby nodded, turning to pass the word along.

“‘Cleaning up’?” Ella said uneasily.

Quennel returned in a murmur, “Minka had her head in the washbasin when I looked in.” Ella regarded him in subdued alarm.

But while Efran had stepped out into the corridor to talk to Quennel, Minka had quickly dug in the small bag for something that she hid under the washbasin right before Efran came back in.

Shortly, he emerged from their quarters with two bags: a small one full of jars and bottles that sat inside a large one, which also contained a heavy dress somewhat folded. As soon as he opened the door, Nakam ran out, heading down the corridor to the back door. Efran paused to watch him go, then went over to hand the bag to Gaul. “This goes back to Elvey’s. Minka can’t wear the dress; it doesn’t fit. The makeup and such she never ordered and doesn’t want.”

“Yes, Captain.” Gaul took the bag and whistled for a messenger boy.

From there, Efran went down the corridor to look in at the half-door of the nursery. It took a moment for him to look straight down, where he saw his son sitting against the door, asleep. Efran smiled in mild distress as he reached down to lift the boy to his shoulder, then nodded to Cordelia, “I have him.”

She smiled, “Poor little man held out as long as he could.”

Efran laughed, turning down the corridor to stand at the back door and whistle. Nakam ran in again, darting into the dining hall before Efran even got there. Joshua drooled on his shoulder in sleep. Efran paused at the door when Minka, damp, drew up to him in a linen work dress. “How do I look?” she asked seriously.

“Beautiful,” he whispered. She put her head on his arm to wipe away some moisture, then lifted her face as they both went in.

They entered to sit cheerfully as usual, though many in the hall had finished eating by that time. Ella leaned over promptly to whisper across Efran to Minka. But since he had just received his plate, and Joshua was just waking up, Minka leaned behind Efran to talk, so Ella met her there. Thus while Minka’s stew and lager sat untouched, she gave Ella a complete report. Efran ate placidly and Quennel watched with a wry smile.

Lord Kasprak, brow wrinkled, asked, “Isn’t that Lord Efran who just sat? Which one is his wife? They’re neither dressed well.”

Adele clenched her teeth momentarily. “Oh, I forgot! How could I? I believe I remember the messenger coming in to tell us that they decided not to risk wearing the dresses at dinner because the children hang all over them—see?—and they were afraid of soiling them. You’ll see them tomorrow,” she promised, eyes glazed.

Challinor and Trina, at one of the head tables as usual, noted in delight that Minka came in looking like a ward of the Abbey. Trina hissed to a man standing behind her chair, who ran out.

Shortly, Felice sauntered into the dining hall wearing a relatively simple off-the-shoulder cream-colored dress with ruffles cascading down the side to gather along the hem. She was gorgeous, and all eyes turned to her.

Her new husband Koschat, seated at a table of soldiers, stopped chewing on a mouthful when he saw her. Minka didn’t see, being engaged with Toby to her right. But Efran watched all of this sharply, then turned to the sentry at the door, who came over to bend his ear. Efran whispered, “I want to know everything about those two men with Ad— with Livy. Elvey will probably know.”

“Captain,” Seagrave acknowledged. He straightened to observe the two closely for a moment, who had gone up to the head table to talk to Trina and Challinor. Then Seagrave slipped out, and Efran watched Koschat stand to talk to Felice. She said something placating, to which he responded without expression. Taking his arm, she walked him out of the dining hall.

Efran then looked back to the table where Adele sat seething in her rebozo. But a couple of women at the workers’ tables were looking at her intently, so she got up casually to walk out. Then Efran turned his eyes to the two strangers, who had concluded their conversation with Trina. As they left her table, she smiled brightly in Minka’s direction. Estes and DeWitt, also at the front tables, were aware of the subdued drama while appearing to notice nothing but their own wives.

Minka did not care about anything but Efran’s solid presence beside her. He turned to kiss her head—and promptly wiped his mouth. “Go ahead and eat; the stew is very good,” he whispered. With a sigh, she picked up her spoon. She glanced around for Nakam, who was silently begging at the feet of all the soft touches in the hall.

Having concluded their business—whatever that was—Kasprak and Luetngen began walking to the rear of the hall. As they passed the lord of the fortress, his eyes flicked up. Luetngen paused, then Kasprak nudged him to proceed. In the corridor, Luetngen observed in a whisper, “Something has aroused the lord’s displeasure.”

“Whatever it is, I’ll not risk it,” Kasprak muttered. He nodded cordially to the door guard, who studied them as they descended the steps into the courtyard.

“What about Livy? Shall we ask her?” Luetngen posed.

“Why not?” Kasprak replied. He glanced over to see the stableboy disappear around the corner of the fortress.

When the stableboy brought their horses around a few minutes later, Kasprak put a gold coin in his hand. “Thank you, sir,” Squirt said, depositing the coin in his pocket without looking at it.

But when the two riders were safely down the switchback, Squirt brought out the coin to study it. Then he took it over to Tourle, asking, “D’you know what that is?”

Tourle held up the gold coin to regard the impression of a sunburst on it. “No,” he said, handing it back to him. “Show it to Doane; tell him I asked him to give you a royal for it, then give it to Administrator DeWitt to see if he knows.”

“Yes, sir; thank you.” Squirt ran up the fortress steps and into the foyer.

As the fortress settled into sleep, with Minka wedged into Efran’s side, he lay awake listening to the heartbeat of the hill. Shadowy threats loomed in the darkness; although he knew they were there, he didn’t know what they were or what he should do. But lying awake to brood over the unknown was unproductive, so he gathered up his treasure and closed his eyes. While she was deeply asleep, her hand curled over his chest, and he sighed. There was no betrayal in her.

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Chapter 6

The next morning, February 22nd, Efran, DeWitt and Estes were listening to Seagrave report, “Captain, Elvey says that Kasprak and Luetngen are Featheringham lords engaged to scout out fashions for a Lady Nierling. Apparently, Featheringham is just outside of Crescent Hollow, to the east.”

Efran looked to his administrators. “Do any of these names sound familiar to you?”

DeWitt shook his head, eyes on his numbers, and Estes advised, “Send scouts.”

“Yes.” Efran turned back to Seagrave. “Give this information to Captain Neale; ask him to send two well-dressed Southerners today.”

“Yes, sir.” Seagrave saluted him, Estes, and DeWitt. “Steward. Administrator.” They nodded him out, and he knew not to run.

Efran collected Joshua from under the table, checking his mouth—which Joshua opened for inspection—then paused to ask DeWitt, “What can we offer the men for digging the new switchback?”

DeWitt mildly shook his head. “I’m already offering a royal for a day’s digging. Nobody cares.”

Efran absorbed this, then said, “All right.” And he put Joshua in his sling on his back and walked out.

In the first-floor corridor, a few people paused at the hum. It was very low, practically indiscernible, but it made several people uneasy. They walked past the closed door of the empty storage room, wondering, *Where have I heard that before? What does it mean?*

Stepping out of the fortress to the courtyard, Efran noted the Abbey children with their bodyguards on their way down Main, obviously heading to their play hut. Then he looked past them to the three unwise men beyond the wall gates. They were out in the road, weaving in a strange fashion. Scowling, Efran asked Finn, standing as gate sentry, “What are they doing now?”

“Getting restless, Captain. They haven’t charged the gates, but a few of the archers want to take them out before they do,” Finn said. His partner at the gates, Corwyn, nodded. The three of them watched intently as the Abbey children exited the wall gates on their way to the hut. With the opening of the gates, the foreigners shuffled forward, but the guards shouted at them, so they drew back.

Toby stopped before them to say something, and they turned to him, bowing in their weird, synchronized way. Efran watched tensely while they talked for quite a while before the children’s bodyguard urged Toby away. The tall men waved almost in distress. Corwyn told Efran, “They get my wind up, Captain. They’re not human.”

“I know, but. . . .” Efran hesitated. “Let me—check with Ryal before we do anything.” The creatures did not attack Toby; he was communicating with them.

With Joshua on his back, Efran began walking down the switchback to look at everything. The construction of the chapel and the new inn was progressing well—a lot of the men were earning extra pay working on those, which was fine. There were only a handful digging the new switchback, which was hard, dirty work. There was not a large crowd around Elvey’s today, but Trina’s house to the west was mobbed. Shurtleff’s new dining area was set to open for the midday meal, for which there was already a line forming.

Rounding a bend in the switchback, Efran saw the lords from Featheringham come out from Firmin’s, glance around, and head idly toward Elvey’s. Two well-dressed Southerners on good horses departed Barracks #2 to exit the wall gates and ride up the main north road. They were the scouts on their way to the unknown Featheringham east of Crescent Hollow.

Again, with the gates’ opening, the weird three pressed forward so that the archers took aim at them. One of the three issued a strange, honking yell, but they did not rush the gates, so the archers did not fire. Troubled, Efran continued to descend the switchback.

At Elvey’s, the lady herself was addressing Adele in vexed, disappointed tones. “Livy, what happened? Minka and Ella both sent back their dresses last night as unwearable! And I don’t have Minka’s or Ella’s authorization for them on record anywhere. We can’t even find their measurement charts!—which is probably why the fit was off. This is just—we can’t afford to do business like this, especially since Trina and Challinor are sucking away so many of our customers.

“And this order from Imelda’s—!” Elvey was now pawing through the small bag. “Livy, there’s almost thirty royals’ worth of applications that are nonreturnable! I should have warned you that Minka never wears makeup, but, this kind of expenditure requires approval, and poor Dierksheide [her accountant] is fit to be tied.”

Adele listened with clenched teeth. She had told Elvey beforehand about the order from Imelda's, which she seemed to have forgotten. And in Elvey's quest for a scapegoat, she had utterly lost the ability to improvise. "Oh, dear Elvey, there's no need to panic," Adele began soothingly. "The gentlemen from Lady Nierling are coming back today, and we have plenty of time to find girls who can model both dresses for them. If we just keep our heads—"

But Elvey was blinking strangely at Adele. Tilting her head in concentration, she said, "Do I—know you? Something about you seems . . . familiar. Where have I seen you before?"

Adele laughed gaily. "You see? Imelda's treatments make everyone look like a friend!" Adele gathered up the dresses and cosmetics into the large bag. "Let me take care of these for you, and don't you worry about a thing!" She swept out with the bag while Elvey looked after her, confused and thoughtful. But that was nothing compared to her reaction when Ghislain entered to show her the original tags for the dresses, which had been made for two EurAsian women who had not yet picked them up. Worse, they had put down a substantial deposit.

Meanwhile, at Ryal's, Efran was standing at the counter to ask the notary, "Ryal, where is Jonguitud in relation to the Lands?"

Ryal stood looking at him blankly while his wife Giardi shook her head. Ryal turned to her to ask, "Dear, will you get the atlas, please?"

"Yes," she said, with a glance of adoration at the baby looking over his dad's shoulder.

She left the counter to immediately return with a large, flat book, which Ryal opened. "Jonguitud? Spell it, please."

Efran said, "I—have no idea how it's spelled; am not entirely sure of the pronunciation."

Heaving a thoughtful sigh, Ryal turned to the back of the atlas and asked, "Is it a city? A province? An estate?"

"I don't know. I asked our three friends at the gates who they were, and they told me that's where they're from," Efran said.

With an air of hopelessness, Ryal studied the alphabetical lists of all entities on the Southern Continent. Then he looked up to say, "I have no idea. I don't see anything remotely resembling it here."

Efran inhaled, looking out the window.

A few more people passing through the busy back corridor of the fortress paused at the growing noise. More than a hum now, there were faintly discernible vibrations attending it. The fortress residents should have remembered something so nearly devastating that had occurred less than six weeks ago, but once it had been overcome, they all seemed to have swept it out of memory.

So those who paused at the noise eventually continued on, and the buzzing grew.

Efran exited the notary shop to look to the wall gates again, where the three were swaying in—urgency? Hunger? What? Since he didn't know, and he didn't know how to find out, Efran turned to look at the few diggers on the new switchback. At this rate, it wouldn't get done for a year or more.

Already wearing the work clothes he always wore, Efran began ascending their one functional switchback to

make his way over the rough northeastern hillside to the marked-off area of the desired new switchback. The men digging paused as Efran, with Joshua, went to the top to pick up an idle shovel.

Thrupp, the engineer in charge, came over to him immediately. “Captain, are you going to dig?” he asked as one would query him, *Are you going to jump?*

“I am. Where do you want me to start?” Efran asked, looking around.

“Here on the inside line, Captain,” Thrupp said in disapproval. “Load it in the wheelbarrow and cart it anywhere to the east of the lines, if you think you *must*.”

Glancing at him with a wry smile, Efran wielded the shovel to begin filling the nearest wheelbarrow. Joshua looked over his shoulder to babble what he clearly meant to be a request for his own shovel. The men around him grinned at each other, and all set to work with new enthusiasm.

At this time, Minka was in her locked quarters with Nakam. She dare not breathe a word to anyone, but, when she was cleaning up her face last night, she had noticed how much the eyebrow tweezing did open her eyes—she looked less like a field hand, a little more grown up.

So with the tweezers she had purloined from the small bag last night, she began cautiously tweezing again, with studied reference to her hand mirror. Remembering that the beautician said that the tweezing must be done on the lower edge of the brows, that’s where she worked—also, a little bit between her brows.

She stopped before she could overdo it, and critically examined the results. Yes, actually, that made a great deal of difference. So she resisted the temptation to do *just a little* more, and hid the tweezers with the hand mirror in her wardrobe. Then she took Nakam out to the back grounds. But Efran wasn’t out here, so she went back into the fortress.

In the lower corridor, she paused at the vibrations underfoot. Several others had also stopped to look around, frowning. But Minka had no time for that mystery right now. Since she was curious to see if Efran noticed the difference and what he would say if he did, she went on up to the second floor.

Efran was facing Main as he shoveled, so saw the two Featheringham lords meet up with Adele—accidentally?—outside Elvey’s. She was carrying a large bag that he recognized. While shoveling, he watched her speak with enthusiastic gestures, pointing to something in the bag. Then they three went back down the street toward Firmin’s.

Efran stopped here to lift the full wheelbarrow and cart it to the eastern edge of the shoveling lines, where he dumped his load of dirt. The carting was hazardous, for the incline and loose rocks that made walking difficult made carting dirt that much more so, and if he didn’t pay attention, he’d be refilling the same load all over again.

But he got that done, and by the time he returned to digging, he saw Adele leave Main to enter a house down a side street off the new northbound road (which was Folliott’s, although Efran did not know this). Between watching Main and digging, he hardly noticed that the number of men working with him had now tripled. They were also contending with the loose rocks, as well as the entrenched nettles and briars, the scorpions, and the occasional adder. But if the Captain thought to dig like a laborer, they would too, dammit.

In Folliott’s house, Adele swept through the bedroom collecting her clothes, accessories, and the nearest bag of royals. She packed everything as compactly as possible, including the rejected dresses and beauty supplies. Because the face-changing potion was wearing off much too quickly, and she might have lost Sybil’s support,

Adele judged that it was time to go. Despite the fact that Folliott was laid out on the bed snoring, she made no attempt to be quiet. Even screaming wouldn't wake him from sleeping off hard ale.

With everything packed, Adele hoisted the two bags and went out.

Finding Efran not to be in the workroom, Minka took DeWitt's suggestion to check the front, since he had been obsessing over getting the new switchback done. So she and Nakam went out the fortress doors to look down from the courtyard gates. She didn't see Efran right away because she first looked toward Elvey's on the west side of Main.

Seeing nothing of interest there, she looked farther down the street where an elegant carriage had pulled up in front of Firmin's. And Minka watched Adele cross Main to hand two bags to the carriage footman, who then assisted her into it. Behind her, the two natty lords climbed in, and the carriage began to roll up to the wall gates. At this moment, the children were returning from play time at the hut. Minka saw Toby run ahead of the bodyguards toward the strange tall men at the side of the road.

Inside the fortress, Gaul had just entered the lower corridor from the back grounds. He walked up the corridor toward the foyer, right on time for his shift at the front doors. But he stopped abruptly in front of the empty storage room to listen in alarm. He heard something that he recognized, as he would bear scars from the encounter for the rest of his life.

Wheeling, he put a hand on the door to feel the distinctive vibrations, then began roaring, "Torches! Bring torches! Hurry!"

Far below, at the north end of Main, the wall gates were opened for the carriage to exit, which it did with no regard for the children attempting to cross to the gates. The bodyguards shouted in fury to the driver when they had to pull several children back to safety. Toby was the only one on the other side of the carriage, and he was talking to the aliens beside the road.

Efran, having dumped another load of dirt, was returning to shovel when he heard the faint calls. He looked down Main past the wall gates, where he saw Toby waving urgently at him, shouting something while the elegant carriage was rolling northward beyond him. Efran couldn't hear him; he only knew that Toby was asking for something, and Toby had reasons for whatever he asked. So Efran raised his hand in a thumbs-up.

Seeing it, the guards dubiously let the three weird men through the gates and onto the Lands.

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Chapter 7

As the strange trio sprang through the gates and up Main at a wild run, a sentry ran out of the fortress, crying, "Snobbles, Captain! The snobbles are back!"

Minka turned in horror; Efran heard him, but couldn't tear his eyes away from what he was seeing on Main. The loping lords from Jonguitud suddenly fell down in a heap together, and something else emerged from under them. Nakam sprang down the switchback while a black, three-headed monster shook off the unconvincing disguise to continue loping up Main.

Its three serpentine heads sprouted on long, muscular necks from a lizard-like body with a short, curling tail. It had black armor like a crocodile, with a sickly gray underside and red eyes. It was headed straight for the hill.

Everyone watched in horror as a matron emerged from Elvey's. Head up, eyes to the front, she began crossing Main at the southernmost crosswalk in defiance of the creature loping toward her. This was a proper crosswalk, vivid yellow, which meant that anything approaching *must stop* for pedestrians. With that dictate firmly in mind, she would not be deterred from crossing as was permitted her.

When the hydra was upon her, it merely swerved to the right, toward the unstable northwestern hillside. The woman arrived at the sidewalk on the east side safely, as she knew she must, and the rest of humanity anywhere near Main watched the black creature scabble fiercely up the hill. Given how the yellow tongues flicked out from its heads, and how its clawed feet picked out a specific course, Efran realized that he was seeing tracking behavior. The creature was sniffing out prey.

Nakam appeared to realize this, for he had run onto the hillside above the oncoming predator as if he were its pointer. Minka ran after him, anxiously calling. Efran whistled shrilly, pointing to her, and one guard caught her up before she could set foot on the treacherous hillside. Nakam obediently returned to her while the hydra scrambled up where its tongues led.

Dropping his shovel, mindful of Joshua on his back, Efran began sliding down the face of the northeastern hill, angling toward Main where Toby was approaching at a run. The other children were streaming through the wall gates after him while their bodyguards pursued.

Toby and Efran met at the bottom of the switchback, where the faerie tree branches stood straight up. "Toby! What—?"

"Thank you, Efran! The guards wouldn't listen to me! But you always do!" Toby cried with shining eyes, throwing his arms around Efran's waist. Joshua agreed in excited baby talk.

Efran's mouth dropped open, then they heard a massive, shuddering crash from the hillside. They swung to look as the hydra disappeared through an irregular break in the ground. There was an echoing splash, and then the smell of smoke. "He made it! We did it!" Toby exulted.

"What?" Efran gasped.

"Didn't you talk to him? Didn't he tell you he was hungry? Oh, his disguise was really funny, wasn't it? But he didn't know how to get in. I tried to tell him that you'd listen to him, if he just told you," Toby said excitedly.

"Tell me what?" Efran asked.

"That he came to eat the snobbles! He smelled them from a long way away, but couldn't figure out how to get past the gates. So he tried the disguise. It's—something like a second skin, or something. I'll have to ask him more about it," Toby said, still excited.

"How did you learn all this?" Efran asked in wonder.

"I asked. I saw his feet under the skin, so I asked what he wanted, and he said he was hungry. I asked what he was hungry for, and he said snobbles—only, he called them the 'clackety teeth in hill.' I asked how he knew they were here, and he told me he smelled them. So I knew that they were back and we had to let him in, but no one believed me. You always listen to me, Efran," Toby said, full-hearted.

Efran exhaled, picking him up to squeeze him. “Toby, I’m going to appoint you Counselor of the Fortress, second only to Minka.”

“That’s fine; she listens, too,” Toby said agreeably. And they began walking up the switchback together.

Efran looked up to Thrupp, who had descended partway down. Upon meeting, Efran told him, “I’ve got to check on the situation inside, then I’ll be back to dig.”

“If you must, Captain,” Thrupp said in bewilderment.

Followed by the excited children and their stressed bodyguards, Efran and Joshua walked a triumphant Toby up the switchback to meet Minka, Nakam and many men in the courtyard. There, Efran had Toby tell his story again, and they all heard it with the same gaping wonder.

“Efran always listens,” Toby concluded once more, clutching his hand.

Efran sighed, “Now if I only knew how to ask questions like a child, we’d get somewhere. Let’s go see what they’re doing inside.” Efran lifted Joshua out of the sling, then they all went in.

In the smoky back corridor, Efran handed Joshua to the nursery attendant for a fresh diaper and a bottle. When he asked her if they’d seen any snobbles, she said, “Snobbles? No, we’re fine.” So he turned to the open storage room to watch men with kerchiefs on their faces sweep remnants of dead snobbles out to a small fire on the back grounds.

“Captain,” Gaul said, saluting. “The snobbles came back, but we jumped right on them and drove them back into the cavern. There weren’t near as many as there were last time, but we’ve got to keep the screen on *all the time* now”—to prevent their coming up through the trap door.

“Excellent, Gaul,” Efran said, patting his shoulder. He went into the room to look around, then opened the closet door to remove the tall clay pot that held a torch.

“Be careful, Captain; they may come up again,” Gaul said.

“Yes, I want to take a quick look,” Efran said. Toby came over to watch. Minka uttered a half cry, but Efran had already knelt at the trap door to stick his head down through it. Gaul stood right at his back to pull him out if required.

Part of the cavern water was brightly lit from the early afternoon sun, so Efran could see even in the shadows. (Incidentally, the bright light was highly injurious to the snobbles, which were creatures of the dark.) He laughed, “Oh, well done, friend.”

“What?” Toby asked excitedly. “Can I see?”

“Yes,” Efran said, rising up. Those behind him watched in alarm as he upended Toby to lower him by his legs over the trap door until only the bottom half of him, upside down, could be seen.

“Efran?” Minka said weakly.

But they heard Toby laughing, “Oh, he’s climbing the walls and scooping them up with his mouths—all three of

them! He must have very thick skin because they're not hurting him at all. He's crunching them! All the mouths are crunching and grinning! Oh, he's coming this way."

"Pull him out, Efran," Minka pleaded.

He brought Toby up and righted him, but the boy complained, "I wasn't finished watching! I wanted to see from the front."

"I'm sorry, but Minka couldn't stand it anymore. We have to make allowances for the women's tender eyes," Efran said regretfully. He let Toby down to his feet so that both of them could hug her in reassurance.

"Captain? What's down there?" Gaul asked as the men pressed forward to hear.

"Back everyone; come out to the corridor and Toby will tell you all about it," Efran said.

So Toby had to tell his story yet again, which he did without exaggeration or omission. When he was done, Gaul asked Efran, "So what should we do with this room, Captain?"

Efran looked in, considering. "We don't need the torches anymore, but we do want to make sure that no stragglers get in. So, shut up the trap door with the screen. Let's seal the closet door temporarily—put a barrier in front of it, but go ahead and move the shelves back in this room. I won't give up storage space."

"Yes, Captain," Gaul said. "The humming is a good advance warning; when we hear that, we need to act."

Efran muttered, "If we can keep our hydra friend happy, we won't need anything else. What does he call himself?" he asked Toby.

The boy screwed up his face. "Something strange, like, Jonketood."

"Jonguitud," Efran sighed.

"Yes! That's it," Toby confirmed.

"All right. I'm hungry, too. Let's go see what the kitchen has," Efran directed.

Minka took Nakam back to the bedroom, both to rest and curtail his begging in the dining hall. Then they all went in to help themselves from the smorgasbord that the kitchen had set out for the midday meal. While Toby was in demand by soldiers, fortress workers and kitchen help to tell his story again and again, Efran and Minka took plates and ale to their back table to sit.

Efran had his face down in his plate for a few minutes, then wiped his mouth with his napkin to turn to her with a thought. But he never aired it, pausing to study her. She looked back at him innocently. "Yes?"

He squinted, lifting her chin for a comprehensive look. "You're not wearing makeup," he said pensively.

"No, I'm not," she said righteously.

"But—" He tilted his head in bewilderment. "You look different."

"How?" she asked.

He pressed his lips together, slowly shaking his head. “I . . . can’t tell.” He reached out to stroke her face with his thumb, searching for foreign substances. “No, no makeup.”

Shrugging, she turned back to eat her custard and flatbread. He tried to resume eating as well, but now he was studying her profile. “It’s. . . .”

She glanced at him, lifting a brow as she took a drink, and he suddenly apprehended, “It’s your eyes. Something different about your eyes.”

“Better or worse?” she asked idly. He slowly shook his head again.

She kept eating, but he had laid down his fork, unable to let go of the mystery. Inexplicable changes in her were too threatening for him to ignore, no matter how trivial. So, exhaling in mild exasperation, she leaned toward him to whisper, “I finished tweezing my brows.”

His face was blank at the explanation. So she told him very quietly what that entailed, finishing, “It’s hardly noticeable, but makes me feel better about how I look.”

He struggled with that for a moment, then said, “Of course. I won’t be stupid about grooming.”

“Thank you,” she laughed.

“Don’t do anything else,” he muttered, and she laughed at him again.

Following the meal, Efran left Joshua napping in the nursery and went out front with the intention to resume digging. But remembering Jonguitud shedding his disguise—which Toby had likened to a second skin—Efran walked down to Main to look for it. All he found were shreds that he had to wrestle away from a stray dog. It did have something of a skinlike feel. But how a thing with claws could replicate such a covering was beyond him, so he tossed the pieces back to the dog and climbed the hill to the new switchback once more.

When he started shoveling again, the men returned in droves. In one shovelful, he accidentally brought up an adder from its den. Lightly whistling to call attention to it, Efran carried it on his shovel to toss it on the barren hillside. There weren’t as many adders out here now, which meant the diggers had to be watchful for those remaining.

In the midst of the digging, they felt a shudder in the hill, and a wave of heads turned to the northwestern hillside. Shovels went still as the men watched a puff of gray smoke emerge from the break in the hill. Then clawed feet appeared on the inside edges of the break, and the hydra climbed out.

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Chapter 8

The Landers watched in some apprehension as the creature stretched, all three of its mouths yawning. Then it flopped onto its back beside the hole, exposing its gray underbelly to the afternoon sun. The heads stretched out on the slope, mouths gaping open as smoke lightly drifted out. The middle head issued a definitive belch. And then Jonguitud settled down to nap. The switchback diggers leaned on their shovels to laugh, and the soldiers paused their practice with the slings high on the northwestern slope so as not to disturb the snobbles eater.

Hours later, as the sun dropped behind the trees west of the Passage, Efran called it a day, and the weary but satisfied diggers stacked their shovels to go clean up for dinner. When Efran entered his quarters, Minka was waiting for him with his change of clothes. Jumping up from the table, she said, "Oh, please come try the waterfall in the vacant third-floor room!" She dangled the key to the room in front of his face.

He paused to bend down to study her eye to eye. Exasperated, she insisted, "I haven't done a thing! More."

"Just checking," he said, taking the armload of clothes.

As they began to turn up the stairway, they both heard the loud demand of "Papapapa!" from the vicinity of the nursery. Efran gave her the bundle of clothes, then went to the nursery door to lean down for his son, nodding to the attendant.

When Efran brought Joshua to join Minka at the foot of the stairway, she laughed, "What a smug little face!" Joshua did appear self-satisfied as he looked up the stairway in expectation.

"We're not going to your play tree; we're going up an extra floor," Efran warned him, but Joshua did not appear troubled.

Minka used the key at the third-floor room, then looked in to see that all was in order. She locked the door behind them while Efran took Joshua into the bedroom and set him on the floor. Undressing, Efran glanced at the bathing alcove with the grill at the bottom. "I hope there's a lot of water in that cistern," he murmured, then looked down at Joshua's soggy wraps. "Oh ho. And you've been busy, too."

While Minka sat on the bed to watch, Efran leaned over to strip the baby as well, then brought him into the alcove. Efran set him on the floor before opening the gentle flow of water from the ceiling. Startled, Joshua covered his face, but when he squinted up at his father bathing, he raised his hands in request. So Efran picked him up to bathe him under the flow as well. Minka admired them both, smiling.

When Efran brought Joshua out to dry them both off, she murmured, "I don't know if I told you, but, Adele left in the carriage that almost ran over the children coming back from the play hut. She was with those two men that wanted to see her dress on me."

"Ah," Efran said, then looked around. "Oops. We need wraps for Joshua."

"I'll get them," she said, standing. "Give me the wet ones." And he handed them over with two fingers.

At this time, about a half hour in advance of Adele's carriage on the westbound road, the two Abbey scouts had slowed at a square complex with high stone walls and solid wooden gates. This sat in splendid isolation on the left (south) side of the road. Caswall and Tourse looked all around in bewilderment. There were no signs on the

walls or the gates, and no other structures that would indicate the presence of a village or hamlet.

Tourse, the senior of the two, called out at the blank wooden gates, "Hello?" A square peephole in one gate slid open for a face to look upon them. It didn't speak, only looked.

After a moment of astonishment, Tourse said brightly, "Good afternoon, my good man! My friend and I are from the Abbey Lands, just east down the road from you here. We're looking for Lady Nierling of Featheringham, what? Would she be in residence at this magnificent place?"

The face languidly answered, "Do you have an appointment?"

"No, do make one for us, please. I am Lord Schoellman and this is Lord Torsney, what?" Tourse said affably.

"We don't make appointments," the Face decreed, and the peephole closed again.

"Oh! But is this Featheringham?" Tourse called. The Face declined to reappear or speak. Unknown to the scouts, however, their appearance had provoked a spirited disagreement about shutting them out.

"Well, Torsney!" Tourse said loudly, "it looks as though we jumped the boat and arrived at nowhere, what? Let's ride on to see if our elusive Featheringham lies beyond, what?" Caswall, his face stiff for holding in the laughter, nodded lightly and turned his horse to continue west. Belatedly, the peephole opened again, only for the Face to see that the opportunity had passed.

Tourse and Caswall rode at a lackadaisical walk until they judged themselves out of earshot, then they turned off the paved road to enter the woodlands on the right (north) side, about twenty feet off from the road. They rode quietly to the east until glimpsing the stone fortress through the trees. Then they dismounted, tied off their horses, and crept to the edge of the woods to keep watch on the front of the complex. The afternoon was cool, getting colder as the sun tracked westward, so they took turns retreating to warm up with calisthenics.

Approaching the compound at this moment, Adele was uneasily riding with the lords Kasprak and Luetngen as their carriage continued west in the early twilight. She had asked many questions about Featheringham and Lady Nierling that they answered briefly, if at all, and she did not appreciate that they had picked up her bags to go through them thoroughly, taking special note of the royals. "Those are mine," she informed them, and they smiled vaguely at her. But they put both bags down again.

The men murmured between themselves occasionally, of which Adele caught little. Luetngen leaned over to tell his partner, "Shame that Lady Trina wanted to send us dresses, not workers."

"Did you buy any?" Kasprak murmured back.

"A few, as bait," Luetngen admitted. "But the girls I gave them to declined to come."

Kasprak pressed his lips together in dissatisfaction, then asked warily, "You gave Trina sunbursts, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes," Luetngen said quickly.

"Then that's all right," Kasprak said.

Finally, they sat up as the carriage slowed, and Luetngen peeked out the window to his right. On the seat across from him, Adele opened the window on her left to look.

They were coming upon a compound with high stone walls and solid gates. The driver pulled the carriage up to the gates to call, "Hiya!" The peephole slid open, then shut again quickly. Then two uniformed men pulled the gates open slowly, which screeched on rusty hinges. When they were open just enough to allow the carriage through, the driver brought it into a large, mostly empty courtyard. From their hiding place in the trees, Tourse and Caswall were peering into the courtyard to study everything they could see.

Without waiting for assistance, Adele stepped out of the carriage to look at a gray stone building in front of her. There was a door with a guard standing at it, but no windows, properly speaking—only long, narrow slits running lengthwise at the very top of the building. It looked like a prison. She shivered; all this stone was cold.

From the edge of the woods, the scouts spotted her. Caswall asked, "Is that Livy?"

Tourse said affirmatively, "Um hmm, alias our lovely Adele." Caswall nodded.

Although the Abbey men could not hear Kasprak, he was telling her, "That's our factory. Lady Nierling is over here." He pointed toward a house slightly behind the factory and to the right. Adele eyed him, but followed him and Luetngen to the front door of the house. They had waved away the footman to carry her bags themselves.

Kasprak suddenly looked back at the driver, who was unharnessing one of the horses. "You don't have time to change them! We'll be right out!" Kasprak shouted. The driver looked at him in dismay, but replaced the harness. The footman brought over a bucket of water for the weary horses.

A butler met the lords, bowing. "Is she up?" Kasprak asked, handing him his cane and hat.

"Yes, my lord," the butler said, taking Luetngen's accessories as well.

"Very good. Follow us, Livy," Kasprak said with a glance, and she smiled tightly at him.

Once the lords were safely in the house, Tourse and Caswall watched the driver shout, "And don't keep me waiting!" Grouching, he turned the carriage around to face the exit, then he joined the footman to go into the house themselves.

The two gate guards exchanged a few words with the third guard at the door of the stone building. (What one said was, "Time to get the girls fed, then," which the eavesdroppers could not hear.) Then all three entered another door into what looked like a connecting corridor between the house and the building. Catching his breath, Caswall said, "There's no one left in the courtyard! Is there?"

"Let's get a closer look," Tourse replied. So they left their hiding place to peek into the open gates.

The high walls blocked the westering sun, but outside the deep shadows created by the walls and the gates, there was no movement aside from the stirring of the exhausted carriage horses.

"The courtyard looks empty, doesn't it?" Caswall whispered eagerly.

"I don't see anyone," Tourse replied. "But it would be dangerous and stupid to attempt to slide in through these stubborn gates while they're standing open in invitation." Nonetheless, his manner clearly indicated his intention to go in.

"Just what the Captain would do," Caswall affirmed.

Leaning farther in to note the best hiding places, Tourse said, “Don’t be absurd. If we got caught, he’d flay us.”

“Let’s not get caught,” Caswall recommended. So, in the gloaming, they slipped in to obscure themselves in the blackness along one wall.

Inside the house, the butler opened the door to a bright dining room with its table set. Adele exhaled in relief as two maids brought in aromatic dishes of pheasant roasted in red wine with rosemary and thyme, red cabbage with wheat berries, and baked apples. A large woman, evidently the Lady Nierling, sat at one end of a long table, looking up as the lords quickly sat on either side of her. They dropped Adele’s bags beside their chairs.

“Who is this?” she asked as if Adele had forced her way in.

Kasprak, helping himself to pheasant, glanced up at Adele, still standing. “This is Elvey’s designer Livy, Lady Nierling. She brought a few of her recent designs.” He nodded at one bag on the floor beside the table.

“Hello! So nice to meet you, Lady Nierling. May I sit?” Adele asked sweetly.

Without answering, the lady reached a fat arm down to rummage in the bag. She brought up Minka’s rejected dress, holding it up beside her chair. Her heavily made-up face squished itself into a disparaging grin as she snorted, “Well, we’ll put her on the line.”

“Certainly! That will be fun,” Adele said, assuming that the lady meant a design line. “I’m anxious to meet your team!” She sat to reach for the bowl of cabbage. Expressionless, Kasprak glanced at her while Luetngen commandeered the cabbage, helped himself, then passed it to Kasprak, who set it aside out of Adele’s reach.

Adele looked at her hostess, who had found the bag of royals. “That’s good, but not enough,” she sniffed. Turning to Kasprak on her right, she asked, “Well? How does the stock look in the Abbey Lands?”

“Comfortably spoiled,” Kasprak said. “Other than this one, we weren’t able to lure any others away.”

“Ugh. We need more hands,” she muttered. “What do you do?” she asked Adele, frowning.

“I’ll be happy to tell you when I have a bite to eat,” Adele said, baring her teeth back at her. Scowling, the woman gestured with a fat, ringed hand, and Luetngen put the cabbage back in front of her. Adele helped her plate, then said, “Now the fowl, if you will.”

Kasprak reached over to take the last bird on the platter without looking at her. Stiffly, Adele began eating the cabbage. Regarding Adele’s soft white hands, Nierling said, “I can already see that you don’t spin or weave. What do you do?”

“I design dresses worn by the Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress,” Adele said haughtily.

“I’m the designer; I don’t need another one. I need work hands,” Nierling told her.

Smiling, Adele thought about what a colossal mistake this was, and how to extricate herself from it. “Elvey has hundreds of girls working for her,” she began thoughtfully. “But many of them are unhappy there, and it wouldn’t take much for me to convince them to leave. I’d have to take the royals back to spread around a little, to show them what I made.”

Nierling's piggish eyes went to Kasprak. "Is that true?"

He lowered his fork to consider it. "Could very well be. We saw scores of them at work. But I don't know how much influence Livy has over them. She was quick to leave with us." He resumed eating.

"Yes, I was running away from my husband. But as long as I can come back here, there's no danger for me at the Lands. And of course I have influence; how else could I have directed the making of that dress? It's one of the most expensive creations Elvey's has ever produced," Adele sniffed.

"Then why doesn't 'the Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress' have it?" Nierling sneered.

"Alterations, which Elvey's provides for nothing," Adele purred.

Nierling considered this, looking between the two men, neither of whom offered an opinion. "Very well; take her back."

A look flashed between the men, and Kasprak said, "Certainly, Lady Nierling. But we're obliged to take the finished dresses to Lord Ennemond's first. We're to meet him at his studio shortly and stay the night."

"Oh. Well then, you'll have to leave tomorrow," Nierling told her.

"That will be fine. I need to bathe and wash this tint out of my hair. It was an experiment that I've grown tired of," Adele said, touching the faded black coating on her blond hair. The face-changing potion had almost entirely worn off by now.

"Then we'll see what you can do. Take her to the Superior Guest Room," Nierling waved at Kasprak. Then she added, "But first, show her the factory." He stood to bow to her, and Adele rose from her chair to blow her a kiss. Nierling squinted her little piggy eyes.

As Adele turned from her chair, she saw the two maids standing at either side of the main entry to the dining room, heads down, hands folded submissively in front. One shot a quick glance at the visitor before returning her gaze to her feet. Seeing, Adele paused. Frightened servants were not a good sign.

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Chapter 9

Kasprak took Adele out a side door to a drab corridor. They walked this echoing, unadorned, windowless hallway to another door, this one locked. He took a key from a hook on the wall to unlock this door and push it open, then he walked her inside the large, cold stone factory. Only two small braziers, one at either end, were allotted to heat this dim, stinking space.

At least twenty girls, from preteens on up, were at work in various capacities here, all by fading daylight or candlelight. Many were weaving on looms; some were carding or spinning wool; others had their heads bent over embroidery or other stitching. A few looked at the feet that entered; none dared lift her head from her work. And Adele saw that all of them had a foot chained to a loom, a table leg, or a ring in the floor.

Adele barely noticed the crates at the far door, but in them were carefully packed many beautiful dresses, all bound for Ennemond's tonight. Supposedly.

Kasprak leaned over to murmur, "If you don't bring back a carriage load of girls tomorrow from the Abbey Lands, you'll be sitting here yourself." She eyed him in feigned unconcern.

He took her out and down the cold corridor back to the house. (Minutes later, the three guards brought bowls of mash and cups of water to the chained workers.) Down another corridor, Kasprak stopped to open a door into what looked like a servant's room. "Sweet dreams," he said sardonically. Then he stepped out, shut the door, and locked it from the outside. Both of her bags were still sitting in the dining room.

Adele stood breathing in the room for a moment, then said, "God, if You're there, get me out of this. . . . Please."

In a room off another corridor, Lady Nierling was preparing her evening toilet when the butler brought in a young red-eyed girl, shaking. "Here's your nurse for the night, Lady Nierling."

Patting herself with cream, Nierling eyed them both in dissatisfaction. "Is this the best you can do?"

"Pardon, Lady, they're all a sorry lot," he said sincerely.

"Oh, I know. That's why we need more," Nierling groaned. "Fine. Get out."

With a bow, he withdrew, and Nierling eyed the girl. "Well, then. Do you know what your responsibilities are as my nighttime nurse?"

"T-t-to watch you sleep, Lady Nierling," she whispered.

"That's right! Because I have a Breathing Condition, and if I roll over the wrong way, I may get distressed and stop breathing. So you are to keep me lying in the correct position while I sleep, because if I roll over and get distressed, you will be punished. Do you know how you will be punished?" Nierling demanded.

"Yes, Lady Nierling!" the girl cried.

"Well, then. Watch me carefully," the lady said, positioning herself on her back on the feather mattress. And the girl stood by her bed, trembling.

Tourse and Caswall were watching from the shadows as the driver and footman returned to the carriage to climb up to their seats. Shortly thereafter, the two lords emerged from the house to stand beside the carriage. But they spoke so softly, the intruders were unable to hear them. Kasprak murmured, "That's a large delivery of dresses. I didn't realize we had so many to take."

"I don't think they'll fit in the carriage, do you?" Luetngen posed quietly.

"No, it's impossible, especially given that . . . Ennemond's not paying nearly enough," Kasprak replied.

"Suppose we accidentally leave them behind until he hands over another—fifty royals," Luetngen proposed.

"At the very least," Kasprak agreed, swinging into the carriage.

Luetngen followed, and the driver leaned down from his seat to wail, "How long you staying this time?"

Luetzgen looked up to say, “We’ll be overnight at Ennemond’s, then head back here mid-morning or so. But then we’re to take Livy back to the Lands to collect more workers for us. She swears she can get Elvey’s help to come.” This the Abbey scouts heard.

Once Luetzgen had slammed the carriage door closed, the driver grunted to the footman, “Eh, there’s a liar, if you will.” He straightened his aching back as he clucked to the horses, whipping the reins lightly, and the carriage rolled out through the gates.

Tourse and Caswall listened intently to the direction of fading hoofbeats and rolling wheels, then raised in comprehension. “They’re going west. To Crescent Hollow,” Caswall whispered.

“Probably less than an hour’s drive. Now the question is: how many men are left here?” Tourse observed. He and Caswall began sliding out of the shadows, then froze at the sudden appearance of the three guards.

But the intruders went unnoticed as one guard, seeing the carriage gone and the gates standing open, gestured to another. They began pulling futilely at the unyielding gates.

One gave up, venting loudly, “I’m not shutting them tonight just to open them again tomorrow morning!”

“They just need oiling,” the other sighed.

“That they’re using on the blasted looms! Are you going back in that pit to find it?” the first demanded. He gestured to the large, grim, granite building with no windows. The third guard had despondently resumed his watch at its door.

A girl came out from somewhere with unlit torches and a small burning brand. She shoved the torches in brackets next to the gates, then lit them. They illumined little beyond a five-foot circle. The Abbey scouts then watched her bracket and light another at the door of the windowless building. The solitary guard at this door stopped her as she was scurrying away.

She said something quickly before resuming her flight. One of the gate guards demanded, “Hey, where’s she going? Where’s our dinner?”

The door guard exhaled, “We have to go in and get it ourselves because they’re not getting the kitchen cleaned up quickly enough. So one of you come stand here while I go in and eat.”

“Yeah, and you come stand at the gates while we come in and eat!” one of the pair shouted back at him. The intruders studied each other’s eyes in the darkness. There weren’t enough men to pull shifts?

The door guard seemed to take the other’s suggestion at face value. “Sure. Here’s the keys to the door and the chains.” Departing his post, he tossed a keyring in their direction, which they let fall in the dirt between them. Tourse and Caswall glanced at each other again. Chains?

The door guard went around the large building into the house. The Abbey men watched him go, then looked back at the tired, disgusted gate guards. “I’ll take the one on the left,” Caswall whispered.

“And I’ll take all the rest,” Tourse said. “Just pop him one; they’re not worth killing.”

Caswall mutely agreed as they left the shadows to walk toward the gates. “Hello there! We’re your relief,”

Tourse said brightly. Both guards wheeled toward him while Tourse hit one between the eyes with a fist.

He dropped while the other guard watched, blinking. Caswall hit him likewise, but the man only clutched his face. "Ow!"

"Like this," Tourse said patiently, then landed a quick blow to his temple. Caswall caught him as he was falling, then Tourse hoisted the other unconscious man by his shoulders. "Out of the compound," he nodded.

Snatching up the keyring on the ground to drop in his pocket, Caswall took hold of the man around his chest while Tourse was already dragging the other out. They found a shallow depression against the outside of the east-facing wall in which to drop their sleepers and cover them with brush. "Should we tie them?" Caswall asked.

Tourse shook his head. "Not worth the time. They'll be out for hours." Then the pair slipped back inside the gates to glance around. "And now we check the stables for the men who were supposed to relieve them," Tourse whispered, nodding in the obvious direction.

They trod lightly to the barn doors to peer into the dense darkness, where they listened for a while. Hearing nothing but the snorts and shifting of a few horses, Tourse went out for a torch, which he brought back to rapidly check the stalls. The two horses within shied away from the flames, but those two, and a donkey, were all he found. Coming out again, he noted the large wagons standing outside the stables, and his eyes narrowed. Thinking, he returned to his partner.

Tourse replaced the torch in its bracket at the door of the large building, then Caswall brought out the keyring. "Shall we have a look?"

"Wait," Tourse said, eyeing the front of the house.

"Ah, yes—the third man." Caswall replaced the keyring in his pocket, and they withdrew to the deep shadows, trying not to let their teeth chatter. Balmy winters in the Lands made them sometimes forget how cold it got elsewhere.

Some minutes later, the door guard returned. "So, I suppose you'll be—" Seeing the gates unmanned, he vented, "Why couldn't they wait, the idiots?"

He turned to start back toward the house, but Tourse sprang out to intercept him. Although the man was surprised, he parried Tourse's initial blow and struck him with enough force to knock him down. Caswall had to assist with a hit to the temple from behind. As the man sagged, Tourse got up to hit him again, so he finally fell.

Huffing in mild indignation at the unexpected resistance, Tourse dragged that one out to the ditch. He straightened his coat as he returned, nodding, "Now let's see what we have here."

Caswall brought out the keyring again. After a minute of trial and error, he found the key that opened the door.

With the braziers almost burned out, it was dark and cold inside. But there were forms rising from the floor, quiet exclamations, shuffling, and the smell of many bodies crowded in together. "Who are you?" one young voice asked fearfully.

Caswall reached back for the torch on the outside of the door while Tourse announced, "We're from the Abbey Fortress, and we don't approve of what's going on here."

Caswall began walking the torch down the first row of looms, then stopped abruptly. “They’re chained! They’re all chained to the floor.”

Walking over to take the torch, Tourse asked him, “Weren’t you the one with the keys?”

Caswall began sifting keys as feminine voices cried out, “Are you freeing us?” or variations on the question.

“Yes. Please be quiet,” Tourse replied as Caswall knelt to begin trying keys in the lock on the girl closest to him. “Meanwhile, I need someone to tell me who and how many are in the house,” Tourse added.

“Racheal.” “Racheal,” said a few voices, and Tourse held up the torch toward a woman who stood, shaking.

“That’s me; I’ve been here for four years now. Lady Nierling has a staff of five: the butler, the cook, her personal maid, and two cleaning girls. The lords Luetngen and Kasprak come and go; they are very dangerous. There are only three guards—most of the guards who were here left at one time or another with those of us that they could get free. No one has been able to get us all out.” She spoke clearly, though she was underfed and under dressed for the cold.

“Well, you never had the help of the Abbey Fortress before. I am Tourse; this is Caswall,” he said crisply. “So let’s see what we can do for you.” He looked down as Caswall was rapidly unlocking one woman after another.

Tourse told him, “Give one of them the keys, let them unlock themselves. Now, Racheal, which of the staff you just told me about will object to our taking you all?”

She paused to make sure she understood his question. “The butler and the cook, both men, are devoted to Lady Nierling. She’ll be asleep in bed by now. The women, the servants, will want to come with us,” she said. Caswall handed the keys to a girl who began flipping open locks with a vengeance, starting with Racheal.

“Don’t forget Sosie! She’s Lady Nierling’s night nurse tonight!” another girl cried.

Tourse cautioned, “Shh. So we need someone to come show us where everyone is right now.” He looked at Racheal.

She said, “I will.”

“Excellent,” Tourse said, extending a hand to her. “The rest of you, when you are unlocked, stay here. As soon as we take care of the butler and the cook, we’ll come right back for you. Won’t we, Racheal?”

“Yes. Do what he says,” she nodded authoritatively, and the rest of the women settled down to wait near the rekindled braziers as Tourse handed off his torch to one of them. “This way,” Racheal said, leading to a door on the other side of the factory room. The girl with the keys had to come unlock it.

Then they went up a dark stone corridor, lit only by a faint light coming from around the door ahead. “This should not be locked,” Racheal whispered, cautiously turning the handle.

The door opened into a house corridor. Racheal pointed, “The door at the end of that corridor is Lady Nierling’s.”

She started toward it, but Tourse whispered, “Wait a moment, please. Where are the butler and cook?”

“Rooms toward the front of the house. I must show you,” she said.

“Very well, then. Bring out the night nurse,” Tourse nodded.

Racheal went quietly to the door to open it. Sosie started, turning quickly. “Come, dear. We’re leaving,” Racheal whispered.

“What?” Sosie gasped.

“Come on,” Racheal smiled.

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Chapter 10

Numbly, Sosie came to Racheal’s side as she reached in to lock the door from the inside. Unfortunately, closing it caused Lady Nierling to snort and roll over in the feather mattress.

Racheal brought the wide-eyed girl up the corridor to the waiting men. “Sosie, these men are from the Abbey Fortress.”

Tourse said pleasantly, “Hello, Sosie. I’d love to chat, but we have a lot to do tonight. Now, dear Racheal, the cook and the butler?”

“Yes,” Racheal said. With Sosie in hand, she led the men up that corridor to another. There, she paused to whisper, “The second door on the left is the butler’s. The third door on the right is the cook’s. He’s the more dangerous; he’s a large man with a quick temper and he always sleeps with a knife.”

Acknowledging this with a nod, Tourse tiptoed to the second door to listen. He shook his head briefly at the silence, then went on to the third door. He listened only a moment before making a gesture to indicate drinking, then held up two fingers. So, the butler and the cook were having a nightcap together.

Tourse retreated to the head of the corridor indecisively. Caswall asked, “They’re drinking in cook’s room?”

Tourse nodded; Racheal said, “They do that only when the lords are away and Lady Nierling is safely asleep.”

“Oh, our timing is impeccable, worthy Caswall,” Tourse said. “Now, if we could only keep them there. A locked door’s not sufficient.” Contemplatively, he looked up and down the corridor, and paused at the sight of a massive hutch against the wall. Then he glanced at the cook’s door to see the hinges on the outside. Beckoning to his partner, he went over to begin unloading the hutch. “Let’s get the heavy breakables out,” he whispered.

Racheal and Sosie helped them empty the hutch of pottery and dinnerware. Caswall then went to one side while Tourse took the other, and they quietly moved the hutch to rest against the cook’s door. Then the four of them gently reloaded all wares back into it. Racheal also found a heavy ash bucket to rest on the middle cabinet. All this activity did not seem to disturb the drinking buddies. But someone else down the corridor did hear it.

Brushing off his hands in satisfaction, Tourse said, “Now, take us to the rest of the servants.”

“In the kitchen corridor,” Racheal said, breaking into a trot.

She went directly to a room to open the door, creating momentary alarm among the three within. But when they understood her, they came right out, gawking at the Abbey men. All five women looked to them.

Caswall asked Tourse, “Didn’t I see conveyances outside the stables?”

“You did, my perceptive young friend. And we’re going to use them,” Tourse said, patting his shoulder. “Racheal, we’d like for you to help all the ladies get ready for a night ride to the Abbey while we arrange your transport.”

The other women gasped, whirling to her. Smiling, she said, “Sosie, go bring everyone out to the kitchen and washroom.”

“Yes, Racheal!” she cried, and was off at a run.

Shortly, 28 women and girls (which number included the maids) were crying, laughing, eating, bathing, and throwing ragged, filthy dresses into the firepit. They brought out the crates of dresses they had just spent weeks making. Some of the women put these on; others who didn’t want to touch them again chose plainer clothes, but all the fine dresses were put aside to be taken. The women helped each other dress and arranged each other’s clean hair.

Meanwhile, Caswall had retrieved the Abbey horses from the woods to feed and water them while Tourse brought out the two horses from the stables. Since they weren’t taking the donkey, Tourse just made sure he had plenty of hay and water, leaving his stall open should he need to get out.

While the men harnessed a pair of horses to each of two large wagons (the Abbey horses being paired together), the women began bringing out supplies—especially pillows, blankets and food, not forgetting the dresses. The women also brought dinner leftovers to their rescuers, who willingly paused to eat pheasant and baked apples.

This preparation took almost two hours, during which time the women, loudly laughing and talking, passed the cook’s and butler’s corridor frequently. Those two, deep in alcoholic slumber, did not notice. But someone locked in a room farther down the corridor did hear, and tapped on the locked door. “Hello? What are you doing? Can you get me out? Hello? HELLO!” Unfortunately, no one heard.

Finally, with 14 slender women crammed into one wagon and 14 in another, both padded thoroughly with down comforters and pillows, Tourse and Caswall each drove a wagon out of the open gates and eastward down the starlit paved road toward the Abbey Lands.

Back at the fictitious hamlet of Featheringham, on the inside of a locked door, Adele listened to the sudden quiet. She had caught snatches of men’s voices, and thought they might be from the Lands. But now they were gone. Everyone had gone.

Adele went back to the suite’s washroom to scrounge around in its drawers. Finding a cheap brooch, she opened its fastener and returned to kneel at the door lock. Several minutes of probing it with the sharp point of the fastener finally sprang the lock so she could push open the door. Cautiously, she exited to look around.

Seeing the large hutch relocated to block one door, she stopped to listen. Still hearing nothing, she went on.

Entering the kitchen, she glanced around at the disarray here and in the connecting washroom. When she saw piles of shabby dresses, she went down the corridor to the factory, all doors standing open along the way.

Torches still burned in brackets at the front and rear doors. Adele could look across the whole vast room, echoing in emptiness, the gaping fetters scattered everywhere on the floor. “Abbey men,” she breathed in certainty. Turning on her heel back to the kitchen, she ate what little she could find, then she thought—“I wonder. . . .”

Returning to the dining room, she paused. “She just dropped them under the table, didn’t she?” Looking, she saw one of her bags sitting on the floor where fat, stupid Nierling had left it. “Yes!” Adele quietly exulted. But opening it revealed only the rejected dresses and makeup.

In disappointment, she dropped it back under the table. “Where did they put the bag of royals?” she murmured. Looking around, she saw a bag sitting by the door, so quickly went over to open it. The sight of all the gold coins made her exhale in satisfaction. Taking up the heavy bag, she began to leave—then on second thought, went back for the makeup. Then she crept out to scan the grounds.

No one was here, no one at all. She looked up at the moon, beginning its descent in the west: sunrise was still hours away. “They’ll be back in the morning,” she murmured, meaning Kasprak and Luetngen—which meant that she must be gone. She reentered the house to gather a few articles of clothing that she’d need, stuffing them and the makeup into a shoulder bag.

Then she took a coat off a rack by the door and went out to see to her transportation.

Tentatively, she looked into the stables, but had to go fetch a torch, now burning low, to see what was there. And what remained was one slumbering donkey. “Ohhh,” she groaned in exasperation. But she had no choice: it was either ride the donkey or walk. Opening the stable door wide, she tossed the almost burned-out torch to the dirt, where it slowly died.

“All right, you sweet thing, let’s go for a ride!” she said brightly. He barely opened his eyes at her, then shut them again. “Come now,” she encouraged. Looking around, she found a snaffle bit that looked the right size, so pulled it off the wall to begin slipping it over his nose.

He rejected that with a snort, shaking his long ears. Adele groaned again, petting his head while she looked around. Suddenly she remembered Efran with that abominable horse Bastard—he used carrots. Efran had made that obnoxious animal behave with carrots.

So Adele went back into the kitchen to rummage around, emerging again with a great bunch of carrots. “This should get him the distance to the Lands,” she said, then paused. She had washed the last of the sage dye out of her hair tonight, and was more or less blonde again. She already knew that the face-changing potion had worn off as well. Why did she imagine they’d let her back in?

“I can go back to Showalter’s estate,” she mused, speculatively casting her eyes west. “If I don’t run into Kasprak and Luetngen on their way back, that is.” This was an unhappy possibility. Also, she didn’t know who was in possession of the estate now; it wouldn’t stay vacant for long.

“So I really don’t have any choice,” she considered, looking to the east. Then her face settled. “Sybil will let me back in. She can’t help herself.” Smirking, she returned to the stables to offer the donkey a nice, fat carrot. He accepted this, ears pricking up.

Then she divided up the royals in even portions to stuff into saddlebags, which she strapped onto the donkey. He

squirmed and shifted, but allowed it, looking back at the carrots. Meanwhile she looked around for a saddle, but didn't see one small enough for a donkey.

So, aware that time was growing short, she tried again with the snaffle bit, which the donkey accepted. Buttoning up her coat, she lured him out of the stables with another carrot, then climbed onto his back to ride to the open gates. He shook his ears, but consented to carry her out onto the road and proceed east, because she had the carrots right in front of her.

An hour later, one moaning figure rose from a ditch outside the east wall of Featheringham. He jostled his ditch mates, who groggily climbed to their feet to stagger past the yawning gates and look around. It took them only a few minutes to ascertain their complete failure at their job on all fronts. Seeing that no one was waiting to punish them, however, they looked downright relieved to find the factory empty.

In the house, they lit a few candles from the banked fire. After admiring the hutch sitting in front of cook's door, and declining to unlock Lady Nierling's door (behind which all was silent), they sat at the dining room table to nurse their headaches with beer and leftover cabbage. "There were about fifty or sixty of them that attacked us," one gate guard noted. "We held them off as long as we could, but, there were just too many."

"Right," said the door guard. "Besides which, they had wings and spat fire. Where d'you suppose they came from?"

The gate guards looked at each other, both thinking of the Abbey gentlemen they'd turned away. But the second gate guard said, "Had to be from Crescent Hollow. Someone finally acted on our messages; just forgot to let us in on it. Well, I'm glad the girls got out, so I'm off as well." He looked a little wistful at the fact that *all* the girls were gone. "I don't care what you two do, but I'm not waiting around for the lords to come back. It's almost morning."

The door guard turned up his beer. "Where d'you expect to go?"

"First, since the gate's standing open, I'm walking right out. From there, I'll choose between Crescent Hollow to the west and the Abbey Lands to the east," Gate Guard #2 said, having discovered just today of the Abbey Lands' existence.

Gate Guard #1 observed, "So we sit between the devil and the deep blue sea."

The others contemplated this, then the door guard said, "I like the Sea."

"Assuming that the girls were taken back to Crescent Hollow, I don't care for their pointing me out as one of their jailers," Gate Guard #2 said. "Besides, I'd like to see what's at the Abbey Lands. If we don't find much there, we can hike on up to Westford."

The others apparently agreed, for they gathered up all the remaining provisions they could carry, then walked out of the gates and turned to the right.

Nakham, standing between the compound and the woods, watched the last of the refugees stagger down the road to redemption. Smiling wryly, he said, "You're welcome."

By the second hour of travel, most of the girls in the carts had fallen asleep, cuddled up with each other in

downy blankets. But Racheal couldn't sleep; she kept looking up at the man driving the cart by himself, keeping awake in the cold night air.

So she raised up to lean over the seat, and he quickly looked back. "May I sit up here with you?" she asked.

"It's cold," he protested.

"Not as cold as sleeping on a stone floor," she murmured.

"Well—here—" He started to take off his suit jacket.

"No. Here's an extra blanket." She pulled one off a sleeping girl, who merely snuggled under another girl's blanket.

Racheal climbed over to sit close beside him and throw part of the blanket over his shoulders as well as her own. He said, "If you think I'm chivalrous enough to insist you have the blanket all to yourself, I'm going to disappoint you."

"I'm crushed," she laughed, then asked, "What's your name again?"

"Tourse, otherwise known as the Scourge," he said, smiling back at her. They could see each other, somewhat, by the moonlight reflecting off the white paved road.

"Tell me about the place we're going—the Abbey Fortress," she said.

"And Lands," he added. "There are too many of us now to all live in the fortress. But at first, it was just the Captain there, with a handful of orphans. He didn't even know there was a Treasury in the fortress, but others knew, and after he'd been there only days, an army of several thousand from Eurur marched on him, thinking to help themselves to it. He was the only man there, but some of us from his regiment—the Red Regiment of the Army of Westford—decided that he would not fight alone. So forty of us rode out to meet them as well. . . ."

And for the rest of the ride, Tourse told Racheal about life at the Abbey, and she listened; he asked her about her home, and she told him while he listened. . . .

Efran was up shortly after sunrise (on February 23rd) to check on several areas of concern: Minka's face (which was its usual unmolested sweetness), their new accountant Ploense (who was settling into his responsibilities like a bear at a honey tree), the storage room (which was not humming), the northwestern hillside (which had a large new nest beside the break in the ground, into which their guest had vanished for breakfast), and the progress on the new switchback (going a lot faster than it had been two days ago). Since everything looked satisfactory, he heaved a sigh of relief and got himself breakfast. Seeing that Joshua was still asleep, he went to go dig.

Minka took Nakam out back for his breakfast and morning evacuation, then she, Ella, and Soames met in the library, with the Librarian, for their class on Roman's Law. Today Soames was covering the laws on debts and debtors. This section was interesting and rather detailed, in that its aim was to protect debtors from utter ruin while seeing that lenders received their money fairly. And usury was forbidden.

Minka tried very hard to concentrate on the lesson while the only thing running through her mind was, *I am very happy for Cyr. I am very happy for her, and for Tera, and for Kelsey, again.* For Leese had just confirmed that,

yes, it looked certain that Wyeth's wife Cyr was pregnant, as were DeWitt's wife and Estes' wife. *I am happy for them, and now I will not think about babies any more.*

A little later that morning, DeWitt walked down to note the progress on the new switchback. He observed to Efran, "I see you got them digging."

Efran looked around. "That just happens when I come out to work on anything—fencing, the wall, and now the switchback."

"Well, look at this," DeWitt said, handing him a gold coin. "One of the men who had come to look at Elvey's dresses tipped Squirt with this. Neither Estes nor I nor Ploense recognized it, so I sent it down to the moneyer Meineke. He cut a tiny bit off it there to assess it, and returned it with the report that it's worthless—just a gold veneer over a lead base. He advised us to warn the merchants to check their coinage carefully and not to accept them, because any we find will be destroyed."

"Oh, that's not good," Efran muttered, studying the coin. A sun with rays was engraved on one side and oak leaves on the other. "What's the lettering around the leaves?" he murmured.

DeWitt replied, "Meineke said the elements are copied from an old Grecian coin. The words state the value: one hundred drachmas."

"I see." Efran handed it back to DeWitt and asked, "Have you done that yet, then—warned the merchants?"

"The men should be going down shortly," DeWitt said, glancing back up to the courtyard. "Yes, there they go, ten men. We divided up all the Abbey businesses among them with authorization to check their money and confiscate any false coins. We're also posting notices in Ryal's window and those of the largest businesses on Main."

"Let me know what you find," Efran said, shifting.

"Certainly. Are they still here? Those two visitors?" DeWitt asked.

"No, Minka told me they left yesterday with Adele," Efran said.

DeWitt weighed this, then said, "Well, that's fine, as long as none of them comes back." He flipped the coin, and both looked down at the sunburst.

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Chapter 11

As DeWitt was reentering the fortress, a nursery worker came out carrying Joshua and a sling. Efran, being alerted by a fellow digger, dropped his shovel with a half-laugh to make his way up to the courtyard. Joshua, jaw jutting, pulled on his ear while watching his father approach.

"Apologies, Lord Efran," the nursery girl said, "but he had hold of the door latch, and we were afraid he'd make it out."

“Adventure calls,” Efran laughed, draping the sling over his shoulder. Joshua reached out for his father to tuck him in, and she handed him a teething rag along with the baby. “Oh, thank you, Cordelia.”

“Certainly, Lord Efran,” she said, turning back toward the fortress steps.

He shifted Joshua over to his back. “Can you see?” he asked, craning his neck to check that Joshua’s eyes were above Efran’s shoulder, and that he had a firm hold on the teething rag.

“Unh,” Joshua said, looking ahead at the northwestern hillside.

The scrabbling noises caught the attention of everyone in the courtyard and on the new switchback. They paused whatever they were doing as the black hydra crawled out of the hillside hole to begin descending. In concern, Efran watched him go clear down the hill to the western portion of the main east-west road, on which there were houses.

But Jonguitud stopped at the southern edge of the road to sit up on his haunches and begin swaying. Efran cautiously descended the old switchback to get a better look. At the end of the switchback, Efran cut across Main to draw even with him on the edge of the road, though about forty feet away. From there, he and Joshua watched the hydra jerk up and down a bit, extending his three heads to stand apart and upright. Then Efran detected changes on his black skin, which he finally decided must be secretions.

Over the next half-hour, all available eyes watched the secretions coalesce into a covering which then formed patterns and colors. Before their eyes, Jonguitud produced the three figures again. They were shiny at first, until another quarter hour’s exposure to the air dried and solidified them. And there they stood at the edge of the road.

“Unh!” Joshua pointed to them in a demand. So, cautiously, Efran began walking over.

He drew up about five feet away and said, “Hello. Can you talk to us now?”

The three heads bowed slightly, then one of them appeared to say, “Clackety teeth are firm and we are glad.”

Efran laughed, “The snobbles? We’re glad for you to eat them! But what will you eat when they’re all gone?”

The middle man raised his folded hands in a gesture of unconcern (as if showing off that he could), and the voice said, “Many other eats, some crunchy, some soft. We stay and eat.”

“Good, I hope,” Efran said, mildly anxious. “Don’t eat the octopus.”

“Octopus is what.” The right-most figure moved his jaw in a semblance of speech.

“The one with eight legs,” Efran said, simulating the movement of a tentacle.

There were shouts and whistles from far up Main. Efran’s head spun to see the gates open wide to a large wagon full of women driven by Caswall, followed by a similar wagon driven by Tourse. The smiling, laughing women were looking around as men descended on them like locusts.

“Don’t go away,” Efran said to Jonguitud’s threesome, who bowed. Then he and Joshua walked down Main to see the fruit of his scouts’ labor. The women were unloaded to be engulfed by men, stunned by this gift of the road. Due to the number of men in the Abbey Lands army, they outnumbered women on the Lands by about four to one.

Two smug scouts walked over to salute Efran. “Tourse and Caswall reporting from Featheringham, Captain,” Tourse said complacently.

Efran was momentarily distracted by his son’s trying to catch a girl’s eye with a wave. “I can hardly wait to hear,” he said, then turned to a nearby soldier, gazing at the bounty before him. “Go bring down the women’s matron Gayla. She’s across from the second-floor workroom,” Efran instructed.

“Yes, Captain,” he said with a pathetic face at being sent away. Nonetheless, he turned to run. People were coming out of shops along Main, including Elvey’s, to look at the influx of women.

Efran jerked his head for the tired, triumphant scouts to follow him up the switchback, but Tourse paused. “To get the most informative report, Captain, we need Racheal.” Efran watched as Tourse turned to beckon to one of the women. She saw him, then spoke to a girl before coming to his side.

Tourse introduced them: “Captain Efran, this is Racheal, who was instrumental in the success of our operation.”

Efran turned his beautiful smile on her. “Welcome to the Abbey Lands, Racheal. Our women’s matron Gayla is coming down shortly to see to your ladies. But we’d appreciate your coming up to—” Tourse cleared his throat to nod, and Efran glanced back to see Estes and DeWitt riding down to them.

Returning to Racheal, Efran amended, “At the Abbey Lands, our highest administrators come down to welcome visitors. And this is my son Joshua.” Efran couldn’t help but see the glazed delight on her face as his son chatted to her in baby talk, clutching the teething rag in one pudgy hand.

“Hello. I’m so happy to meet you,” she cooed. Joshua raised his head just like Efran, and she sighed.

Smiling tightly, Efran asked Tourse, “Is my son showing me up?”—because Efran couldn’t get a good look at him over his shoulder.

“Badly, Captain,” Tourse confirmed.

“Well—” Efran broke off as DeWitt and Estes dismounted.

DeWitt demanded, “Tourse! Have you emptied Featheringham of their entire female population?”

“Yes, I believe so. Haven’t we?” Tourse asked Caswall.

“I never saw the Lady Nierling,” Caswall said thoughtfully.

“We left her sleeping,” Racheal said with a slight smile.

They got introductions made, then Tourse gave them an abbreviated version of the night’s work, with Racheal filling in gaps. The women’s matron Gayla arrived, who was told that she had 28 visitors to see to. But then a number of Abbey soldiers came up with a woman in hand whom they wished to claim.

“What? Already? Are you sure?” Efran asked one blushing girl. “Wait, now,” he said. “No one takes a woman without a marriage license. And—these girls know nothing about you! Any man’s got to get two character witnesses to take to Ryal.” So the men began making deals with their friends to attest to the good character of each other.

Several of the women were quite weak, or had problems with their legs from sitting chained for so long. The men were not dissuaded by any of this; any woman who needed medical attention found herself being carried over to Coghill, the new doctor on the Lands. And if he was too busy, the women were carried up the switchback to Wallace's quarters on the second floor of the fortress. That way, the man carrying her became the instant favorite to be her husband.

With all this going on around them, Tourse looked at Racheal dubiously. "After talking to you all night, I don't think I could endure a night without you. Do you think you could actually possibly—be my wife?" Tourse, for once, was pathetically unironic.

"Yes," she said, dignified but happy.

Caswall went to bring over another girl, Sosie. With the Captain's dismissal, those four started to walk toward the line extending down the street from the notary's office, but Efran said, "Wait. One more question: did you see Adele? I don't see her among those here." At the mention of her name, one of Elvey's dressers, Ianna, looked over. Elvey had finally realized who Livy reminded her of.

Tourse and Caswall gaped at each other. "We forgot all about her!" Caswall said.

Tourse thoughtfully began, "We saw her arrive in the carriage with the two lords, Captain. But. . ."

Caswall added, "Nierling's men dropped Adele off at the house, then they left for Crescent Hollow. They told the driver they'd be back for her this morning, to bring her here, sir."

"Why?" Efran asked, irate.

"To get more slave labor, sir," Tourse said. "She somehow convinced them—but not the driver—that she could steal workers from Elvey."

Ianna blurted, "What? Adele? Steal what from Elvey?"

She and Regie, another dresser, were staring at the beautiful dresses that many of the women were wearing. Regie demanded of one refugee, "Where did you get this dress?"

The girl glanced coolly at the outraged query. "I made it." Two men were vying for her attention, so she ignored Regie's disbelieving stare.

Neither Caswall nor Tourse was paying any attention to Elvey's people, either, for both men were waiting on the Captain's permission to stand in line at the notary's. "Yes, go on," Efran nodded.

They saluted and hurried off. Estes, DeWitt and Gayla were discussing accommodations for the women as well as the new couples. So there was a considerable amount of crosstalk resulting in moderate confusion, even though they were all agreed on the basics of what needed to be done.

As the empty wagons and horses were taken to the lower stables, Efran patted DeWitt's shoulder. "We'll need commendations for Tourse and Caswall now."

"I suppose so," DeWitt admitted, then looked to someone else who spoke to him.

Efran began walking up Main, having caught sight of the children, led by Toby, who were clustered around Jonguitud with their bodyguard. They'd obviously been heading to their play hut, but got distracted by the hydra in his funny skin. Joshua dropped the teething rag to point. "Ungh!" So Efran took him over to watch.

About that time, an elegant carriage entered the open gates at the largely abandoned Featheringham. The driver pulled up in the middle of the empty courtyard, and the lords Kasprak and Luetngen climbed down from the carriage to eye the deserted grounds. They looked at the burned-out torch in the dirt, and the front door of the house standing open.

The footman hopped down to run look in the open stables. "Horses are gone, sir."

"Them wagons is gone, too," the driver said, nodding to the vacancy in the courtyard.

Luetngen strode forward to pull on the door of the factory, which swung open for him to look inside. He turned back to his partner with a black face. "All of 'em's gone. *And* the dresses."

Hearing the crash of glass breaking, the four looked toward the house. Momentarily, the cook and the butler, hung over, bedraggled, and angry, came staggering around the outside of the house. The cook, gripping his butcher knife, roared, "Who the hell blocked up me room? We had to break me window to get out!"

"And how is Lady Nierling this morning?" Luetngen asked mildly.

The cook and the butler had to think about that, blinking in the sunlight. The butler said, "It appears we must go in the front door to look."

"That's what we have to do, then," the cook said. Shame-faced, they stumbled up the steps to enter the gaping front entrance.

The two lords stood contemplatively. Kasprak muttered, "What do you want to bet that Livy is gone?" Hearing, the driver climbed down from the carriage to begin unharnessing the horses.

Meanwhile, the footman had walked out of the gates to look at the road. Being paved, it showed few tracks, but enough for him to come back with the observation, "Hoof prints and wagon tracks going east. Nothing going west."

"So," Kasprak whispered to his partner, "Livy took advantage of our absence to entice our girls away with promises of work in the Abbey Lands."

Luetngen frowned, shaking his head slightly. "She couldn't have done this without help, for the first thing she'd have to do—after getting out of her locked room—would be to get the girls free, and that means she'd need the keys."

Kasprak snorted. "Well, you don't see guards anywhere, do you? What do you suppose she promised them for their help?"

Luetngen nodded in acknowledgment of this. They watched Cook and Butler emerge from the house with sickly faces, Cook wiping his mouth. Butler said, "We had to break into Lady Nierling's room. The . . . the lady is dead in bed."

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Chapter 12

“How did Lady Nierling die?” Kasprak asked.

“She must have rolled over with no one to turn her,” Butler sighed.

“And Livy? In the Superior room?” Kasprak asked.

Butler looked to Cook, who said flatly, “Gone. Lock broken.”

Kasprak asked ominously, “Is there anyone left alive in the house?”

Cook shook his head. “Maids is gone. Kitchen’s a wreck. Lots gone.”

“So,” Kasprak breathed, “what we must do, friend Luetgen, is go at once to the Abbey Lands to retrieve our thieving employees and the merchandise they stole.”

Luetgen looked dubious. “They’ll tell them about the chains, and such.”

Kasprak snorted, “Who’s to confirm this terrible slander of Lady Nierling, who was murdered in her bed? This Lord of the Abbey Lands makes a big to-do about abiding by their Law; let’s see them justify murder and theft.”

Luetgen acknowledged this with a nod. “We should get reinforcements from Crescent Hollow. After all, it’s Ennemond’s property they stole.” He jerked his head back to the pouch of royals in the carriage. Evidently, Ennemond had paid the extra demanded of him.

“Takes too much time to recruit mercenaries,” Kasprak objected. “We don’t want to give the girls weeks to get established in the Lands, or get away elsewhere. If the Abbey Lord can’t listen to reason, *then* we’ll come back with force.” He truly believed it unnecessary. Besides which, he was unwilling to spend anything for arms, preferring to use cunning. He turned around to order the driver, “We’ll leave within the hour for the Lands.”

As he and Luetgen waved away the footman to take their own luggage and money into the house, the driver went stomping back to the stables. “They’re going to kill the sorry beasts; they know we’re down to the last pair!”

Checking to see that the lords were safely in the house, the footman patted the driver’s shoulder in reassurance. “Peace, Oskar; all we need do is get them to the Lands. We can stay there, for *we’ll* confirm the girls’ story.” The driver looked up at him with eyes watering from fatigue, then his face relaxed and he smiled for the first time in a long while.

About that time, Adele was approaching the northwest corner of the Abbey Lands’ wall on an increasingly rebellious donkey. Miles ago, she had to dangle a carrot on a stick in front of his nose to keep him moving. However, he quickly discovered that rearing up to make the carrot swing back enabled him to catch it a bite at a time. But now she was out of carrots.

Still, they finally arrived at the wall, to the relief of both. Adele slid off his back, bringing the reins over his head to lead him along the wall until they reached the small wicket gate. This allowed the miller's customers to enter the mill yard directly with their grain. She opened the gate to peek in warily, then led the donkey in, stepping over the threshold. Anyone watching from a distance would see nothing suspicious about this at all.

Adele paused to cover her blonde head with a scarf before leading the donkey to the miller's yard, where she tied him loosely to a post. He immediately lowered his nose to begin grazing. The miller had a donkey; this was a donkey, so there. Still scanning the area, she unbuckled the bags from around his belly to wrap them in her rebozo, which she slung over her shoulder. Then she walked quickly toward the heart of the Lands, blocks away.

On Main, she didn't see any unusual activity. From under her scarf, Adele scanned for poorly dressed refugees, or soldiers talking excitedly, but saw nothing alarming. She did note a few couples waiting outside the notary shop. Seizing on the gorgeous dress one woman wore, she thought in alarm, *Trina and Challinor have really upped their game. I've got to match that.* So she studied the dress from a distance until one couple came out of the shop so that the woman and her soldier could go in.

It was close to noon, however, meaning that the dining areas at Croft's, Firmin's, Averno's Bakery, and now Shurtleff's Fish Market were filled to overflowing. Adele avoided these areas as she crossed Main to the new northbound road, and the side street where Folliott resided.

Sweeping in through his unlocked door, she was mildly startled to see Folliott himself, awake but slovenly, sitting at his table eating what looked like porridge. He glanced up at her to mutter, "Where you been?" It had been about 24 hours since she had left. But he would not know that, as he had been unconscious at the time.

"I've been out selling dresses, of course!" she said brightly, pouring out the gold pieces from the saddle bags onto the table.

"Hmph," Folliott snorted lightly, unimpressed. With a vague frown, he picked up one coin. "What're these?"

"What do you mean, darling?" she laughed. "You don't recognize gold?"

He tossed it back down to the table. "Sun with rays; not a royal. Royals marked with a crown and laurel leaves."

"Oh, well, they're practically the same," she shrugged, taking off the scarf without thinking. "Anything happen while I was gone?" she asked, scratching her head. The remainders of the sage dye itched.

He was squinting at her. "Your hair . . . is . . . blonde." He was also evaluating her face, trying to pinpoint what was different about it. But his recent drinking made discernment too difficult right now.

She paused, gaping slightly. "Yes, I like to change up my hair every now and then! Just for fun."

He squinted dubiously as she went to his bleak kitchen to scrounge for something to eat.

In the fortress dining hall, Efran was somewhat eating as he told Minka about Tourse's and Caswall's success in Featheringham. She had a full plate in front of her, but didn't even look at it while listening to him. He was eating and talking at the same time, because digging was hard work, and he and his crew had gotten a lot done this morning. He had also worn out Joshua, who was napping in the nursery.

“And—the women were wearing these dresses—Elvey and Trina both came out to look at them,” Efran was somewhat explaining.

“Excuse me, Captain. Lady Minka.” Both of them looked up at Tourse beside their table. His new wife Racheal was standing behind him.

“Yes, Tourse. Hello Racheal,” Efran said, standing to extract himself from the bench while swallowing.

“Forgive the interruption, Captain; we won’t keep you long. Lady Minka, this is my wife Racheal,” Tourse said.

“Hello! Sit down! Oh, I’ve been hearing about this amazing rescue and I want to know so much more!” Minka cried.

“Thank you,” Racheal said, laughing without sitting. “Um, my girls and I have something we’d like to give you. And—Lady Ella?”

She looked inquiringly to Tourse, who glanced around. “I don’t see her right now, but, give hers to the Lady Minka. She’ll see that she gets it.”

Minka looked blank while Racheal unwrapped a large paper bundle. “Tourse has been telling us how your husband directed him and his partner to come scout out Featheringham, which—led to everything for us. So, we wanted to give you and the Captain’s daughter two of our creations.” She shook out a creamy white dress covered with exquisite embroidery. “If it doesn’t fit, any one of us can alter it for you.”

Assisted by Efran, Minka stepped over the bench in shock. “That’s—that’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” she gasped. “Oh, you can’t—are you sure? At least let us pay you for it.”

“After what your men have done for us? No!” Racheal said, laughing.

Minka looked helplessly at Efran. “How can I accept something they made as slaves?”

He raised his brows. “Because they offer it as free women.”

Minka put her hands over her mouth as she burst into tears. “Thank you—that’s—I’ve never—I don’t know how—Oh, my hands are wet!”

Efran reached out to take the dress carefully. “Thank you. We’re honored. Ella will be honored and delighted.”

Sheepishly, Minka took it off his arm. “Yes, I’ll—wear it gratefully. Are you—going to make more?” She wiped her face on the sleeve of her work dress to avoid dropping tears on the new one.

Racheal exhaled with a wide-eyed look. “I don’t know. The dressmakers—” she broke off, looking uncertainly at Tourse.

Wryly, he told them, “Elvey and Trina have been battling for their services. They offered the ladies premium wages to work for them.”

“What? No!” Minka said indignantly. Turning to Racheal, she said, “Open your own shop! Work for yourselves! Efran has all kinds of people who will show you what to do!”

Racheal paused, open-mouthed, to look at Efran. He nodded. “Yes.” To Tourse, he said, “Take her up to the workroom; tell DeWitt what she needs. He’ll probably have Pieta help her with a plan and financing. She can take Pieta’s recommendations to the other girls; see what they want to do.”

Tourse looked inquiringly to Racheal, who whispered, “Our own shop. I never dreamed—never imagined that anything like this could happen to me.”

“Before you faint, let’s give Lady Ella’s package to the Captain, and let me take you upstairs, what?” Tourse suggested, handing Ella’s wrapped dress to Efran. Racheal seemed torn between laughing and crying, so Tourse helped her walk away, nodding back at the Captain.

Sitting again, Efran extended the package to a sentry behind him. “Take that to Ella, please.”

“Captain!” He saluted to run off with it.

Efran resumed eating, but Minka was sitting with the amazing dress in her hands. Looking at the painstaking detail, she whispered, “Oh, Efran—how can I ever wear this?”

He glanced over, smiling. “When they open their shop and need customers, just walk down Main in it,” he suggested. She turned to squeeze him as hard as she could, which he accepted.

When Ella received the dress minutes later, she sent Sudie to ask, “*Who gave me this amazing dress?*” As Minka was explaining it to Sudie, Ella appeared in the (mostly deserted) dining hall wearing it.

Gaping at Minka, she whispered, “Who is this from? How did they get my measurements? Do you think it’s proper for Quennel and me to repeat our vows in the chapel so I can wear it?”

Laughing in delight, Minka had to explain everything to her. As to when she should wear it, Minka shrugged, “Whenever you like. It does look wonderful on you.”

While they were leaving the dining hall, Willis ran up to salute. “Captain, it looks like we’ve got three more stragglers from Featheringham at the wall gates.” Ella and Sudie were already on their way back to her quarters, talking between themselves.

Efran tentatively asked, “Men or women?”

“Men, Captain. In some kind of uniform. One has a black eye, the other two have knots and headaches,” he reported.

“Ow,” Efran laughed. “Bring them up to the workroom; get either Caswall or Tourse up there as well. Tourse may still be there.”

“Yes, Captain.” Willis saluted and left quickly.

Minka looked appraisingly at her husband. “May I come listen?”

“Of course,” he said in surprise. Then glancing down at the bundle in her hands, he said, “Don’t wear the dress.”

She laughed at him. “I have to take Nakam out, so I’ll leave it in the room and come up.”

“All right.” He kissed her head, smiling. No pomade, no makeup.

When Efran arrived in the workroom, he found the newest Featheringham refugees devouring an Abbey midday meal of beef, asparagus, fresh bread and mild Delano’s ale. Beat up and exhausted, they only glanced at the Polonti laborer who entered, smiling, to throw himself into the chair at the head of the table. He allowed them to keep their attention on the plates in front of them. Estes shook his head and DeWitt continued working on his numbers; there was no point trying to interview them until they finished.

Caswall entered the room at that time, saluting. “Captain. Steward. Administrator.” The visitors barely looked at him.

Behind him, Tourse re-entered to salute. Then he leaned over the men to say, “Get your butts up, gentlemen; that’s the Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.” He nodded to the laborer in dirty clothes.

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Chapter 13

The three lurched up to salute. Efran laughed, “At ease; finish your meal.” They did so dubiously, wondering which one was joking with them. Efran looked up to ask Tourse, “Did you find someone to advise Racheal?” At the name, the men stopped eating to turn around.

Eyes on his work, DeWitt nodded; Tourse said, “Yes, Captain; thank you. Racheal and three others are meeting with Pieta in the small dining room.”

“Good. Have a seat, Tourse,” Efran said. Minka slipped in unnoticed by anyone but Efran. She sat at the far end of the table, behind the faerie tree (which the Featheringham guards had merely blinked at).

As Tourse sat, he looked at the guard with the black eye and winced. “Sorry about that.”

“I knew you sounded familiar,” the man said, pushing away his empty plate. To Efran, he said, “Thank you for the hospitality, sir.”

Leaning back, Efran said, “You’re welcome. So, we pretty much know what happened when my scouts got into your compound. Now I want background. What are your names?”

The man who had spoken said, “I am Dolivo, that’s Freling and Leneghan. We’re the last of the personal bodyguard attending Lady Nierling. After we woke up in the ditch to find everyone gone, we decided not to wait for the lords to come back, and set out east.” He had a settled, resigned air.

Efran regarded his light gray, well-constructed (though soiled) uniform. “Did you think we wouldn’t know where you came from?”

“Personally, I didn’t think about it,” Dolivo said, glancing at Freling beside him. “I only knew what Kasprak and Luettgen would do when they found them all gone.”

Knowing whom he meant by “them,” Efran asked quietly, “How did you justify their chains?”

Dolivo settled a blank gaze on the faerie tree growing up through the middle of the table. “We did what we could. When the lords started—confining them, we were able to get a few away at a time, and the lords didn’t notice. We could have walked away ourselves at any time, but we were afraid of who would replace us and what they would do to the girls. But we were able to slip them extra food, and send messages to their families, asking for help. Leneghan sent a message to his old unit—we never knew whether it got through or not. We did get a message through to Surchatain Auber of the situation at Featheringham, but, never heard back.

“Of course it didn’t start like that. Ten years ago, Lady Nierling was a brilliant young designer in Crescent Hollow; girls fought for the opportunity to apprentice with her. As she became wealthy from her designs, she moved out of the city and built the private complex because of the thefts of her ideas, especially by Ennemond. She became—shut in and suspicious; some of the girls early on stole her designs. So she got tighter and tighter with them.

“It didn’t get bad until the Lords Kasprak and Luetgen appeared. They just—showed up and took over with flattery and attention, and—food. They gave her everything she wanted, and took control of her money and her production. She didn’t want the women leaving the compound, so the lords had them chained to their beds. Then she complained that they weren’t spending enough time in the factory, so the lords had them chained to their work. That’s only been for the last year or so, though.

“We didn’t know what to do.” Dolivo looked again at Freling, who had his head down in shame. Leneghan was looking off bitterly, as though facing a court-martial. Dolivo continued, “There were more of us at the beginning, of course. The guards who spoke up about the girls’ treatment just—disappeared. Many of the men slipped out with a girl, or several. We kept waiting for them to come back with an army, but no one ever did. It was like—this stone compound on the main road between Westford and Crescent Hollow was invisible.” Efran unconsciously nodded, having noticed it before.

Dolivo went on, “And when the lords were off doing business, I kept trying to talk to Nierling, tell her what was going on, asking her to stop it. But, she didn’t believe me. She didn’t believe that anyone was being mistreated; that was ridiculous. No, of course she wouldn’t go look. And she wouldn’t hear anything against Kasprak and Luetgen; they took good care of her. It took your men—however many you sent—slipping in to have a look around and knock us out. We should be grateful you didn’t kill us,” he observed to Tourse, who raised a brow.

“So here we are. Do as you will,” Dolivo finished.

There was a silence, then Efran looked down the table at Tourse. “You said that Kasprak and Luetgen would be bringing Adele here.”

“‘Adele?’” Dolivo repeated blankly.

“Livy,” Efran informed him.

Tourse confirmed, “Yes, that was their intention, as they told the driver.”

Efran looked at Dolivo, who was shaking his head. “She was gone before they ever got back.”

“You think she will come back here?” Efran asked.

Dolivo shrugged slightly. “I don’t know.”

“But you believe they will,” Efran said.

“Certainly. You have their property,” Dolivo said.

Efran looked to the door sentry. “Alert the wall guards to watch for them, and Adele. If they show up, they’re to be brought up here.”

“Captain!” The sentry saluted, but took care to walk away.

Another few moments of silence passed while Efran cast back on everything he had learned. Looking to Dolivo again, he asked, “You tried talking to Nierling?” Dolivo nodded slowly, so Efran asked, “Why would she listen to you?”

“I’m her son,” Dolivo said. “Freling and Leneghan are my cousins. We kept thinking—there must be a way to stop it. But just to leave. . . .”

The room was quiet as Efran looked at Estes and DeWitt, who subtly indicated that they had nothing to ask. He looked down the table at Minka, who had her head lowered, tears in her eyes.

Efran then asked Dolivo, “And what of your mother?”

“I assume we left her sleeping. She keeps a very regular schedule,” Dolivo said dully.

“You didn’t check?” Efran asked.

Dolivo looked up with dead eyes. “Once we saw the girls were out, I no longer cared.”

With that, Efran leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest to study the faerie tree branches growing up through the ceiling. He turned his head to whistle lightly, and Elrod stepped in, saluting. “Captain?”

“Yes, stand by.” Efran looked over to Estes. “Do we have a vacant house close by on the plots?”

Estes raised up from his ledger. “Yes, actually. Stites and Challinor vacated twenty-two when Trina bought them a house near hers. I believe they just left the door unlocked and the keys inside.”

“Excellent.” Efran looked back to Elrod. “Get you a couple more men to take our visitors down to twenty-two. See that they have whatever they need there; we will keep the keys and stand watch.” To the Featheringham men, he said, “We will probably want your testimony when Kasprak and Luetzgen get here. Dismissed.” He took them and Elrod in at a glance.

Elrod saluted and the three stood. “Thank you, Captain,” Dolivo said. Freling nodded but Leneghan saluted with practiced precision. Still, they looked completely drained.

“If you will follow me,” Elrod said, upon which they turned out with him.

To Tourse, Efran said, “DeWitt is drawing up commendations for you and Caswall. Go rest.” DeWitt nodded, eyes on his numbers, as Tourse stood to salute and depart.

Then Efran stood, stretching, to look to Minka. “I’ll be—”

“Don’t dig any more,” she pleaded in exasperation, standing.

His administrators glanced up, smiling, and Efran conceded, “If there are enough men out there, I won’t. Come look with me.”

Suspicious, she accompanied him out to the courtyard to look down the northeastern hillside. Neither of them knew that the hilltop captains, Towner and Rigdon, also disapproved of the Captain’s digging. Therefore, they had exempted any men in their units from regular duties if they would dig on the new switchback. So when Efran and Minka came out to look, they found at least thirty men at work, including Ella’s half-brother Cyneheard and his protégé Henris. So Efran consented to go bathe in the third-floor waterfall and then wait for Lords Kasprak and Luetttgen to show up.

Hours later, Efran and Minka, with Joshua and Nakam, were out on the back grounds. He was lying on his front on a blanket with another book from the library, this one comparatively light reading about Ares’ successful efforts to establish a fleet at Hycliff. He did this primarily by retrofitting the merchant ships his grandfather Bobadil had built.

Absorbing all this, Efran shook his head in resignation, whispering, “I can never match what he did.” Meanwhile, Joshua sat on the blanket beside him, screaming in delight as the children—Toby, Noah, Ivy, Alcmund, Erastus, Cleo, and Hassie—ran around them, kicking a ball. Toby endeavored to protect Joshua, but Efran had to periodically deflect the ball without looking up from his book. Nakam ran among their feet, barking, while Minka watched from the bench nearby. She also had to keep an eye out for the ball, which occasionally came sailing past her head.

“If it goes over the fence, you’ve lost it,” Efran warned them, still without looking up.

“But there’s a gate there now,” Noah observed.

Efran looked back over his shoulder to confirm that there was also a lock on the gate. The fence was so close to the cliff that anyone going out had to produce a good reason to get the key from Lwoff or Greves. “How are swimming lessons coming along, Noah?” Efran asked. This time he did look up with a wry smile.

“It’s a little cold in the lake right now,” Noah said cautiously.

“Then we’ll resume when it warms up,” Efran said, lowering his eyes again.

A sentry ran up to salute. “Captain, the lords Kasprak and Luetttgen have arrived from Featheringham.”

Efran closed the book and pushed himself up. “Excellent. Have them sent to the small dining room with refreshments. Alert Administrator DeWitt and Steward Estes; I’ll be in directly.” He did not have to stipulate that the lords’ carriage, horses, driver and footman were to be accommodated at Croft’s, as that was standard practice.

While Efran picked up Joshua, Minka collected Nakam to go in. The children turned their attention to the new horses at the training pens.

Dropping Joshua off at the nursery, Efran asked her, “Do you want to come? There won’t be much discussed today; it’s too late.”

“Yes, I would like to come anyway. Let me put Nakam in our quarters,” she said. So he waited for her to deposit a happy, exhausted dog on their bed, then they went down the corridor to the small dining room off the foyer. The sentry at the door saluted while Efran, with Minka in hand, walked in.

Efran nodded to DeWitt and Estes, already seated, then looked to the stone-faced lords. DeWitt informed them, “This is Lord Efran.”

So Kasprak, lifting up from the plate of *coq au vin*, said, “Lord Efran, Lord Luetzgen and I have come to demand retribution on the thieves and murderers you have permitted onto your Lands.”

“Murderers?” Efran asked casually. Since the visiting lords were sitting at the head, Efran sat near the door.

“Yes,” Kasprak said tightly. “Lady Nierling was found dead in her bed this morning.”

“How unfortunate,” Efran said blandly. “With such serious charges, we must call in the notary for a hearing. It’s too late in the day, however, so we will begin first thing tomorrow morning—”

“I demand the immediate return of our valuable property,” Kasprak added.

“Which is what?” Efran asked.

Kasprak uttered, “Twenty-six dresses of Lady Nierling’s design, produced by her factory. And we know they are here, for we spotted several walking your streets.”

Efran noted, “Ah. We’ll address that. Meanwhile—”

Kasprak stood, as did Luetzgen, after cleaning his plate. “Then we will return tomorrow morning. We will stay the night at Croft’s.”

“You will,” Efran said, neither a question nor a statement. “Excuse me.”

He rose to leave the room, but stopped in the corridor to think. No, there’s no way he’d let these two have the run of the Lands tonight; they must stay in the fortress. But it had no prison; there was no secure room.

Pausing at a thought, he went down to the library. The Librarian turned to him, bowing, and Efran said, “I have an unusual request of you.”

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Chapter 14

“I am at your service, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said.

Glancing around the room full of valuable books, Efran said, “I have two dangerous guests that we must contain overnight. I don’t wish to endanger you or any of our treasures here, but—I seem to have the idea that you can accommodate them without difficulty.”

“You may have perfect confidence in me for this task, Lord Efran,” the Librarian said, his white hair fanning out.

“Excellent. I will send them to you at once,” Efran smiled. The Librarian bowed.

Returning to the door of the small dining room, Efran looked in at his guests waiting belligerently while four Abbey men blocked the door. “I’m afraid that Croft’s is full, as it usually is these days. But we have an alternative that I hope you find acceptable. Follow me.”

He stepped back for the guards to part, allowing the two lords to emerge suspiciously from the small dining room. Estes and DeWitt followed in curiosity as Efran said, “This way.”

He walked the short distance to the library and stopped at the door. “Here.”

Everyone looked confused, but two Abbey men thrust their visitors into the library. They looked at the Librarian standing silently amid shelves full of old books. Luetngen noted, “I hope we have a light to read by.” Immediately two large lanterns on the wall behind them lit up.

“Good evening, gentlemen. We’ll summon you for the hearing tomorrow morning,” Efran said. He walked off, leaving the door open. His administrators glanced in, nodding, then Minka came to the door. Head lowered, she smiled at the Librarian, who bowed to her. Then everyone left the two guests to their room for the night.

As it was almost time for dinner, the corridor filled up with fortress residents on their way to the dining hall. Kasprak and Luetngen stood in the library doorway to watch them all throng by. Within a half hour, the corridor had cleared, and a din was audible from the dining hall a few doors down.

The lords looked up the corridor toward the foyer, then looked back at the Librarian standing quietly beside his books. Smiling at each other, Kasprak and Luetngen began to step out.

They were repelled from the doorway to land flat on their backs in the middle of the room. After they had gotten their breath back, goggling at each other, they sat up to look around.

Eyeing the Librarian, Kasprak got up to walk back to the doorway. He thrust his hand out, and nothing happened. Still staring at the Librarian, he lifted his foot—and the resultant repulsion caused him to do a back flip into the room.

Scrambling up from the floor, he suddenly saw the sword of Ares in its stand beside a large old book. With a malicious smile, he reached over to grip the hilt with both hands and pull. It came out readily from its stand, but when Kasprak tried to lift it, he fell backwards with the sword lying across his chest and the grip under his arm. “Argh! It’s—at my throat! Get it off!” he shouted.

Luetngen rushed over to grab it (by the blade, unwisely) then quickly withdrew his hand, crossed with a red line. “It cut me!” he cried. At this, the Librarian picked up the sword by its grip and restored it to its stand.

Kasprak rose to his knees, red-faced in anger. He hissed at the Librarian, “You let us out of here, or I fear terrible things may happen to your books.” At this point, Luetngen was content to watch from the floor. He carefully wrapped a handkerchief around the scratch on his hand.

When the Librarian did not move or speak, Kasprak walked over to the nearest shelf. Leering at the white-haired man, he reached out to take a book at random from the shelf. As he drew it out, a set of sharp teeth emerged from its pages to clamp onto his fingers. Kasprak screamed, dropping the book to hold his bloody fingers. Luetngen scooted away in a backwards crab walk.

Staring down at the book on the floor (which was titled, *Creatures of the Deep*) Kasprak reached his other hand tentatively toward it, and it sprang up with exposed teeth so quickly that he barely jerked his hand away in time, falling down.

Enraged, Kasprak leapt up to punch the wide spine of another book (titled *Effective Warfare*) with his closed fist. The blow pushed the book deep into the shelf, then it rebounded to hit him in the face with such force that his nose began spurting blood. Kasprak rolled on the floor in pain, covering his nose, and Luetngen leaned over to offer him his handkerchief.

Holding it to his nose, Kasprak sat up to breathe to their silent adversary, “You think you’re clever with your little tricks, do you? Well, there are two of us, and we have all night to wear you down.” Luetngen was looking dubious.

The Librarian reached down to point to a book on a low shelf. It edged out to fall on the floor, and the men stared at it in near terror. But it had a pastel cover with a flowing gold script that read, *Lullabies*—The full title was obscured as the book opened its gilt-edged pages, which breathed out a sweet song:

Dear little man,
Don’t twist the kitty’s tail
Or poke the pony
With a rusty nail.

Don’t light a fire
In your mother’s sage;
Don’t tease the dog
Till he bites in rage.

Don’t pour the pepper
In your brother’s milk;
Don’t pour the oil
On your sister’s silk.

For, little man,
If you do these things
Something very bad
Will visit you in dreams.

When the first stanza was heard in a soft, feminine voice, Kasprak and Luetngen eased down to lie on their backs, blinking sleepily. The second and third stanzas saw them drift into deep sleep. Upon the fourth stanza, however, their faces grew anxious, and they occasionally jerked as though trying to run or wake up.

But they didn’t; they lay like this for the remainder of the night. The Librarian bent to retrieve the book to restore it to its place, its full title being: *Lullabies for Naughty Boys*.

The following morning, February 24th, Kasprak and Luetngen were nudged awake by the boots of Abbey soldiers. “Heya. HEY. Wake up. Get up, now; yer summoned to the hearing.” Arne informed them.

Both men groaned, opening bleary eyes. Luetgen shot up to a sit, glancing around wildly. “Where are the snobbles?” he cried—which had evidently appeared in his dreams.

“They’re mostly gone, I believe,” Conte replied. “Up now, you’re to have a quick breakfast and get yourself together. The notary’s here taking statements.”

The two allowed themselves to be ushered to the door; on the threshold, however, they sprang back in terror. The impatient soldiers dragged them into the corridor to attend them outside the garderobe and wait for them to gulp down breakfast in the dining hall. Kasprak was detoured to the doctor’s quarters to have his fingers bandaged and the blood cleaned off his face.

Finally, they were brought to the small dining room. They looked at an old man asking questions and a young soldier scribbling furiously with a quill. Sitting around the oval table listening were the Captain, the Lady Minka, and the Administrator from last night. The lords then looked at the man being questioned.

At first they had no idea who he was. The old man was saying, “Now, Melgren, do you know anything of Lady Nierling’s death?”

“Yes, sir. When we had returned to Featheringham, the cook and the butler came around the house, angry that they had to break Cook’s window to get out of his room—the door had been blocked with a hutch. So the lords asked after the lady; Cook and Butler went to look, then came back to say that she had died in the night from not being rolled over.”

Still groggy, the lords listened to the old man ask, “‘Not being rolled over’? What does this mean?”

Melgren explained, “Well, sir, she was so fat, if she rolled onto her front in her sleep she was liable to suffocate unless someone was there to roll her back over. Butler said she hadn’t been rolled over and suffocated.”

“Did you see the body?” the old man asked.

“Ah, yes, sir. While we was waiting on the lords, Butler asked me to bury her. I hauled her out of the house to the back of the grounds and buried her shallow, I’m afraid,” Melgren admitted.

“What did you observe about the condition of the body?”

“Not much,” Melgren said, wincing. “She was face down in the pillows when I found her. Eyes half-open, bloodshot.” He shrugged.

“Did you see any wounds? Any hand prints on her skin?” the questioner asked.

“No, sir,” Melgren answered.

“You’re the footman!” Kasprak erupted in rage. “What do you know?”

“Thank you, Melgren; you’ve been most helpful. You’re dismissed,” the old man said. The footman stood to bow to him, then walked out with a cold glance at the lords.

“Lord Kasprak, please be seated,” the old man said.

“Who are you?” Kasprak said uneasily, taking Melgren’s place in the chair at the head.

“I am Notary Lord Commander Ryal of the Abbey Lands, formerly at Westford. We are making inquiries into your accusations. Now, Lord Kasprak, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?”

“Yes,” Kasprak growled, looking aside.

“Very good. First, regarding Lady Nierling, did you see her after the cook and the butler informed you that she was dead?” asked Ryal.

“What? Afterward? No,” Kasprak said in disgust.

“Ah. Then how did you conclude that she had been murdered?” Ryal asked.

Kasprak’s eyes flicked up to Luetngen. “Because they all hated her.”

“Any other reason?” Ryal asked.

“Isn’t that enough?” Kasprak snapped.

“Who did you suspect of murdering her?” Ryal asked.

“Any of the girls. Livy. The Abbey men who raided the compound,” Kasprak said darkly.

“I see.” Ryal laid a sheet of paper to the side. “Now tell me how the factory workers came to be put in chains.”

Kasprak studied him a moment, then looked off to say, “I know nothing of that.”

Ryal hesitated. “Were you not working for Lady Nierling when it was decided to chain the women in the factory?”

Kasprak raised his shoulders in ignorance. “Possibly. But it was nothing I had anything to do with.”

“Did you never see them chained?” Ryal asked gravely.

“No,” Kasprak said with a puckered frown.

“What was your job, then?” Ryal asked.

Kasprak leaned forward eagerly. “To be liaison to Lord Ennemond of Crescent Hollow, who paid good money for the dresses that Lady Nierling designed and had produced, and that were stolen from us by those—”

Ryal cut him off: “And how did you receive the dresses that you delivered to Lord Ennemond?”

“Why, they were packed and stacked—” Kasprak suddenly stopped. In the dead silence, he resumed, “—for my associate Lord Luetngen to load in the carriage.” He did not look at Luetngen, who had gone white.

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Chapter 15

“You never loaded the deliveries in the carriage yourself, Lord Kasprak?” Ryal asked.

“No. The footman did, though—Melvin. He loaded them frequently,” Kasprak maintained. Ryal turned aside to look at Lord Efran, who looked back at him with an almost blank face. There was only a tiny upward tilt to the right corner of his mouth.

Ryal turned back to say, “Thank you for your testimony, Lord Kasprak. You are dismissed.”

With a nod of vindication, Kasprak got up to attempt to leave the room. This was prevented by a large man in Abbey red, and Ryal said, “Lord Luetngen, please take the seat of testimony.”

Kasprak’s head snapped around as Luetngen sat, sweating, and Ryal asked, “Lord Luetngen, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?”

“Yes,” Luetngen said, getting over the first question easily.

“Very good. Please think carefully about this next question, Lord Luetngen,” Ryal said. Luetngen nodded earnestly, and Ryal asked, “You have just heard the testimony of your associate Lord Kasprak. Do you agree with everything he said?”

Sweat springing out on his temples, Luetngen stared at Ryal, who asked, “Shall we have his testimony read back to you?” In asking this, Ryal looked over at Soames’ progress with the note-taking.

“No,” Luetngen said quickly. “Ah, yes, I agree with it.”

“Where were the dresses that you picked up for delivery to Lord Ennemond, sir?” Ryal asked.

“The dresses,” Luetngen said.

“Yes. Where were they stacked for you or the footman to pick up?” Ryal asked.

“Usually—right outside the factory door,” Luetngen said, thinking fast.

Ryal eyed him. “Was that not inconvenient in bad weather, sir?”

“No,” Luetngen said. “They were put out—quickly. And the footman packed them quickly. I told him when they were out, and he packed them.”

“So you’re familiar with the footman?” Ryal asked.

“Yes, well enough,” Luetngen shrugged.

“And what is the footman’s name, Lord Luetngen?” Ryal asked, looking down at his own notes.

Luetngen’s eyes widened slightly. “M-M-Merlin. Melrin.”

There was another silence as Ryal sifted through his notes, checking to see how Soames was doing. Then he said, "Very well. Thank you, Lord Luetngen. You are dismissed."

Efran looked up at a sentry to say, "Return them to the library."

Luetngen issued a whimper and Kasprak looked braced to run, but they reluctantly went.

They sat quietly in the library for the next several hours. The Librarian did not look at them or speak. No one else entered, except—a maid came to the door. Startled to see the two men on the floor, she almost turned out again, but the Librarian bowed to her. "How may I assist you, miss?"

"Oh," she said, mildly flustered. "You gave me a beautiful book on Ruth, and said you might have others I might like. So, I wondered—"

"Yes, miss." He reached up to withdraw another slender volume. "You may enjoy this one."

"Oh." She looked at the title. "What's that word?"

"*Chataine*, miss. A ruler such as one of Eurus or Crescent Hollow is called 'Surchatain.' His daughter is a Chataine."

"Oh, yes," she said. "May I—take it out to read it?"

"Yes, miss. Please return it when you are finished with it," the Librarian said.

"I will," she said. As she began to leave, Kasprak sprang up to thrust himself in front of her to the doorway. He immediately rebounded as though he had hit a rubber wall. The girl, looking back at him in astonished disdain, hastily left with her book. Kasprak rolled over, groaning.

After a few more hours, in mid-afternoon, a sentry appeared at the door of the library to look down at the bleary lords. "You are summoned."

They got to their feet to stagger out of the library and down the corridor to the small dining room. The only ones present at this time were the notary, his scribe, and Lord Efran. The lord and the notary were talking quietly when the lords entered.

Efran sat back and Ryal looked up at them. "You will stand behind the seat of testimony."

Not liking this formality, they shuffled painfully (having sat on the floor most of the day) and stood as directed. Ryal cleared his throat, then checked to see that his scribe was ready. Soames brandished the quill, looking up attentively.

So Ryal began, "Lord Kasprak and Lord Luetngen, after taking testimony from several of the factory women at Featheringham, plus the guards, plus the driver and the footman, as well as our own scouts who were eyewitnesses, I find your testimony to be unreliable and inconsistent even with that of each other. Therefore, I find you guilty of twenty-five counts of imprisonment and theft of wages over a period of at least fifteen months, some for longer. Since the charges are unprecedented in my experience, and your guilt so manifest, I and Lord Efran, Steward Estes, and Administer DeWitt must confer over the punishment. It will be grave.

"Therefore, you will be remanded to the library for the time being. It may require several days for us to arrive at

a consensus for punishment under Roman's Law. In the time being, you will be fed and made comfortable. And you have a wide choice of reading material," Ryal finished dryly.

Soames then spoke: "Oh. Pardon, Lord Ryal, but Lady Ella and Lady Minka are both probably waiting for me in the library. They are anxious to know the provisions of the Law that cover this trial, and they find the Librarian's input instructive. Actually, I do, too."

So Efran turned to instruct the two large Abbey men standing nearby, "Take them to the cold storage room down the corridor instead. Stand at the door; I'm afraid there's no lock. We'll have you relieved for the night watch."

Saluting, the soldiers walked the pair of lords past the library a short distance to another door, which they opened. The prisoners went in without resistance to drop onto a stone floor in a windowless room. Shortly, two other soldiers brought them a small lantern and their evening meals, though it was only late afternoon. The reflection of golden sunlight from the corridor shone in a narrow strip under the door.

Kasprak and Luetngen ate everything they were given. Then Kasprak looked at two units of shelving standing along one wall. He went over to riffle through them, finding towels, soap, tallow and such—nothing that would aid an escape. So he knocked the shelves across the room, scattering their contents.

He threw himself back down to the floor, and they looked at the strip of light spilling from the bottom of the doorway to the corridor. Luetngen's forehead creased, and he turned his head. "Do you hear something? A—buzzing?"

"Yes, my ears are still ringing from that blasted book hitting me," Kasprak muttered, gingerly feeling his nose.

"The guards," Luetngen said. "Did Dolivo and his idiot cousins testify against us?"

"Who knows?" Kasprak said. He turned his head slightly to his partner to observe, "They're going to kill us, you realize."

Luetngen scowled, "I don't really appreciate your trying to accuse me of knowing about the chains."

"Makes no difference; I didn't convince anyone," Kasprak muttered. Then he cocked his head, looking. "Light. There's light coming from under that door." It wasn't the door to the corridor.

Luetngen turned to look in the same direction. "Yes, there is." Curious, he went over to open the door. "It's a closet. But there's light under these shelves." Kasprak watched from his spot on the floor while Luetngen worked a loaded shelf unit out of the closet. The light grew stronger and Luetngen exclaimed, "It's a trap door! The light's coming from under this opening in the floor!"

Kasprak got up to push his way into the closet and kneel in front of the brightly outlined square. Finding that he could not lift it with his fingers, he went over to retrieve the tin fork resting on his empty plate. Prising the trap door up, he was confronted by a mesh screen. "It's screwed in," he breathed. "But look at the light!"

The cavern waters were brightly lit from the westering sun. But that was temporary; in another hour, the tide would rise so as to block the hillside opening completely, and with it, most of the light. (Fortunately, the water level almost never rose as high as the first floor, and when it had risen with the appearance of the water giant, it only seeped minimally through the trap door.) Kasprak then attempted to use the tines of the fork on a screw, but they were too thick.

“Here.” Luetngen stripped off his belt to hand him the belt buckle. Kasprak immediately applied the edge of the buckle to the slot in the first screwhead. As he worked, Luetngen leaned down, his ear to the opening. “That buzzing is even louder here. What’s making that noise?”

Kasprak shook his head, intent on getting the screws out. But Luetngen was peering down through the screen. “There’s something in the water,” he said, studying the broad, gentle ripples. “Something big.”

“There!” Kasprak said, tossing away the fourth screw. With that, he was able to lift the screen, setting it aside to peer down at the water. “Look! A boat!”

“What?” Luetngen squinted. “No, that’s just a—tub. A tin wash tub with—gunk in the bottom. What is that stuff? There’s partly burned wood, but something else as well.”

Kasprak laughed, “What difference does that make? It *floats*, and all we have to do is drop down into it and ride the tide out!”

“How do you know the tide is outgoing? It looks incoming to me,” Luetngen observed.

“If it is, we might have to wait a few hours,” Kasprak shrugged. “So?”

“What is making that noise?” Luetngen asked intently.

“There! The tub is almost right below us,” Kasprak said. He sat on the edge of the opening to dangle his legs down.

Luetngen gripped his arm. “There’s *something in the water*.”

Kasprak looked down around his legs. “I don’t see anything.”

“There! Right under the surface! It’s black!” Luetngen shouted.

Peering around his feet, Kasprak laughed, “That’s a dolphin!”

“All right, it’s a dolphin. What do you do when it capsizes your tub?” Luetngen asked. He sucked in a breath. “That noise. It’s louder.”

“Crickets,” Kasprak said.

“No,” gasped Luetngen. “It’s—something else. I don’t like the sound of it.”

“I don’t care,” Kasprak said. “The notary said the punishment is *grave*. They’re going to kill us. I’m willing to risk whatever’s down there to get out. Are you?” he challenged.

Luetngen sat back. “Both of us trying to ride in that tub would sink it for sure.”

“Then that means only one of us gets out,” Kasprak said. “Goodbye.” Watching the tub below his feet, he waited until just the right moment. Then, clutching the edge of the opening, he let himself down to hang by his hands. Right before he dropped, he cried out, letting go of the edge.

Luetngen leaned over the opening to see him land in the tub, slapping at his arms. Things were crawling up his

arms, over his chest, onto his face—while Luetngen was looking, however, small things with clacking jaws began crawling up over the edge of the trap door. As Kasprak was screaming below, Luetngen began screaming above.

He seized the screen to plop it back down over the opening, then stood on it to stomp on the four or five creatures that had gotten in. Meanwhile, more began congregating on the underside of the screen. Luetngen was only vaguely aware of a black shape overwhelming Kasprak and the tub before all disappeared underwater.

Luetngen concentrated on holding the screen down until he could find the screws. With trembling hands, he screwed three of them back in with just his fingers, unable to find the fourth. But that seemed to contain the clacking jaws.

Shaking, he lowered the trap door in place, then shut the closet door and took off his suit jacket to stuff it in the crack underneath. And he sat on the far side of the room to watch the door all night long.

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Chapter 16

When the sentry, Verrin, opened the door of the storage room the following morning (February 25th) he stared at the hollow-eyed man scrunched in the darkest corner of the room. “What—?” Verrin muttered. He looked at the contents of the shelves strewn over the floor. After setting one shelf unit back up against the wall, he saw the jacket stuffed under the closet door and the disordered shelf unit sitting to the side. “Oh oh. Did they get in again?” He stepped into the corridor to call for reinforcements.

Shortly, Verrin returned with Allyr and Salk, both bearing torches. Other men stood in the corridor to see what help was needed. Verrin pulled away the jacket from under the closet door while the other two held the torches ready.

Opening the door, they looked at the trap door in place with nothing emerging from under it. Verrin got down on his knees to bend his ear to the door. “I’m not hearing anything. Are you?” he asked the two over his shoulder.

“Waves,” Salk replied.

Allyr nodded. “If there’s humming, it’s faint. Isn’t the hydra down here?”

“This morning? I don’t know,” Verrin said. He lifted the trap door to look down through the screen. “I don’t see anything yet. But there’s not much light.” Thumbing an empty screw hole, he noted, “There’s a screw missing.”

They thought about that, then Allyr turned his torch over the room. “There’s a man missing! Weren’t there two put in here?”

The other men looked around the disarray in the room that contained only one body: the speechless man in the corner. Another soldier brought in two breakfasts. “They need to eat and then go—” He stopped abruptly, perceiving that one of them was not there, then he also looked at the open closet in alarm.

Verrin went over to lift Luetngen by his shoulders and prop him up against the wall. “Did your partner try to go out the trap door?”

Luetngen blinked, then slowly grimaced in the effort to get out, “Y-y-yes.”

“What happened?” Verrin asked quietly. The other men clustered around them in apprehension.

“Th-th-the—the—” Luetngen raised his arms to show his bloody shirt sleeves.

The men collectively sucked in their breath. Verrin turned with a hand on Luetngen’s shoulder. “I’m taking him up to the doctor. Allyr, you and Salk go find the Captain to tell him. Who else is there?—Suco, why don’t you find more screws; get this screen down tighter?”

Suco nodded to hurry away; the others paused. “Which one’s gone?” Allyr asked, scrutinizing the survivor.

With a shake of his head, Verrin peered at Luetngen. “Who are you?”

Luetngen raised his eyes blankly to the ceiling. “Dead.”

In pity, Verrin guided him out of the room toward the stairway while Allyr and Salk went up the corridor toward the foyer.

Minutes later, Efran appeared in the doctor’s quarters, closely followed by Allyr and Salk. Leese showed him to the room where Wallace was treating the injured man. Efran looked in the doorway to see the victim sitting on a raised bed while Wallace wrapped his hands in gauze. “Doctor?” Efran asked.

Wallace turned. “Yes, Efran—six snobbles bites on his hands and wrists. No permanent damage, I think, except that he’s in shock.”

Efran entered the room to look closely at him. “Yes, that’s Luetngen. Luetngen? What happened to Kasprak?”

Luetngen groaned faintly, closing his eyes. “He . . . dropped down to the tub. But the things were on him, and, there was something large in the water. . . .”

Efran barely nodded. “Are you hungry?” A good meal was his infallible remedy for anything.

Luetngen’s eyes shifted and he whimpered softly. Efran backed out, telling Allyr and Salk, “Bring him to the dining hall; get him a plate.”

“Captain,” Allyr acknowledged while Salk took Luetngen’s arm.

Efran preceded him to the dining hall, where almost 50 people were gathering to sit in groups. Efran pointed Allyr and Salk to sit their survivor at a small table in front, then he went over to talk to Ryal, Estes, DeWitt, Feyer, and Pieta, who had all just entered the hall. Minka was already sitting at the table to which they were headed. As Efran explained the new situation with their defendants, his listeners quickly looked over to Luetngen, now seated. With a bandaged hand, he was taking up slow forkfuls of scrambled eggs.

Armed with a paper, Efran went to the front of the room to look around. While his administrators took their seats, the audience stilled. A few were having breakfast; more were just waiting. Additional soldiers entered to stand at the back. Efran looked to see Minka smiling at him. He unconsciously smiled back, then began, “All right. Thank you for coming; we’ll try to cover everything quickly. What we’ve done, is—”

He broke off when a soldier, Fennig, entered with Joshua on his arm. “Captain, I encountered this runaway crawling up the corridor, if you have any idea who he belongs to,” he said impertinently. Efran’s mouth dropped open as Fennig walked the baby up to the front amid light laughter.

Felice rushed into the hall. Pale, she cried, “He opened the door! He turned the latch while my back was turned!”

There was a burst of laughter as Efran took the fugitive, both of them glancing to Minka. She was smiling, unsurprised. Efran looked back to say, “Sorry, Felice. Ah, someone get her more hardware on that door. Yes, thank you, Seagrave. And, bring me a sling, please, Felice.” She nodded, turning out again.

“Now, then,” Efran resumed, “we’re going to see if we can get our Featheringham people settled. First, we’ve just dispatched forty men under Captain Barr to assess the situation, as we’ve seen nothing of the cook or the butler. Also, Barr’s men will bring back all monies they find, which will be divided among the women. Oh, let me introduce Feyer, who will be in charge of answering your questions after I’ve thoroughly confused you this morning.” A young man at Minka’s table stood to lift a hand to the crowd, who murmured in amusement.

Efran went on, “Ah, Oskar and Melgren? The carriage driver and the footman.” He looked across the hall as Melgren raised his hand. Oskar was sitting next to him, working on his second breakfast. Efran paused as Felice ran to him with a sling. “Thank you, Felice.”

She growled at Joshua, kissing him fiercely on the forehead. There was more light laughter while she retreated to the exit, still shaken by his escape. Joshua looked smug, as his foray had been a success on all fronts.

Efran quickly donned the sling and tucked Joshua into it. Then he took up the paper again. “Oskar and Melgren. We’ve talked to Wade, who owns the carriage-for-hire service here, and he’s eager to have your help. He’ll provide food, lodging, and customers. You two are assigned joint ownership of the carriage and horses. You may go now to discuss terms with Wade—his building is right next to Croft’s—and if you have any problems, Feyer is right there.” Efran pointed; Feyer waved again, so Melgren and Oskar stood to leave.

But Oskar paused. “Captain,” he said faintly, and Efran looked over. After a moment’s struggle, Oskar said, “Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome,” Efran said. Melgren nudged Oskar’s arm, and they made their way to the exit.

“Now then,” Efran said, consulting his paper as Joshua made a grab for it. “The bodyguard: Dolivo, Freling, Leneghan?” He looked up to see Dolivo wave from another table. His cousins were sitting with him. “You may stay on the Lands if you work. You’ll interview with Feyer to find what suits you. We have *many* openings for physical labor. If you want something that pays better, we have many Polonti in the army who want to learn to read and write in the Southern Continental language. If you’re capable of tutoring them, you’ll have endless, good-paying work. So, go ahead and huddle with Feyer in the back corner there to see what you want to try.”

As Feyer and the three stood to head for the corner, Leneghan (who had been the door guard) asked, “What if we want army service, Captain?”

Efran winced. “We have a long waiting list for the army, so you’d have to try out—demonstrate your skills. Tryouts are demanding, but you may ask Feyer to set up a screening session for you.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you,” Leneghan said.

While the bodyguards went over to huddle with Feyer, Efran looked back down at his sheet—after working the

corner out of Joshua's mouth. "Now the ladies." He looked up at the former slaves. "I understand that several of you are working with Pieta to start your own dressmaking shop. Is that correct?"

A few women nodded; Racheal said, "Yes, Lord Efran."

"Good. She's here to help you with that. Pieta, if you'll see to them in this other corner, please." Efran pointed across the hall from Feyer's group. As she and ten women got up to head for that corner, Efran added, "Ladies who are not interested in the dress shop, please head over to Feyer's corner for his help finding work. All of you ladies must either work or be married to stay on the Lands. We'll give you a week to find either a job or a husband—and I can't imagine any of you not finding one or the other," he said in sudden bemusement.

"How many are under sixteen?" he asked abruptly, as that was the age of majority across the Southern Continent.

He looked to Estes, who replied, "Three. We're placing them with families, seeing about apprenticing them."

"Ah. Good," Efran said, working the sheet out of Joshua's grip. "Anyone else whose situation I've not covered, see Feyer."

Most of the remaining women left at that time, being already married or pledged to marry someone on the Lands. But five went over to Feyer's corner, two of those to talk to Dolivo or Leneghan. Both men married those ladies later that day. Obviously, those women were the reason these two men had stayed at Featheringham, trying to help.

Efran then said, "That leaves our remaining defendant." He regarded Luetngen, slumped at the table, his empty plate before him. Efran directed a questioning look to Ryal at another table, to which the notary waved him over. There, Efran sat to confer with Ryal, DeWitt, Estes, and Minka. Joshua now had sole possession of the paper.

Minutes later, Efran made eye contact with Stephanos and pointed to Luetngen. The soldier went to assist the defendant out of the chair and walk him over to stand before the Abbey authorities. Ryal, acting as judge, did not announce that his sentencing was imminent, but conversations in the far corners of the room stilled as the former slaves and the former guards all waited to hear what Luetngen's punishment would be. They already knew that for Kasprak.

Ryal began, "Lord Luetngen, having determined your guilt in this matter, I have solicited input from the Abbey leadership as well as your victims as to an appropriate punishment. The unfortunate demise of your co-defendant, and your own injuries, have not changed our judgment as to what should be done with you.

"Therefore, I sentence you to work for the victims' business without pay for a minimum of ten years. You shall be utterly dependent on their goodwill and the success of their shop for your own well-being, and if you prove to be unsatisfactory in your duties, you will then be conscripted to dig for whatever construction projects on the Lands that require it. You will begin your ten-year sentence for the ladies' business when the doctor clears you. Until then, you will be confined to—"

"Not the storage room," Luetngen rasped. "I beg you, not the storage room."

"No," Ryal said with a mild scowl, as he disliked being interrupted. "To a room in the doctor's quarters, so that we may be immediately informed of your availability to work."

Slightly swaying, Luetngen stood without speaking for several moments, then croaked, "That's my punishment? To work without pay for the women?"

“For ten years,” Ryal added, studying him.

Luetngen’s face contorted. “That’s *it*? We thought you were going to kill us!” The administrators eyed him; Minka watched heartbroken as he cried, “Kasprak jumped down that dam’ hole because he thought he was going to die!”

“Which he brought about himself,” Efran said. “But you are alive. You might want to make the most of that.”

Luetngen half collapsed; Stephanos caught him and Efran instructed, “Take him up; secure him to the bed. Ask the doctor to give us daily reports on his condition.”

“Yes, Captain.” Stephanos hoisted Luetngen, turning him around to walk. The others in the dining hall watched silently.

Efran turned to those seated at the table to whisper, “Now the only one unaccounted for is Adele.” They considered that while he removed globs of paper from Joshua’s mouth.

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Chapter 17

About that time, Adele was in Folliott’s wash room, experimenting with new ways to disguise herself. Using a hand mirror and the makeup that she had brought from Featheringham, she outlined her eyes in charcoal, then studied the results. Since she had previously disdained the use of charcoal, considering it a cheap look which obscured her big blue eyes, she found that it completely transformed her face. No face-changing potion was needed.

Next, she found a fluffy black lambswool blanket. After cutting several inches of fringe which she unraveled, she secured these bits to her front hairline with hair pins. These she covered with a scarf, which she tied tightly over her blonde hair. Then she fluffed the protruding bits of wool over her forehead. Regarding the results, she smiled. Now she had black hair, with no dye needed.

Adele finished dressing, careful to not disarrange her disguise. Then she took up a small bag of (what she believed to be) royals and emerged from the house to go shopping. She did not know or care where Folliott was.

Emerging onto Main with confidence, Adele went first to Averno’s Bakery, as Folliott had practically no food in the house. Averno’s new dining area, beautifully landscaped with a small pond on one side, was filled to overflowing at this time of the morning. Adele patiently stood in line to hand over a gold coin for her purchase of sourdough rolls and sesame bread. Admirably, she declined change. The harried boy at the counter took it without question. But an hour later, Averno himself came by to glance through their morning receipts, and picked it up.

From Averno’s, Adele swept to Shurtleff’s Fish Market, also very busy. Since he had his selection of fish laid out for the customers’ inspection, Adele simply picked up a nice fat trout to sniff it. Finding it acceptable, she wrapped it in paper herself and laid a gold coin on the counter. “There you are!” she called gaily to Shurtleff.

He glanced up, busy with another customer, and Adele left. But a moment later, he came over to look at the coin she had left. Face black, he rushed to the door to search the street. "Hey! Hey, you! You with the scarf!" he called angrily. Oblivious, she turned into another doorway, but Shurtleff cried out to an Abbey soldier, who trotted over to see what the curmudgeon was mad about now.

Down the street, Adele entered Delano's lovely building to complacently wait in line. When she reached the counter, she said, "I'd like two mild ales and two lagers, please"—fully intending to hide them from Folliot when she got back.

Delano's wife Madgwick, who was waiting on customers this morning, put the requested bottles in a sturdy sack and set them on the counter. "That will be sixteen pieces, please." Due to production costs, ales from any supplier were expensive.

Adele tossed a gold coin on the counter and said aloofly, "Keep the change."

Madgwick looked down at the sunburst and picked it up to immediately hand it back. "I'm sorry; I can't accept this."

"What?" Adele said.

"It's counterfeit. Worthless," Madgwick said, studying the hairpins and blond hairline peeking out from under the black wisps at the edge of the scarf.

"Oh, that's absurd," Adele said impulsively. Customers behind her were watching, and one ran out the door.

"Is that all you have?" Madgwick asked. Inwardly, she was praying for this young woman, whom she saw as dangerously adrift.

"I'll have to go check," Adele said, turning to leave without the brews. She was vaguely remembering something Folliot had said about the coins.

As she began down the street, an angry voice bellowed, "That's her!" Looking quickly, she saw Shurtleff running after her, pointing. Heads began turning in her direction.

Adele quickly slipped behind the notary shop to yank off the scarf with the hairpins and the lambswool. She shook out her blond hair to twist it demurely over her shoulder. Then she took the wrapped fish out of her bag and dropped it over the fence into the notary's yard. Ryal's wife Giardi, about to emerge into the yard with wet washing to hang, watched all this in concern. And she recognized Adele.

Adele then reentered Main, as construction blocked the quickest routes back to Folliot's house. Shurtleff appeared in front of her, paused indecisively, then opened her shopping bag to look in it. She blinked at him innocently. Not finding fish, he ran on down the street, searching.

Somewhat shaken, Adele continued up the street. But a young Polonti in Abbey red came out of nowhere to intercept her. Grinning, Jehan said, "Hello, Adele. What are you doing?"

She clenched her teeth at him, seeing his impudent partner Coish bouncing on the opposite sidewalk, waiting to cross to where she and Jehan were standing in the street. But there was a large cart coming, so she cried, "Watch out!" looking over Jehan's shoulder.

He spun to look, whereupon she ran back to enter the notary's shop. Inside, she flew past Giardi to the back door. Running through the yard and out the back gate, she cut through several unfenced adjacent yards, pausing in one to tie the scarf around her head, covering her blonde hair again. Nearing Folliott's street, she turned onto the new northbound road to walk placidly against the overflow of excited searchers from Main. Finally, she was able to turn onto his street, walk swiftly to his house, enter and lock the door behind her.

She leaned back against the door, panting. Then she pulled out her little bag to sift through the handful of coins—yes, they all had those stupid sun rays. She threw the bag against the opposite wall in fury, then pulled out her purchases from Averne's. At least she had something to eat.

Reconsidering, she retrieved the little bag of worthless coins to put it back in her pocket. Surely there were other fools on the Lands besides her.

Taking the bag of breads into the kitchen, she started at the sight of Folliott, dressed, groomed, and sitting at the table. He was enjoying a late breakfast from Firmin's of peach pie and hot tea—expensive, but worth it. Regarding her complacently, he asked, "What's all the excitement about?"

"How should I know?" she shrugged, placing the bread on the counter.

"You weren't trying to spend the bad coins, were you?" he asked wryly.

"What? Of course not," she replied, sitting with a roll. But she uneasily regarded his smile.

The first report that Efran received that day was from Tourle, one of the men charged with warning businesses about the fake gold coins. "Captain, we found two businesses that were defrauded—Croft is out six royals for rooms and meals for the Featheringham lords, and Lady Trina is out forty royals for dresses."

Efran frowned. "Luetngen and Kasprak bought dresses?"

"Yes, and gave them away, apparently," Tourle said.

Efran thought about that. "Huh. Well, with the business Croft is doing, he'll recover, and Trina won't miss them. But—she's not titled here, Tourle, so we don't need to call her 'lady.'"

"Oh, sorry about that, Captain. Since she uses it all over her shop, I didn't realize it wasn't legitimate," Tourle said, troubled.

"We'll do something about that," Efran mused. "Anyway, thank you. Dismissed."

"Captain." Tourle saluted and left the workroom.

Efran looked over to Estes. "I don't care how much money Trina has, I don't want her appropriating a title we haven't given her. I don't *anyone* doing that."

Estes was considering that when DeWitt glanced over to say, "We'll tell her that using an unauthorized title is a breach of contract for having a business in the Lands. She has to stop using the title or we'll shut down her business."

"Can we do that?" Efran asked dubiously.

“Oh, yes. It’s false advertising. A title implies Fortress approval of a person and/or their business. No one here has expressed Abbey approval of Trina’s work. We could and should shut her down if she continues operating under the pretense of Abbey Lands nobility.”

“Who’s going to tell her that?” Efran asked, wincing.

“Ploense,” DeWitt and Estes said at the same time, and Efran choked on a laugh.

Shortly, the Abbey accountant was dispatched to talk to Trina. Following that, the miller Kane sent his son Chuk up to the workroom with a message. The 12-year-old told Efran, “Cap’n, Pa wanted you to know about the donkey. A donkey just showed up in our yard—day before yesterday? Pa put him in back with Gerdie, thinking someone would come claim him, but no one has.”

“An unclaimed donkey,” Efran said, looking over to his administrators.

DeWitt suggested, “Take it to Melgren or Oskar at Wade’s Carriages for Hire—see if either of them recognize it.”

“Yes,” Efran agreed. “Let us know. Don’t run down the stairs.”

“Yes, sir.” Chuk ran out, but slowed at the stairs to walk down them.

Minutes later, Mohr entered the workroom to salute and report, “Captain, both Averne and Shurtleff are claiming to have been swindled by a young woman who paid for purchases with bad coinage and then walked out before they could stop her. There’s some confusion about her description, whether she’s got black hair or blonde. Pretty woman, too much makeup.”

“Ah. Thank you. Dismissed.” Efran glanced meaningfully at his administrators.

Moments later, Stourt arrived at the door, saluting. “Captain, Delano’s wife Madgwick says that a young woman just tried to buy ales and lagers with a false gold coin. Madgwick said she attempted to disguise her blonde hair with something that looked like black wool.”

Repressing laughter, Efran said, “Thank you. Dismissed.”

As Stourt turned, Eustace brushed past him to salute. “Captain, the notary’s wife Giardi reports that Adele just ran through the shop and out the back, leaving a wrapped trout in the yard. Giardi has returned it to Shurtleff.”

Efran leaned back in his chair to hit his forehead with his palm, laughing. “Thank you. Dismissed.” Eustace saluted and turned away while Joshua came out from under the table to study his father.

Jehan and Coish then appeared together at the door, Jehan wailing, “We almost had her, Captain!”

“Salute, stupid!” Coish reprimanded him.

Jehan did, but went on, “She got away and ran down to number sixty-one.” Soldiers were generally not permitted to follow objects of pursuit into a house unless they were suspected of a serious crime involving injury or death.

“Sixty-one?” Efran repeated, looking to Estes.

Estes, in turn, got up to fetch a ledger from a shelf. Opening it, he ran his finger down a column, then stopped and said, “Folliott.”

“Ah,” Efran said, looking up to the ceiling, then over to DeWitt. “Should we have it searched for bad money?”

“By all means,” DeWitt said without looking up from his numbers. So Estes sat to sign a writ authorizing the soldiers to search for false coinage.

This he handed to Efran, who extended it to the young Polonti with, “Go get you Arne and Goss, if they’re available, or the next two largest men you can find to search number sixty-one for the bad coins. They’re marked by a sun with rays on the head and oak leaves on the tail. Take only those coins; bring them here. If you find Adele, you may bring her as well.” No writ was needed for her, being banned on the Lands.

“Yes!” Jehan exulted, saluting as he took the paper.

“Yes, Captain.” Coish properly saluted and castigated his partner when they turned out. “Are you in love with her, stupid?”

“Yes!” Jehan said.

Hearing, Efran had to lean back to laugh again. “From eight on up, Polonti boys have one thing on their minds.” Then he frowned down at Joshua, muttering, “I’d better warn the nursery girls not to kiss him.”

Shortly thereafter, Folliott and Adele were sitting quietly at the table. She was peeling the sourdough roll to eat it in pieces while he had his eyes closed, appearing almost asleep. While keeping an eye on him, she looked around for the location of any genuine coins.

There was an authoritative knock on the front door. Adele inwardly tensed as Folliott opened his eyes, turning his head in faint curiosity. The knock sounded again, so she murmured, “Sounds like they mean it.”

Folliott rose from his chair, then. The moment he was out of the kitchen, Adele shot up to run quietly to the back door. She slipped out, closing it softly behind her, then ran over to the next street, parallel to this one.

Here, she stopped to watch an old man shuffle up a stone sidewalk to enter the house directly before her. Seeing a sign in front with extensive lettering, she approached it to read: “STAY OUT. Private residence of Reinagle, former Surchatain of Eurus. NO BEGGARS OR SALESMEN.”

“Reinagle,” she breathed in satisfaction. This was Folliott’s father, and—just as he claimed—former Surchatain of Eurus, having been deposed by the probably insane Webbe the Destructor.

Glancing around to make sure she was not observed, Adele ran up to his door to knock. As she did, she withdrew the small pouch of fake gold from her pocket. When the door was barely opened to reveal half a wrinkled face, she shook out her blonde hair and batted her large blue eyes. “Hello,” she said. “It looks like you dropped this pouch.” And she handed him the small bag of bad coins.

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Chapter 18

Scowling, Reinagle cracked the door to take the small bag Adele held out. Merely feeling what was inside it, he peered at her and she smiled back at him. “Eh, perhaps I did. You want to—come in for a bite or what, perhaps?”

“Oh, I’d love to. Thank you,” she said sweetly, and he opened the door to her.

At Follriott’s door, he was looking at the writ which Arne had presented him. “You’re directed to search for bad coinage?” Follriott asked in a half laugh.

“That’s correct, sir,” Arne said distrustfully.

“And it takes four of you?” Follriott asked, surveying the two large soldiers Arne and Goss, and the two small soldiers Jehan and Coish. The latter were striving to see around him to the interior of the house.

“We also have permission to appropriate the Lady Minka’s sister Adele,” Arne said gravely. His small eyes flicked over Follriott’s shoulder.

“Don’t know any Adele. The only one here is Livy, and I’m fairly sure she’s the one passing around the bad coinage,” Follriott said.

“Yes, sir. Livy is Adele. May we come in?” Arne asked.

“Ah. Certainly.” Follriott amiably opened the door to them.

The agile Polonti streaked inside to search every room in seconds. “She’s not here,” Coish said, affronted.

“Back door,” Jehan said, observing that it was minutely open. So both ran out to look.

Meanwhile, Follriott was casting about for the saddle pouches that Adele had brought in. “Ah. Here it is.” He lifted the conjoined bags from the floor of the messy bedroom. Goss looked at the dresses in the wardrobe while Arne attended Follriott’s opening one of the pouches.

“Yep, here they are.” Follriott handed the bags to Arne, who reached in to lift a handful of sunbursts.

“That’s them,” Arne confirmed. “Are there any more, sir?”

“I don’t think so. The rest of the bags are mine.” Follriott gestured to two large bags sitting carelessly in a corner.

Goss went over to look in those bags, stirring the coins a bit. He shook his head: “They’re all royals.”

Follriott nodded benignly while Arne draped the saddle bags over his shoulder. “Then we’ll take these, sir. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Delighted,” Follriott said, smiling sardonically.

As Arne went out front with the bags, Goss stepped out the back door to whistle to Jehan and Coish, who were looking around the neighborhood from Follriott’s overgrown yard. They turned when Goss shouted, “We got what we came for! Come on now.”

“Let us look for her!” Jehan cried while Coish affirmed, “She’s got to be nearby.”

“Come now!” Goss roared. They hastened to comply.

Meanwhile, the new accountant Ploense was disgruntled to have been interrupted in his work, instructed to go down to this Trina’s dress shop and tell her that she was unauthorized to use the title “lady” in the Abbey Lands. As he walked down the switchback, he considered her motivations and the objections of his superiors. With those in mind, he calculated the possible effectiveness of various operations until selecting the one he judged most likely to satisfy all parties so as to enable him to get back to work.

Arriving at the house underneath the large sign proclaiming “Designs by Trina and Challinor,” Ploense opened the door to look around dolefully. The front room was cluttered with frivolous nonessentials, and he yearned to return to his sane place.

“Hello! How may we help you at Trina’s and Challinor’s Designs? Do you have a special lady you’re looking to dress?” a young painted woman asked. She was regarding him with the same dismay that he felt.

Sadly, he said, “Administrator DeWitt has asked me to come speak to Trina, please.”

“I’ll see if Lady Trina is available,” she replied dubiously.

Shortly, Trina appeared in the showroom, demanding, “Yes? You’re from DeWitt? Is he going to reimburse my loss to those counterfeiters? Or does he need dresses for his wife? What’s her name?” Challinor and the receptionist both came out to watch.

“I am the Abbey accountant Ploense. The administrator has informed me that you are ineligible to use the title ‘lady,’” Ploense began.

“That’s ridiculous; I’m the richest person on the Lands,” Trina bristled.

“Yes, which is why the title ‘lady’ is inadequate. As no other ladies on the Lands can equal your situation, you should have a unique title. Therefore, I suggest ‘empress.’ You should heretofore be known as ‘Empress Trina.’”

Trina gaped at him. Behind her, Challinor breathed, “That’s marvelous. He’s absolutely right; you should be distinguished from everyone else.”

“I suppose that will do,” Trina said, thinking. “Will I need a—proclamation from Efran, or something?”

Ploense bowed to her. “Pardon, but Lord Efran is not empowered to bestow this designation on you; it is one which you must take upon yourself. We can only request that you begin using the new title immediately, Empress Trina.”

“This is granted you,” she said, lifting her chin.

“Thank you. Good day, ladies.” Ploense nodded to the other two, then turned out to return to the fortress, comforting himself with the calculations running through his head.

Arriving at the fortress, Ploense plodded up to the second-floor workroom. Upon his entrance, the three men looked up. “Lord Efran, Steward Estes, Administrator DeWitt. I have suggested to Trina the use of the title

‘empress’ as opposed to ‘lady,’ which she has accepted. With your permission, I request to return to work.”

After a moment of stricken silence, DeWitt said, “Granted.”

“Thank you, sir.” Ploense gravely turned out, and the three looked at each other.

Estes breathed, “There’s been no ‘empress’ or ‘emperor’ anywhere on the Southern Continent for centuries.”

DeWitt murmured, “As a title it’s irrelevant—a historical relic, and—silly.”

Efran fell back in his chair to cover his face and laugh. Joshua crawled over to have a look. Raising up with tears in his eyes, Efran gasped, “Now you have to give Ploense a raise.”

“He’s already earning quite a bit,” DeWitt said reluctantly.

“It’s either that or a title,” Efran said, wiping his eyes. Joshua pulled himself up to stand at Efran’s knees. Picking him up, Efran stood. “I have to go find Minka.” The other two nodded as he turned out, and he felt uneasy. *Yes, I need to find Minka.*

In Reinagle’s house, a servant (Reinagle’s only one) placed before Adele an expensive Croft’s meal of braised pork, vegetable soup, and mild ale. Despite having to give up three-quarters of his wealth to his former friend Bowring and his daughter Trina, Reinagle still had great reserves of his own. Watching her with sharp eyes, Reinagle muttered, “Don’t I remember seeing you at the notary’s?”

She shrugged. “I was in and out, like everyone else. My, this soup is wonderful. Thank you so much.” She puckered at him.

“What’s your name, again?” he asked.

“Pegany,” she replied. “I came down to the Lands with my husband weeks ago, but—he’s so abusive. I am running from him, and need a place to hide,” she said, turning her face in pain. But the pork and soup were so very good, she resumed eating. The only thing she objected to was the pungent smell of onion in this house.

“What’s his name?” Reinagle asked darkly.

“I won’t endanger your life by telling you that. But—if you want to help me, I need sharp shears and a bag of dark sage from Imelda’s Beauty Potions.”

“Eh?” Reinagle said, and his servant looked baffled.

So she looked up at the boy to say slowly, “Sharp shears. Dark sage. Imelda’s Beauty Potions.” He looked at Reinagle, who waved him off on the errand.

“You are so kind,” she puckered at Reinagle, who stirred in anticipation.

Carrying Joshua in his sling, Efran asked a sentry for Minka’s whereabouts, and was directed to the back grounds. He stepped out to see her on the bench under the walnut tree. Just by the way she was holding Nakam, Efran could see that she was hurting.

Minka, gazing sightlessly at the activity on the grounds, did not see Efran at the back door. She was reliving the recurring dream she'd been having over the past week. In this dream, she was stuck in an anteroom much like the one of Adele's prison as Standing Goddess—it was just a small, dim, barren room. People flowed by her, laughing and talking. She glimpsed Tera, and Kelsey, other women whose names she didn't know—even Cyr, though deaf, was laughing to someone as she skipped by.

Minka was not offended that they passed without regarding her; there was no malice in their behavior. They were just all swept up in a joy that did not include her. She was left standing alone and apart from this stream that she so wished to dip into.

She looked up, smiling, when Efran sat down beside her. He regarded her tentatively as he unwrapped the sling from around Joshua to set him on the grass at their feet. Nakam immediately wriggled down with him. She said, "Nakam is go glad to have someone to play with."

Efran watched Joshua bat at the small dog, who snapped playfully at his fingers. "As long as Joshua doesn't bite back, we're good," he observed. She chuckled. Glancing around as though searching, he said, "We didn't want Trina using the unearned title of 'Lady,' so we sent Ploense to talk to her. He anointed her 'Empress' instead."

She looked at him, wide-eyed. "Is that allowed?"

"We won't stop her," he shrugged. Then he looked up at Arne approaching.

The old soldier saluted. "Captain. Lady Minka. We recovered thirty-eight false coins from Follott's house; he said they're Adele's, and we believe him. Seems she'd been living there with him, but flew away right before we got there."

"Of course," Efran muttered. "Very good. You're dismissed."

Arne saluted again, but looked at Minka sadly. In fact, had he continued to stand there, they would have seen his tears. He knew she was in pain, and he knew why. All he could do was turn away.

Efran swallowed, pressing his lips together, searching. Minka looked up at the beautiful blue sky. "I'm so grateful for the balmy weather here. Late February in Eurus, I'd be huddled under blankets all day. The snow was like a freezing prison. I'm so grateful for the greenness and life here year-round."

Efran nodded, blinking. "It's cold everywhere but here." He raised moist eyes. "This is our safe place."

"Yes," she whispered, leaning into him, and he gathered her up.

After Reinagle's servant Kustka returned with the required items from Imelda's, Adele locked Reinagle out of his washroom (with the garderobe) to bring about her newest transformation. Reinagle hovered at the door for a while, but after an hour he got tired and went to take a nap.

When he awoke, he sat up in his bed to see a dark-haired youth rummaging through his closet. "Hey, now, there! What do you think you're doing?" Groping for the spectacles on his bedside table, he peered at the figure that turned toward him.

"I'm completing my disguise," Pegany's voice said.

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Chapter 19

Reinagle gaped at Adele—or as he knew her, Pegany—who now had short, dark hair and Reinagle’s own shirt and pants hanging loosely on her frame. “I need smaller boots,” she muttered. “Oh, well, the clunky shoes will have to do for now. I’ll just pad them with extra socks.”

He looked down. “Those are my best shoes!” he protested. If he objected to her wearing his shoes, he would have been outraged to see the belt, but the overlarge shirt covered it.

Sitting on the bed, she puckered at him. “Then it’s so good of you to lend them to me to save me from my husband. I won’t forget your kindness,” she whispered, leaning forward as the shirt gaped open.

He whimpered, grabbing at her. She deftly moved away, looking down. “Oh, I forgot. I’ve got to bind those.” Thinking further, she said, “My name is . . . Nick. If anyone asks, I’m your newest boy.” She got up so suddenly that Reinagle fell off the bed. As she swept out of the room, Reinagle’s old, abused boy Kustka watched darkly.

Three days later, on February 28th, Captain Barr and his team of forty returned from their clean-up at Featheringham. It was late afternoon, several hours before dinner, so Efran had them fed early in the dining hall. While the team ate, Commander Wendt, Commander Lyte, his Aide Gabriel and Second Cutch, as well as the other captains Neale, Towner, Rigdon, and Melchior joined Efran, Estes and DeWitt to hear their report.

After acknowledging his superiors and his fellow captains, an exhausted but satisfied Barr said, “Well, Captain, our search turned up a little over eight hundred royals—genuine royals. And the biggest problem we had was figuring out how to transport that much gold back to the Lands. But we managed. It should be all there.” Everyone looked as he nodded to crates, pouches, and bags of all kinds stacked in the corner of the dining hall.

“Excellent,” Efran exhaled, glancing over. “That will give our ladies a solid start for their new lives.” It amounted to about 28 royals per woman. The former slaves had voted to share equally whatever was recovered with the house servants as well.

Wendt said, “Efran, let me suggest you put that in the care of trustees for them, to pay it out as needed.”

DeWitt answered, “Yes, Commander, that is wise.”

Others murmured assent and Efran snorted, “If Empress Trina got hold of the girls with money, a few of her dresses would clean them out.” Several men squinted at the title, so Cutch leaned over to explain it in a few sentences, whereupon some men almost choked on their dinner.

Barr resumed, “We found many more of the false coins, and the molds they used to produce them. We destroyed the molds, but only threw the coins out in fields, the woods, or the creek. So our merchants need to continue to watch out for them. The butler and the cook are still there; they didn’t wish to come and we didn’t wish to take them. We didn’t search their quarters for gold and they didn’t attempt to interfere with us. We did dig up Nierling to see what we could determine about her death. No marks of any kind on the body; looks to us to be suffocation.” A few others nodded.

Barr went on: “Some of the ladies had asked for certain machinery and supplies, for which we took a wagon and extra horses. We brought back four looms, six spinning wheels, some sewing tools, and about fifty large spools of thread. All that is being housed in the stables until Racheal tells us where she wants it. We also brought back some tack and equipment that the driver Oskar requested; that’s been taken to Wade’s carriage service. Oh—Oskar confirmed that the donkey which appeared in the miller’s yard came from Featheringham.”

Efran mused, “So Adele rode him in through the wicket gate by the mill and left him there. What should we do? Lock the gate? Post a guard?”

Estes replied, “What’s the point? She’s already here.”

Several men laughed or groaned. Efran said tightly, “Thank you, Steward. Captain Barr, please proceed.”

Barr paused to think, looking to his scribe Numan. “What am I forgetting? Oh, Nierling’s jewelry and dresses. She had a large collection of both; we’ve already handed all that over to the Steward to lock away until you decide what to do with it. Beyond that, we saw nothing much of value. Before leaving, we decided we didn’t want to make it easy for someone to start up another slave factory, so we dismantled the gates, dragged them out to the meadow, and tossed the hardware into the woods. So if anyone does try to make use of the compound, it’ll be obvious right away.”

“Excellent,” Efran said. “Any questions?” He looked around, but no one had anything to add. He scanned the room a second time to note that Minka hadn’t come. That disturbed him, as many of her favorite men were here. But she didn’t care to hear from them? That was not like her. And that was troubling.

When Barr had begun his report, Minka, unknowing, had gone into the empty keep. Normally, she only came here when there was a crisis that required prayer. Knowing of no crisis now, she had just wandered in. She sat on a bench to look up at the ten-foot-tall crucifix. It was a painful sight that she couldn’t contemplate for long. She couldn’t endure the thought of anyone’s suffering, much less the Beloved of the Father.

So she just sat without thinking, without praying. Just . . . empty. She knew that Barr and his unit were returning today; were probably already here. She wanted to greet them, but she wanted to be happy to see them, and right now she just couldn’t . . . be happy.

She looked over at the stand holding the Holy Canon, which lay open. She didn’t go look in it because she didn’t think it would help her. No one was to blame for her constant sorrow, least of all Efran. He was trying to comfort her; she saw that he was looking so hard for something to say or do to ease the pain. What was he supposed to do when she couldn’t even tell him what she needed?—besides the obvious, which he already knew. And which wasn’t happening.

She closed her eyes, sighing. There weren’t even any tears, just that . . . emptiness. Because the treadmill of sorrow continued to run even here, she stood, intending to go back out. But she felt nudged over to the stand where the great old book sat. And she looked down to see the words,

“Sing, O barren one, you who never bore a child,
Burst into song, shout for joy,
you who were never in labor.
For more are the children of the desolate one
than of her who has a husband,’ says the Lord.” [Isa. 54:1]

Minka stared at these words for a long time. Why must she produce a child out of her own body in order to be happy and fulfilled? She and Efran had many children who needed love; what did it matter who gave birth to them?

Besides, Adele almost died in childbirth, and Minka wasn't as strong as she. What if Minka herself got pregnant only to die? And was she so stubborn and ungrateful as to ignore all the gifts God had given her in Efran, in Joshua, in the Abbey, in the orphans and the abundance they all enjoyed? Why was she allowing her happiness, and Efran's, to be held hostage to this one lack?

"That's absurd," she whispered. "I won't do that. I won't drag him down with an impossible demand. That's selfish and cruel. No, look at all that I've been given!" And with the enlightenment came the empowerment to be happy. For the first time in days, she *felt* happy.

She turned to run out of the keep, never noticing Nakham sitting on the bench in front. He watched her go, then murmured, "With some people, all it takes is a little nudge."

Barr and his unit were rising to leave when Minka stopped at the dining hall to look in. "You are here!" she cried. "So many of my favorites!"

They all turned to her, smiling. Efran saw her new peace at once, and sighed in relief. She looked around in joy at them. "My pets! Did you eat? Oh, Commander Wendt! Have you had tea?"

The men laughed, but she was going from man to man. "Oh, Telo, look at you! How strong you've gotten. Pleyel! Stites! Rigdon! Oh, you're Captain, now; that's why I never see you. Oh, Melchior! Smile for me."

He drew up to display his best Efranesque smile, which made the men roar in laughter. "Is that what I look like?" Efran asked, pained.

"Oh, Barr! You're here, too. I won't hug you," she said, lowering her face in grim determination.

Barr smiled. "I won't ask it, Lady Minka, but the men found something we'd like to give you, if the Captain permits."

Numerous faces looked to Efran, who said, "Of course."

"Then—" Barr turned, searching. "Who's got it?" The new man Lambdin stepped up to hand him an object wrapped in strips of cloth. Taking it, Barr began unwinding the strips from something about a foot in length, width and depth. "We found this, and the men agreed there was only one person who should have it."

Minka looked confused and alarmed. "Oh, please don't give me anything valuable. I'll drop it," she said.

The men smiled as Barr held out what looked like a miniature stall with figures inside. Efran leaned over to look at a crèche, beautifully detailed, containing three crowned wise men with gifts of gold and precious spices. There was a magnificent angel atop its roofline, as well as shepherds and farm animals clustered around the holy family of Mary, Joseph—and in the center, baby Jesus.

Minka was stricken speechless at the sight, so that Efran held his breath watching her. "Oh, Barr, it's so beautiful!" she cried, bursting into tears. "Oh, I needed this. I need it so much to remind me of what I've been given. Oh, look, Efran! Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?" She carefully handed it to him with tears streaming down her face.

“Every day,” he whispered, not loud enough for anyone else to hear. He placed the crèche on the table in front of him.

“Thank you all,” she said, twisting her hands as she turned back to the men. “Thank you for thinking of me. I want to hug you all.”

“Which won’t happen,” Barr said. “You’re dismissed to the barracks,” he instructed his unit.

“Captain.” They saluted and filed out, wiping their eyes. The officers nodded to Efran as they left, watching Minka run her fingers lightly over the detailed figures with colored robes and sheep with curling fleece.

Efran pulled her to his lap and she turned to press her face into his neck. He whispered, “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Yes, I’m all right. I’ll never let myself get like that again, I hope,” she murmured. Sitting up, she wiped her nose with her sleeve and sighed, “Where can we put it in our quarters?”

“We’ll find a place out of Joshua’s reach,” he said.

“Where is he?” she asked, scanning the floor.

“I left him in the—” Efran broke off, looking toward the door of the dining hall.

He, Minka, Estes and DeWitt looked at the 14-month-old (as of tomorrow) standing on bare feet, wraps sagging. He was working his way around the door, holding on to the frame. Following him was a soldier, Graeme, just watching.

“Good form,” Graeme observed, glancing up.

Minka stood with a gasp; Efran rose, conflicted. “Did you take him out?”

“No, Captain,” Graeme said with a salute. “One of the workers is putting a high latch on the nursery door, so the bugger just slipped out around him.”

Exhaling, Efran walked over to pick him up, and Joshua patted his shoulder, grinning. “What are we going to do with you?” the father muttered as the son chortled in victory. Efran turned back down the corridor to return him for a change of wraps, Minka following.

Adele, as “Nick,” was out on Main refining her disguise. Mimicking Tess’ fast stride, she had been using Reinagle’s royals at Croft’s, Firmin’s, and Shurtleff’s to buy meals. In doing so, she was careful not to make eye contact nor smile, speaking in a hoarse whisper only when she was required to talk. She accepted change for the royals, noting that the sellers all carefully checked the imprint. No one questioned nor challenged her.

Adele took her latest food order to eat on a bench near Croft’s Inn, where patrons often waited for carriages. She ate with her head down, not looking around to give anyone an opening to speak to her. The success of these last few days encouraged her, but now she had to figure out how to make it ongoing.

A pair of young Polonti in work clothes were standing on the opposite side of the street, just looking. One

spotted her and nudged the other. They watched her for a while, debating back and forth. But by the time they started across the street, she had finished her meal and left, melting into the crowd.

As Minka, Efran, and Joshua were going in to dinner shortly thereafter, the door guard handed her a letter. “From Justinian!” she exulted.

“His last letter didn’t tell us much,” Efran grumbled. “That was—what? Three weeks ago?”

“About,” she said, sitting to break the seal and open it. Efran raised his face to Dobell for their plates, then looked over to silently read the letter she held up.

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Chapter 20

Justinian’s letter began,

“To the light of my dreams:

“I wish I would make it a habit to remember how depressing Eurus is in the winter. We’re in the grip of such fierce cold and swirling snow that Spitta’s Carriages for Hire has simply shut down. So there is no going out and about. The abominable weather has created hardships even here at the divine Lady M’s: our supply of brandy is down to three, possibly four days, unless Hartshough can be compelled to divulge where he hid the emergency supply.

“The blasted weather also has the exalted Councilors sequestering in their own estates, so I have nothing to report from them. Our intrepid Surchatain Webbe the Destructor, however, has been out doing battle with the faerie trees and their residents, who seem to have offended him by decorating his elegant cloak and crownèd head with graeckle berries (which I understand to be clingy balls of graeckle droppings, bright purple and highly odorous. You don’t have the graeckles in your Lands, do you?—large, ugly birds with grating calls and astounding reproductive ability? Count yourselves blessèd.)

“At any rate, when Webbe faints from battling in the cold, the faeries are quick to cover him with warm cloaks that allow him to regain consciousness and stagger homeward in victory. They want to keep him alive as much as the rest of us do—we have seldom enjoyed such peace and quiet as we have these two months of his reign.

“So, with nothing further to report, I’m obliged to ask you not to be concerned about replying right away. If the messengers reach you at all, they will certainly not turn around to wade back into deep snow. And we won’t be going anywhere soon.

“In closing, I will note the curious red arc in the southern sky. We can see it only partially at night, but you must have a front-row seat. What is that?”

“In unfrozen faithfulness,
“Your own Justinian”

Refolding the letter, Minka looked at Efran. “Red arc?”

Efran considered that silently, then rose from the table. As Ella, next to him, looked up, he whispered, “I’ll be right back.” She nodded, then she and Quennel watched him leave the dining hall carrying Joshua, with Minka at his side.

He led out the back door to walk away from the lantern light and look up at the sky. And they saw along the southern horizon over the Sea a stretch of vertical yellow lines of light that gradually merged into red lines—glowing, wavering, reaching up to unfathomable heights in the night sky. The lines pulsed and undulated with a lifelike spontaneity, stretching far up into the firmament before sinking back down, only to rise again. Being reflected and distorted in the motion of the Sea made the spectacle that much more breathtaking.

Others had come out to watch. Efran turned his head to someone behind him. “What is this?” he whispered.

DeWitt, behind him, said, “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Send up to Ploense; ask him to come look. Ask the Librarian,” Efran requested.

“Yes,” DeWitt nodded, moving away.

More people came out to look. Conte, behind Efran, saluted and said, “I saw something like this in Eledith years ago, Captain. *Hulu kukui*—the dancing lights.”

Soames came up as well. “Captain, the Librarian says that the lights are caused by flares from the sun acting on the air, but they’re rarely seen this far south. He has a book on it, of course.”

Not too much later, Ploense came up to look. “It is a natural phenomenon, Lord Efran. Common in other places. The only question I would have is, what is the reason for it to appear here?”

“Yes, thank you,” Efran murmured to them all. They watched a while longer, but as nothing more happened, the observers began to drift back into the fortress. Efran was one of the last to leave. Finally going in with Minka, he returned his sleeping son to the nursery, noting the new latch higher up on the door. He stepped out onto the back grounds again when Minka let Nakam out for his last evacuation. Efran observed the dancing lights unchanged.

The following morning, March 1st, Efran went out back again to look at the lights. They were still visible, though much dimmer in the daylight. Finding this understandable, he returned to the workroom.

There, Estes told him and DeWitt, “We’ve gotten requests from some on the waiting list to build their own houses outside the plots, either on the meadowlands east or in the woods on the west. What do you think?”

Efran said, “Not in the woods; men hunt extensively out there. But—in the meadows?” He looked to DeWitt.

He said, “We can try it with a few families. Have them mark out the plots they want, and what they intend to do with it, then we’ll agree on a lease. Let’s say no more than a half acre to start with, until we get guidance from Ryal about using the land northeast of the Abbey Lands boundary.”

Efran nodded. “Send someone to talk to him today. I don’t see that we can charge a lease for acreage outside the

Lands, but neither can we guaranty their defense. Also, they can't claim more acreage than they can fence. And whatever land they want, they've got to fence it, first."

DeWitt put down his quill and stood. "I believe I'll go talk to Ryal myself about use of the land outside our boundaries."

"Good," Efran said. "Estes, you can start taking the families first on the waiting list to the east lands; work out terms."

"I'll do that; I need to ride. And we'll need more lumber from Venegas," Estes said, standing.

"Yes," Efran said, so Estes left.

Sitting in the workroom by himself was intolerable, so Efran decided to collect Minka and Joshua to ride down to Main with him. First, however, he stationed Stites and Pieta in the workroom to handle military and administrative questions, respectively, in the absence of the administrators.

Then Efran went to the nursery for his son, who was pounding the door in anger that he couldn't reach the new latch. After rescuing him, and the nursery workers who had to listen to him, Efran tucked him in the sling to wait for Soames to let the ladies out of Law class. When Soames saw him waiting, they were suddenly finished with class.

Minka was delighted to go, but wanted to take Nakam, so they went out back to find him helping the gardeners dig new beds. Minka rescued them from Nakam's help, and they went to the stables to get horses and a mail pouch for Minka's baby.

Finally, the four of them were walking their horses down the switchback, looking over busy shops, large construction projects, landscaped dining areas, and women walking around in colorful outfits of hitherto unknown shapes, neither dresses nor pants. Efran successfully choked back laughter, but couldn't help the occasional snort. Joshua picked up on it at once, leaning out of the sling to snort at everyone they passed, whether they deserved it or not.

At Minka's request, they stopped at Averno's new dining area. Since his business was a bakery, his meal offerings tended toward baked goods with soups or simple entrees, which suited Minka perfectly. Efran adapted with ease, and Averno himself waited on them, seating them in a prominent area visible to all Main Street.

At that time, Jehan and Coish were also down on Main. For the last four days, since almost catching Adele, they had come down to Main after work to look for her. But there was never enough time, so today they had requested the day off, forfeiting the pay, to track their quarry. And their hunting grounds were the food shops on Main.

The young soldiers had noticed the feminine-looking boy early on, but agreed they needed a closer look to determine if that were she. So they had gone up and down Main, running errands for merchants or doing other odd jobs for nothing, always keeping watch.

They noticed right away when the Captain and Lady Minka, with their baby and dog, sat at Averno's. Coish thought to go over and greet them, but Jehan pulled him back by the sleeve. The slender boy with short black hair and nice hips was coming out of Averno's toward the dining area when he/she saw the Captain and his wife seated twenty paces ahead, their backs to him/her.

Jehan and Coish watched with interest while he/she deliberated, then walked right past their table. Efran glanced up, startled, then looked at Minka, who nodded at her plate. "They recognize her!" Jehan said excitedly.

"Both of them," Coish confirmed.

But she was stuck at the sidewalk, blocked from crossing by several large carts ambling in both directions. The drivers saw no need to stop for anyone who disdained the THREE crosswalks traversing Main, so she was left uncomfortably standing a few feet in front of her sister and her husband (who was also the father of Adele's baby). The young Polonti, hot on the scent and less intimidated by large vehicles, sprang out into the road to weave around the carts.

When "Nick" next looked up, a smiling Jehan was standing eye to eye with her. "Hello, Adele." Behind them, Efran and Minka were watching.

She quickly turned away to be confronted by the smiling Coish. "Where are you going, Adele?"

She threw her hot soup into his face, the bowl sailing over his shoulder as he dodged. Efran stood, but Jehan had grabbed her arms to pull her elbows behind her back. "Don't leave, Adele," Jehan whispered in her ear.

She kicked him, struggling futilely against his hold. Nakam wriggled out of the mail pouch to leap into the fray, catching her dragging pants in his teeth. Behind the combatants, Efran whistled shrilly, and soldiers appeared from nowhere. Adele went limp in Jehan's grip. Nakam sat beside him, tag wagging. Efran nodded, "Give them a hand escorting her up to the workroom. I'll be there shortly."

"Captain," Krall said, saluting. He and Eymor fell in as the victorious hunters Jehan, Coish, and Nakam marched their prisoner up the switchback.

Efran offered Minka a hand; she accepted it to be placidly led to the horses. He studied her with glances, then mumbled, "Sorry about that."

She laughed lightly. "No harm done. Nakam just wanted to help the boys. I'm a little surprised Joshua didn't join in." They both looked at the baby watching the parade of soldiers with their prisoner ascend the switchback.

"Yes, well . . . I'm not sure what we'll do about Adele," he said, testing.

"I don't care," she said. He assessed her tone as he lifted her to the saddle.

Holding Joshua in his sling with one hand, Efran gripped the pommel to swing himself up to the saddle. He turned the horse's head, repeating, "You don't care."

"No, I'm done," she said placidly.

As they walked their horses side by side up the switchback, he lowered his head to study her face. "You're done," he repeated again, evaluating.

She looked up with a wry laugh. "I don't blame you for not believing me, but, today I am accepting there are things I can't change. One of them is Adele. I've done everything I know to help her, when what she needs is a change of heart, and no one can do that for her. You would move heaven and earth to make me happy; I'm not going to defeat you by letting her drag me down. Do what you think is best. I don't care."

He nodded slowly. "I'm glad to hear it. Do you want to come up to the workroom?"

"Only to get Nakam, to take him out back to see the children. That makes me happy," she said, and he believed her.

When they arrived at the fortress, the three of them went up to the workroom. DeWitt and Estes were not back yet, so Stites and Pieta were sitting at the workroom table. He looked amused and she discomfited by Adele slumped in Efran's chair with her jaw jutting in defiance. Her short, unevenly cut, unevenly dyed hair stood out in spikes. Behind her, Jehan and Coish were regaling their Polonti brethren Krall, Eymor and Stites with the tale of their tracking the woman of disguises. (Pieta still looked mildly aghast.)

All five of the soldiers saluted as Efran, Joshua and Minka entered. She knelt to scoop up Nakam, then turned with a fleeting smile on them, clearly on her way out. "Wait a moment, please," Efran requested. Handing Joshua to Melott standing as sentry, Efran said, "Take him down to the nursery, please."

"Captain. C'm'ere, bugger." Melott took him in arm, and Nakam wriggled out of Minka's arms to follow his playmate downstairs. Minka sighed, but sat.

"Have a seat, all," Efran directed. They did, and when he sat at the other end of the long table from Adele, the faerie tree stretched itself upward, thinning its trunk so that everyone could see around it.

Contemplating Adele, Efran flicked his eyes at Jehan to ask, "Do you know where she's staying?"

"No, Captain," Jehan said in disappointment.

"Reinagle's," Stites said.

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Chapter 21

Adele accidentally confirmed Stites' reply with a brief glare in his direction, and Efran asked him, "How do you know she's staying with Reinagle?"

"The belt buckle with the fancy 'R,'" Stites said, nodding to her waist. "One token he kept from his short reign. It's solid gold."

They all looked to Adele's midriff, where the large gold buckle was partly obscured by the baggy shirt hanging over it. "Some women can't resist the gold," Stites murmured.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Efran gazed up at the branches squishing themselves through the ceiling. *God of heaven*. . . . He shook his head, looking around. "I'm out of answers. I don't know what to do."

The others were silent. Sighing in exasperation, Efran looked at Minka, whose eyes were lowered to her empty hands in her lap. She suddenly looked up, startled. She was not looking at Efran, but just past his right shoulder. Faces shot up around the table; Efran turned to look beside him where a bright light split the air. Minka was trembling, having seen that before.

Everyone in the room watched the light brighten and part for the appearance of a tall woman with white hair. She wore a cuirass and a crown, and her form blazed with light. The onlookers watched dumbstruck as she turned toward Efran. Recognizing her, he stood in respect. “Aleph, Ruler of the Toledoth,” he whispered.

“Lord Efran,” she said in a mild voice that nonetheless sent shock waves through the air. “I failed in my answer to your request. I have come to remedy that.”

“What? No. How did you fail?” he asked in confusion.

“You requested that the woman Adele be made to appreciate someone who tried so hard to help her,” Aleph said. “I endeavored to answer that request, and failed.”

Efran’s jaw worked as he strained to recall the context of his comment. “When she was married to Loriot. Were you the one who—blinded her?”

She said, “Yes, but I misjudged its effect on her, so I reversed it when she was freed from the faerie king’s domain. I am still obligated to answer your request.”

Efran expelled a short laugh, pausing to wipe sweat from his temple. “That’s an impossible task.” Then his brows drew down. “By whom? Who are you obligated to?”

She said, “The Ruler of your Lands, your Victoris. Your race calls him *Ka Mea*”—Maker of All.

Efran absorbed this, then looked aside to Minka. “I’m open to suggestions,” he said dryly.

She whispered, “She just needs a whole new start.”

Everyone looked at Adele. She alone was not trembling as she regarded this incredibly powerful female. Adele said, “You’ve come to help me.”

“Yes, if you will allow it. I can do nothing without your permission,” Aleph said.

“What do you wish to do with me?” Adele asked, lifting her face.

“To give you a whole new start,” Aleph said, referencing Minka’s comment.

“How?” Adele said, a little defiantly. “Will you put me under Minka? Another husband? Will you make me blind again? Deaf? Crippled? Ugly?”

“None of those. I will make your life begin again in a new place,” Aleph said.

“In other words, you will kill me,” Adele said stonily.

“No, you will live,” Aleph said.

“In another body?” Adele asked suspiciously. “As a man? A horse? A toad?”

“No, in your own body,” Aleph said. Efran’s breathing went shallow as he apprehended what kind of new start she must be talking about.

“Far away from here?” Adele asked, looking up at the faerie tree.

Aleph paused. “That is yet to be seen, depending upon the choices you make.”

Adele was silent for a few moments, then whispered, “I accept.”

Aleph turned to Efran. “I have given Lord Efran to understand, as I require his consent to proceed.”

“What?” Adele asked quickly. “What do you understand, Efran?”

But he was looking at Aleph. “Why do you need my consent?”

“Yes, why?” Adele demanded.

“You are lord of the Abbey Lands, and she is the mother of your son, and the sister of your wife,” Aleph replied.

Tears filled his eyes. “What will happen to Joshua?”

“Nothing. He is his own person,” Aleph said.

“And Minka?” he asked. Aleph was silent, as that was not a question for her to answer.

Efran turned to his wife. She looked back at him, wide-eyed in ignorance. He said, “I’m counting on what you told me.”

She didn’t know what he was referring to. Nonetheless, she said, “I trust you. Do as you think best.”

He raised his eyes to Adele, who was staring at him malevolently. As she opened her mouth, he told Aleph, “I consent.”

She, in turn, focused on Adele. “Begin again with a new life, and a new name.”

Gossamer wisps of light emanated from Aleph to surround Adele, and the men around her instinctively stepped away. She was saying, “Why should I have a new name? I rather like my name. I think I’ll keep it, if you don’t mind.”

Watching, Minka gasped. Everyone else looked on tensely as Adele’s face changed slightly. She looked—
younger, somehow. And her hair grew long and blonde.

“My name means something. It’s part of *me*,” the younger Adele said. “It’s who I choose to be. Who are you to tell me I can’t go out tonight?” she shouted at Efran. “Who are you, anyway? You’re not my father.”

The young adolescent at the head of the table was now wearing a rich silk dress, bound at the waist with a ribbon. Minka remembered that dress, given to Adele on her thirteenth birthday. “Is that all I get?” the primped child demanded, looking around. “It’s my *special day*! . . . who invited all these ugly Polonti? Ugh! Get out of here!”

Then there was a toddler, maybe three or four, crawling on the table in tears. “No, no, I don’t want to go. I’m scared of those people; they’re mean. Please, please let me stay here with Auntie. Please don’t make me go!”

Minka collapsed on the table. “I know!” she cried.

The little girl looked at her. “You’re nice. Can I stay with you? I’m scared.” Minka put her head down to sob.

Then there was an infant, a newborn, wrapped in slightly bloodied cloths. With her umbilical cord freshly cut, she was crying and thrashing on the table among the thin wraps. Everyone stared at her without moving. And the rooftop bells began quietly tolling the Faerie Lullaby.

Ellor appeared at the door to look around in some confusion. When he saw Efran standing at the end of the table, he saluted. “Madgwick as summoned, Captain.”

They all looked as Madgwick, followed by her husband Delano, entered the room. She gasped at the sight of the thrashing newborn. “Oh, Lord Efran! Is that why you summoned me?”

“Yes,” he said blankly.

“Oh!” She went over to gather up the wraps around the baby girl. “Thank you, Lord Efran.” She was trembling as she stroked the tiny, bare head. The baby quieted in her arms. “We’ll take good care of her. How did you know?” Madgwick pleaded, crying.

Efran looked to his right, where Aleph had vanished. He turned back to ask weakly, “Know what?”

Delano put a hand on his wife’s shoulder as she pressed her cheek to the newborn’s head. He said, “Well, Lord Efran, it’s just been a secret sorrow of my wife’s for years—when Wystan was about three, we had a stillborn daughter, and then no more. The Lord God just never saw fit to answer her prayers, until now. But, thank you, Lord Efran; we’ll treasure her.”

“You’re welcome,” Efran said, tears standing in his eyes. Minka was watching in a teary daze. Efran wiped his face and said, “Carry on.”

“Thank you, sir,” Delano said. He turned his wife gently out the door as she clutched the little one to her chest. Ellor saluted, then left to show them out.

The room was left in stillness, then Jehan reached down to pick up Reinagle’s shirt, pants and belt from the chair seat to place them on the table. (They were later returned to Reinagle with the explanation that Adele had left. He was disappointed, but glad to get his buckle back. But where were his best shoes? Oops—still under the table.) Minka turned blindly and Efran lifted her, wrapping her in his arms.

“I will wait for her,” Jehan said softly. Coish wiped his face on his sleeve and gripped his partner’s shoulder.

Estes and DeWitt then appeared at the door. As they entered, DeWitt was saying, “Well, we got two families started. . . . What the devil happened here?” He was scowling at teary-eyed soldiers.

“Oh, the devil had nothing to do with it,” Efran sighed. “I’ll tell you. All of you, to your duties.”

Jehan, Coish, Eymor, Krall and Stites saluted and left. Pieta began to move away, but DeWitt told her, “I’ll need you for a moment. Are you all right?” he asked in concern.

Wiping her eyes, she said, “Yes, Administrator. I’m fine.”

DeWitt demanded, "How have you been abusing my assistant, Efran?"

Estes asked, "Why is Minka crying, Efran?"

"It's all my fault," Efran laughed. Before he could sit back down at the end of the table, the faerie tree, evidently tired of holding its trunk in, let down to resume its girth. So Efran went to his regular chair to sit Minka in his lap as usual.

He leaned back, exhaling, "We found Adele."

"Ohhh," Estes and DeWitt groaned.

"Wait," Efran said, and began, "You remember Aleph, and her battle with Nephilim to rule? And of course, all we've been through with Adele. Well. . . ."

Over the next several days, as DeWitt had intimated, families highest on the waiting list for plots were offered unmarked land up to a half acre per family on the eastern Lands clear to the east branch of the Passage (which was the eastern boundary of the Lands). They would pay a modest lease depending on the amount of land they required, and they could not claim unfenced land. (Yes, wire fencing was acceptable as long as it was made highly visible.) They were also required to allow easements for roads as they were needed. The Abbey Lands surveyor Keble was to be used exclusively to mark these plots.

For uninhabited meadowlands north of the Abbey Lands boundary and east of the Passage branch, the administrators deferred to Ryal, as the area notary was the only one who could be given jurisdiction over unclaimed land. So, after riding out to look over the land in question with the Abbey administrators, representatives of Venegas, and surveyors, Ryal first divided the open land into two parts: the Northwest Sector and the Northeast Sector. (Independent surveyors connected with the notary's office would be used for marking these sectors.)

The Northwest Sector encompassed the land between the northern Abbey Lands boundary on the south, the Passage branch on the east, the boundary of Westford on the north, and the Main Road on the west. (All agreed there would be no settling west of the Main Road because of the regular flooding of the Passage from the north. The Lands' northern walls were great protection against this.)

The Northeast Sector comprised the land bordered by the east branch of the Passage on the west, a line level with the northern Abbey Lands boundary on the south, five miles from the western border of Venegas on the east, and a line level with the southernmost tip of Willowring Lake on the north, at which point the oaks began to appear. While the area of Guillaume's logging estate at Eviron was undefined, as far as Ryal knew, he did not wish to encroach on it.

As these two sectors offered a great deal of land for settlement, Ryal did not put a limit on what a family could claim, nor did he require it be fenced, or charge for the use of the land. However, in order to get a deed to the land, the settlers had to pay for it to be surveyed, as well as a nominal fee for the survey's registration with the notary. Because it was the only way to settle disputes about land ownership, surveyors were required to check with the notary for previous surveys in an area before conducting their own. Easements for roads were also required here.

Also, Efran wished to make it clear that the Abbey could not be responsible for defense of homesteads in either

the Northeast or Northwest sectors, as they were outside the Lands. The Abbey army would come to the aid of anyone they could, but this was an enormous amount of land that was suddenly thrown open—perhaps four times the amount of land the Abbey owned.

When the availability of land was announced, DeWitt was flooded with applicants, Keble was besieged, and independent surveyors became hunted men.

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Chapter 22

Ryal had to hire temporary help to get all the surveys logged in his shop. With all the new homes being built, Venegas had to let their cloth-dyeing business lapse in order to get more raw lumber for their mill, despite many of the new residents building log homes. In fact, when Guillaume couldn't supply enough raw wood quickly, Venegas just sent men to harvest trees in the southern range of the vast oak forests. With the wealth from their mill and their cloth, they had stepped up their own building programs as well.

On March 7th, five days after the announcement of available land, Minka entered the workroom to see Efran and DeWitt at the large, east-facing window. Efran turned to invite her, "Come look."

So she went to the window to see teams of surveyors, carts, wagons, riders, and animals moving over the meadowlands like ants. "Oh, my," she breathed. "Can you believe it?"

"Hardly," he murmured, an arm around her. "It's been less than two years since we first came here." To DeWitt, he said, "It's a good thing you and Estes set aside land for pens and fields first. But what happens when we need more?"

"Nothing," Estes said from the worktable. "What do you think the settlers are going to do with all that land? We'll pay them for their grain and meat and let our soldiers do their jobs."

When Efran, in the bright light of the window, looked over, Minka saw for the first time strands of gray in his glossy black hair. In a few days he would turn—what? Twenty-nine. Yes, he had told her that upon his arrival in Eledith as a child, Sister Therese had sent to his village to find out when he was born: March 10, 8126. And here he was already turning gray from the stress of defending the burgeoning Lands.

DeWitt was speaking, but she couldn't take her eyes off her husband. It made her love him that much more, seeing all over again how he laid himself down for the place he loved. Listening to DeWitt, he glanced down at her, and forgot everything else to see the adoration in her eyes. He never got tired of it.

At dinner, Toby was regaling the whole table with conversations the children had with the hydra Jonguitud. "We asked him where he was from, and he said, 'Bottom of mountain.' Hassie wanted to know where his family was, and he said, 'Up in air.' So I asked, 'Why can't you fly, then?' And he said, 'Three heads don't fly, only two.' Almund asked him if any of them had only one head, and he said, 'Just dumb girls.' Some think he's making up answers and doesn't know where he came from or anything about his family."

Minka said, "All we know about most things is what we're told, isn't it?" And Efran thought about that.

That evening, Efran went out back to look over the Sea—yes, there they were again: the yellow-red lights shooting up into the sky. Some nights they were there; some nights obscured by clouds. But here they were again.

Estes came up beside him to look. “We got a report of another woman going to Coghill—the doctor down on the Lands—for burns from jewelry, particularly silver. Coghill is warning residents to leave off their jewelry until we figure out what’s causing it.”

Efran squinted at him, then said, “That started about the same time as the lights, didn’t it?”

Estes paused to think. “I don’t really know; it may have. I’ll send down to ask Coghill tomorrow.”

“Good,” Efran murmured, looking back at the lights. “I’m glad Minka doesn’t wear it much.”

As they turned back inside, he asked Estes, “How is Kelsey?”

“Sick as ever. That’s how we knew she was pregnant again,” Estes said wryly, and Efran groan-laughed.

The next morning, March 8th, Efran found Minka to casually ask, “Would you like to ride down around the Lands?”

“Yes,” she said lightly. “Where’s Joshua?”

“I’ll go get him,” he said, turning.

“Will it be all right if I take Nakam?” she asked dubiously.

He looked back, mystified. “Why would it not be?”

“No reason,” she said.

Shortly, they met in the front courtyard with their respective babies. “We need a bodyguard,” he reminded her.

“Ask for Jehan and Coish, if you don’t mind,” she said.

“I don’t,” he said, turning to make the request of the gate sentry.

Shortly, the four of them were riding down the switchback at a walk, with Joshua in his sling and Nakam in his mail pouch. She looked over to the east to say, “Oh, my, they’re making wonderful progress on the new switchback.”

Her companions looked over to see about forty men digging on it this morning. Efran said, “Good. We’re going to need it with all the new families moving in. The minute it’s done, DeWitt is going to pave it. Then he’s swearing he’ll close this one to pave it as well, so we’ll all stop asking him when he’s going to pave the switchback.”

As they turned off the switchback under the twittering faerie trees, Efran paused. Minka stopped, and their bodyguard had to pull their horses to the side to allow others entrance to the switchback.

Minka watched Efran adjust Joshua's sling, then he looked at her in deep hesitation. "Would you . . . like . . . to—"

"I'd like to see how Madgwick is doing," she said.

He slowly nodded, swallowing. "Then we'll do that."

The four of them rode silently to Delano's brewery, where Efran looked around. "I don't know where they're living."

Jehan dismounted. "I'll check, Captain." Efran nodded as Jehan ran into the front entrance of the brewery.

Momentarily, he came back out. "They're here, Captain, with—the baby."

Efran nodded again. He dismounted with Joshua, then went over to help Minka down with Nakam. "You stay put there," she said threateningly, securing the pouch closed over all but his head.

They went in to be met by Delano. "Lord Efran and Lady Minka! Thank you for dropping by."

Efran replied, "Good to see you, Delano. We'd like to see how Madgwick is doing with her new—new—"

"Yes, come on back, all of you," Delano said happily, waving them past the sales counter, where Wystan was handing over bottles to customers. Delano told Efran, "When it was only the three of us, we didn't see the need for a house, but now with little Ruth, we may convert our east Lands office to a—"

"Ruth? You named her Ruth?" Minka asked, her eyes watering.

"Yes, it's an old name, not very popular now, but, Madgwick felt that a name helps bestow character, and, anyway, Mother gets what she wants," Delano laughed.

He led them to a back room, where a woman stood from a rocking chair with something in her arms. Madgwick rose from another chair to greet them. "Lord Efran, Lady Minka, thank you for coming! And these young men—what are your names?"

Surprised, Coish said, "I'm Coish and this is Jehan, thank you, Lady."

"Oh, just Madgwick," she said. "This is my wet nurse, Tarta. And here's the baby, Ruth. Sometimes we call her Ruthie. Would you like to hold her?"

Efran, with Joshua, backed off in alarm, but Minka said, "I'd love to, if you don't mind." She gave Coish the pouch with Nakam, then turned for the baby.

"Here, dear." Madgwick put her in Minka's arms, and the boys crowded around her to look.

Ruthie looked healthy, with deep blue, unfocused eyes and light fuzz on her head. "She's lovely," Minka said softly. "I hope she's not keeping you up all night."

"Well, that's to be expected, with newborns. But once she's fed, she goes right back to sleep," Madgwick said easily. "I still can't believe receiving such a gift at my age. I worry about the mother, though. How is she?"

Minka shot a rapid glance at Efran. As he was mute, she said, “Well, I assume she’s fine. We don’t know, because the baby was just dropped off with us. And, we felt there’d be no one better than you and Delano to take her. I’m so glad it worked out the way it did.”

She started to hand the baby back, but Jehan blurted, “May I hold her?”

Minka looked at Madgwick cautiously, but she said, “Of course you may.”

So Minka carefully put the newborn in his arms. He held her gently, bending his face to her. And baby Ruth lifted a flailing hand to his lips. Madgwick said, “Well, look at that! She likes you.”

Jehan inhaled, smiling, then transferred the baby to her mother’s arms. “Thank you,” he said.

“You may come back any time to see her, if you like,” Madgwick told him.

Coish looked at him quickly as Jehan pressed his lips together and said, “I might do that. Thank you, ma’am.”

Minka said, “I’m so glad you’re all doing well. We definitely gave her to the right family. Please let us know if you need anything.”

Madgwick smiled in contentment, nodding, and Minka turned out with Efran and Joshua, followed by their bodyguard. Outside, they stood numbly by their horses for a moment, then Minka said, “Firmin’s isn’t busy. Let’s go sit down.”

The boys nodded; Efran murmured, “Yes,” and they led their horses the short distance to Firmin’s.

Minka, Efran, and Joshua sat at a table while the boys sat at another behind them, as was standard practice for bodyguards. Minka turned to them to say quietly, “Give me Nakam. You two go get us all pie; give me tea; you and Efran ales, and then sit here with us.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Coish said. He handed her the pouch with Nakam almost asleep, then she gave him a few royals from her pocket. The boys went off as instructed.

Shortly, they returned, Coish bearing a tray with their plates of pie and Jehan with the ales and tea. Minka distributed the drinks, plates, napkins and utensils around four places. The bodyguard sat tentatively, and they all looked at Efran. He had spoken but one word since coming out of Delano’s.

Leaning toward the table to set Joshua on his leg, he picked up his fork. He shook his head and said, “After her—blinding, and then being transformed into faerie, and then being closed in the tree, I thought—that each change was permanent. But then, she was back! She kept coming back. But this . . . looks permanent. Doesn’t it?”

The boys nodded emphatically; Minka said, “Yes. The only way forward for her is to grow up.”

Efran fed Joshua a bite of cherry pie, and the child leaned down for more. “Do you think she’ll remember any of her life before?”

Minka took a careful sip of hot tea. “I don’t see how, unless it’s bits and pieces.”

Efran sat back. “I want to be relieved, but I don’t know if I can be until I see that this is really for good.”

“It is for good,” Minka said, then smiled at Jehan. “Are you going to go see her?”

He said thoughtfully, “If I can, without it looking bad. I don’t know how to do it without them thinking it’s strange.”

Efran looked at him in sympathy. “I’ll bring you when I come down now and then. I’ll tell them Minka wants reports on her.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Jehan smiled.

“Me, too,” Coish said. “We’re partners.”

“Yes. You, too,” Efran said, then looked down to see that Joshua had eaten the rest of his pie without help, and was now chasing down crumbs on his front.

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Chapter 23

At Minka’s sudden intake of breath, Efran, Coish and Jehan looked toward Main where a highly decorated cart drawn by a pair of white horses slowly passed. Standing in the cart, supported by a rail, was Trina, head lifted high. She was thoroughly made up and coiffed, wearing an admirably constructed gown of many panels with much elaborate trim—and a crown.

The sides of the cart were emblazoned with large signs that read, “Designs by EMPRESS TRINA and Challinor.”

Upon his first glimpse of this display, Efran had to spit his mouthful of ale into the nearest bushes. Minka and the boys could only gaze in wonder. Then Coish said, “‘Empress.’ What is that? Captain, is she claiming to rule the Lands?”

“Ah, no,” Efran said, wiping his mouth. Then he had to explain the accountant’s successful effort to get her to stop using the unearned title of “Lady.”

At that time another soldier, Mathurin, ran up to salute. “Captain, three girls and one of the guards from Featheringham wish to return to Crescent Hollow. They want a wagon and horses.”

“Which guard?” Efran asked.

“Freling, Captain; he was one of the gate guards,” Mathurin said.

“What of the other two guards? What are they doing?” Efran asked.

“I will have to check, Captain,” Mathurin said, looking tentatively toward the switchback.

Efran said, “All right. Freling and the girls may return with a wagon and the horses taken from Featheringham.

They must pay for anything from the Lands they want to take. And see what the other two guards are doing.”

“Yes, Captain.” Mathurin ran first to the wall gates to relay the message, then he was given a horse to ride up the switchback.

Minka muttered, “Well, that’s ungrateful.”

Efran shrugged. “They may have family in Crescent Hollow.”

“Who never bothered to check on them a few miles away?” she huffed. Efran shook his head, unoffended. They had so many people pouring into the Lands, he didn’t care to make anyone stay who wanted to leave. (During the whole time they were sitting, Nakam was struggling to either get down and run around or have a bite from the plates on the table.)

As they continued to sit and watch the activity on Main, Minka sent Coish back for more pie—apple, this time. Meanwhile, Efran was taking in the construction of the new, larger chapel and DePew’s new inn, as well as progress on the new switchback (all satisfactory). The addition of boarding rooms to Firmin’s was complete but for the interior work, so there was no noise nor obstruction of traffic from that, and Efran approved.

The butcher Lowry was just about the only food vendor on Main who hadn’t added a dining area, but that was understandable, as he could barely keep up with the demand from the other vendors—not to mention the Fortress. Looking farther to the east, Efran saw other construction projects that he couldn’t identify. Some buildings were going up without wood framing at all, being made solely of bricks. How was that done? He didn’t understand the process. But why should he?

Gazing around, Efran still could hardly believe the progress of less than two years since this was all meadowlands ruled by the wolf clans. All these people feeding families, producing goods, raising children—and taking in the homeless. He worried, *How can I protect them all?* And he thought again of the ominous yellow-red lights on the southern horizon. *What is that?*

They looked over as Mathurin came riding back down the switchback. Reining up, he saluted. “Captain, the guard Leneghan was accepted into Captain Rigdon’s unit.”

The boys looked quickly at Efran as he said, “Really?”

“Yes, sir; the Captain tested him personally. He had been part of an elite fighting unit in Crescent Hollow. He came down to serve Lady Nierling because of one of the girls who was apprenticed to her. They’re married now,” Mathurin reported.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Efran said. “And the other guard?”

Mathurin said, “Yes, Captain. Ah, Dolivo is the other. He decided to try tutoring the Polonti to read and write as you suggested, and is doing well at it. He—makes jokes and puts on airs like a snooty schoolteacher, and, has got a waiting list. The men are learning well under him.”

Efran smiled. “Excellent. I’ll have to come watch.”

“Yes, sir; I hear that he’s very funny and he really rips into the men who don’t study. They love it,” Mathurin affirmed.

“Being humiliated in front of everyone?” Minka asked in horror.

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Mathurin said, shrugging.

Efran explained, “Polonti learn only from someone who can beat us up. We respect that.” Jehan and Coish nodded firmly.

She looked pained, then observed, “You don’t treat Joshua like that. You’re kind and patient with him.”

The others looked at him, smiling. Caught out, Efran paused, then said, “He’s . . . got Southern blood as well, which means I have to adjust my methods.” He looked at Joshua as though expecting input, but Joshua wasn’t interested in anything but pie right now.

Lowering her chin at her husband, she persevered, “You don’t treat your men like that, either.” (Whether the young Polonti soldiers were “boys” or “men” is debatable. They had the responsibilities of men but the stature and mindset of boys. So Minka considered them men while Efran saw them as boys.)

The Polonti Mathurin, Jehan, and Coish watched the Captain with tightly closed lips, as her statement was incontrovertible. Efran took a drink of ale to buy time, then said, “You won’t let me.”

The witnesses mostly refrained from smiling. Efran glanced up at Mathurin peevishly. “You’re dismissed.”

“Captain.” He saluted, then amended, “Oh! Another message. Racheal asked that the ladies Minka and Ella wear their dresses to the shop’s opening in three days. Lady Ella says she’s willing if Lady Minka is. And Racheal asked the Lady Minka to send the dress down for alterations, and to come by for a fitting.”

Neither pleading nor reluctant, Minka looked to Efran. He toyed with the empty ale bottle, thinking. Then he looked to her. “Do you want to?”

“Yes, if you come with me,” she said.

“You’ll need a bodyguard,” he said.

“That I pick,” she said.

Looking back to Mathurin, Efran said, “Find a maid to get the dress out of our quarters and send it on down to their new shop. Where is it?”

“Ah, number sixty-two in the east plots, Captain. Best reached going down Main and turning right on the third street from the wall. Sixty-two is past the new northbound road,” Mathurin said. It was right next to Follriott’s house, in fact.

“All right. When we see the dress come down, we’ll go over there,” Efran said. Mathurin saluted, bounding off.

They waited, idly observing traffic, until Mathurin rode back down the switchback and passed them waving a bundle wrapped in paper. So they left Firmin’s to ride down Main to the side street on which the new shop was located in the east Lands.

Arriving at the front, they saw a blank building that had once been a feed store. That sign had been removed, but nothing else had been put up in its place. So when Mathurin emerged, Efran sent him to the lower barracks for

men to help the former slaves get their shop ready to open in three days.

When Minka went in for her fitting, she left Nakam in his pouch with Efran outside, where he and the boys would wait for her. Efran then let the wiggling dog down, who shot off around the nearest corner. The dog's babysitter was unperturbed; Nakam would come back when Minka called him.

While the men waited, Efran received some cool stares from early customers and suppliers, as he was wearing his usual work clothes. Jehan and Coish were more favorably regarded in uniform, especially when they acted as doormen for those coming and going. After one lady exited whose packages Jehan carried to her carriage, he came back marveling, "I got a tip! A silver piece!"

"That's not much," Coish observed.

"More than you've gotten," Jehan returned.

"I haven't had any carriages," Coish complained.

"You're not quick enough," Jehan sniffed.

Efran sighed at the undisciplined banter, but could hardly correct them after being accused of kindness. So he looked down at Joshua squirming in his dirty wraps.

Fortunately, Minka made it out to retrieve Nakam without difficulty so that they could get back to the fortress. There, Efran handed over his son at the nursery and changed his own shirt.

That evening, Efran was again standing at the back fence, looking at the horizon. The red glow did not appear to be advancing, but it was hard to tell. Between the currents of the Sea and the undulation of the lines, it seemed poised to leap forward at any moment.

Feeling someone beside him, Efran turned to Nakham. "What is that sitting on the Sea at the horizon?" Efran whispered.

"Light," Nakham said. "Just light."

Efran digested that. "Is it a threat?"

"Not to you," Nakham said. "But your ladies should desist wearing silver till it passes, which it will in a few days."

Efran turned to regard the wavy lights again. "So the two are connected?"

"They're caused by the same thing, but it's not anything that will be a threat for another seven hundred years or so," Nakham said.

Efran peered at him. "Why . . . is that?"

"You don't have any devices that would be affected by it," Nakham said complacently.

Efran's face registered incomprehension, then he said slowly, "So . . . it's not a monster that's going to come roaring up to expose my sins?"

Nakham pursed his lips. “No.”

Looking over the water, Efran said, “And . . . it’s not going to come blasting holes in the hill underneath us?”

Nakham shook his head lightly. “No.”

In fearful hope, Efran asked slowly, “Do I need to go search the fortress for something that will cause it to collapse in a few days if I don’t find it?”

Nakham hesitated on this, which caused Efran’s heart to constrict. The guardian said, “The Destroyer’s getting restless, but he’s not in the fortress, and doesn’t appear to have a problem with anything going on here.”

Efran breathed out in relief. “You scared me for a minute there.”

“Just trying to avoid future misunderstandings,” Nakham said.

Efran suddenly turned to scan the back of the fortress. “Where’s Minka?”

“Looking for you,” Nakham said.

By the light of the lantern at the back door, Efran saw her step out to look around anxiously. Exhaling, he began trotting toward her. Right away, he saw her turn toward him. She said, “There you are!”

Reaching the steps, he lifted her off the top step to hold her against his chest. “So if I disappear, you’ll come look for me for a change?” he asked, grinning.

“Tonight, yes. I’ve got Routh trapped with the shears; he’s going to cut your hair before you get Detler to chop it down to spikes,” she said resentfully.

Tossing the hair out of his eyes, he said, “You don’t trust me to let it grow?”

She wriggled out of his hold to regain her footing on the top step and take his fingers. “No. I don’t.” So he let himself be led inside.

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Chapter 24

Three days later, March 11th, it was time for Minka and Ella to wear the slave-made dresses to promote the free women’s shop. After much discussion among the twenty women who were contributors to the shop, and input from DeWitt, they settled on the name The Lands Clothing Shop, as they wanted to produce men’s and children’s clothing as well.

On the appointed morning, Minka and Ella’s honor guard assembled in the front courtyard wearing their red Abbey uniforms. Since Efran wanted to be associated with his men, he also wore red, rather than his undyed linen dress uniform. He and Quennel, Ella’s husband, would ride beside the ladies, while four of the honor guard would precede them and the rest follow.

Arriving to check over the honor guard, Efran was momentarily surprised by the number of men. That's when he discovered that Minka, determined to honor the most men, had expanded the number from the usual four, or even eight, to twenty. Moreover, Minka wished their names to be recorded as having promoted the democracy of the Lands, in that even former slaves could support themselves here with their own business.

Therefore, let the record show that besides Lord Efran and Quennel (who needed some kind of title as Lady Ella's husband but refused the designation of Lord), the following men, some former slaves themselves, served as bodyguard for this function: Captain Barr, Captain Rigdon, Captain Melchior, Lorient, Martyn, Tourse, Jehan, Coish, Cyneheard, Pleyel, Fennig, Telo, Doane, Chilcott, Allyn, Connor, Soames, Koschat, Stites, Enon, Doudney, Shane, Arne, and Tiras.

Quibblers who might have noticed that there were more than twenty, had they dared mention it, would have been brushed off by Lady Minka, who kept remembering favorites that she wanted to include. In fact, she had also requested Commander Wendt and Commander Lyte, but they had been excused by Efran on the basis that *some* leadership was required to remain on duty during the procession in case of an invasion (unlikely, but, one never knew).

Efran carried Joshua in his sling, as usual, only with triple wraps. The baby was intensely excited by the number of men gathered here, especially as all made a point to greet him. The liveried horses were brought out, and then the ladies appeared in their beautiful dresses.

The white dresses, of a simple, flowing style richly adorned with embroidery, were distinctive and flattering on their wearers. Minka was deliriously happy to be wearing hers surrounded by people she loved, many of whom had put their lives on the line for her, for Efran, or for the Abbey. She greeted them all individually, then Efran finally caught her to lift her to her horse. With the wide skirts spread across the horse's rump and flanks, the embroidery design was on full display. (Minka was wearing no makeup nor pomade, though she had wet her hair to smooth it back in a clip. Most of it.)

To proceed down the switchback, Efran directed Lorient and the three Captains to lead as vanguard. Following them were Quennel, Ella, Minka and Efran in a line while the remaining twenty followed in five rows of four. The symmetrical beauty of the procession was eye-catching all its own, but the faerie trees flittered their green and copper-colored leaves in excitement, and the fortress rooftop bells rang in accompaniment.

Coming off the switchback, the rearguard had to halt abruptly as the vanguard stopped at the first crosswalk for a matron who asserted her right to cross at this moment. When she had safely stepped on to the opposite sidewalk, the procession continued. People came out of shops to watch and wave; Minka responded to all with a glowing smile and a wave in return.

This brought crowds to the sidewalks, wondering what the occasion was. When not waving, Minka laughed and chatted to Ella beside her, who was not quite so brave as to wave at strangers. Efran smiled vaguely while scanning the crowds, as every soldier behind him was doing.

The vanguard had to stop at the second crosswalk for pedestrians as well. Carts coming down the street pulled over to the right or left to allow the procession to proceed down the middle of the road. At that point, they encountered their first real obstacle: Trina in her cart. As her driver turned from a side street onto Main, heading down the middle of the street toward the procession, numerous heads swiveled back and forth, hoping to see a collision or at least a confrontation as to right of way.

But Efran issued a subdued whistle, gesturing over his shoulder. And without looking or hesitating, the lines of

the vanguard, the principals, and the rearguard split in two. Two men on each line pulled to the left while two pulled to the right, freeing up the center of the street. Quennel gestured discreetly to Ella; Efran clucked at Minka's horse, and so the principals diverged seamlessly, even though the women were not practiced in parade protocol. In some spots, the rearguard had to maneuver around vehicles along the side of the street as well as the oncoming cart. It was so smooth, like flowing water, that some spectators applauded.

Meanwhile, Trina was gratified to be driven straight through the smiling ranks toward the switchback. And when her cart had passed the vanguard, they flowed back together in the center, as did each line following. It was again fluid and graceful, pleasing to watch.

Unfortunately, when Trina's cart reached the switchback, she ordered him to turn around and proceed north again. This brought her to the end flanks of the rearguard, who did not move aside nor even look back. So her display became something of an appendix to the Fortress ranks.

At the third street from the wall, the vanguard turned smoothly to the right by Loriot holding his horse still while each to the left rode a little bit faster than the man on his right, causing the line to flow around the corner. This was well done, so pedestrians followed to see more. The principal line turned in the same manner, Efran holding his horse still while Quennel, on the other end, practically loped around the corner.

They continued the procession to the east Lands past the new northbound road, and a number of pedestrians followed to see where they were going.

Partway up the block, Efran glanced back to whistle a halt in front of The Lands Clothing Shop, now identified by signage. He dismounted to assist Minka down in her dress, as Quennel helped Ella. Then Racheal, Sosie, Meena and Piniello, the primary drivers of the enterprise, came out to welcome the ladies and their husbands inside. Pretty Meena smiled at the crowd: "Anyone who would like to see our clothes, feel free to come in as well." There followed a rush into the shop.

The vanguard took their posts outside the doors. They let in all the women who desired entrance, as well as husbandly or fatherly looking men. Younger or disreputable-looking men were stopped with, "It's getting too crowded inside; wait a moment, please." This was especially effective uttered by large, blank-faced Loriot or Melchior.

So there were numerous purchases made at the new shop on their opening day. Luetgen was at work by then, and Efran watched him carry out packages for ladies and perform other trivial chores. But he had a wary, guarded expression, his eyes flitting constantly, and Efran knew he wouldn't last long in the Lands.

After about a half hour, the principals came out again, with the women smiling and waving. Their husbands assisted them up to their saddles as before, then onlookers got to watch the procession reverse itself. The vanguard led out past the rearguard in a single line to spread across the road as they had been. The principals also followed in single file. When their line had reformed, the members of the rearguard merely turned in place, so that those who had been last in the block were now first. And they proceeded back up the side street, crossing the new northbound road and turning back onto Main in that pleasing curve. From there they walked south to the switchback.

Efran looked past the crowds to the foot of the northwestern hillside, where Jonguitud had reformed his three kings skin to talk to the children. They flocked around him with their bodyguard, then every night at dinner, Toby had something funny to tell them of what Jonguitud had said. Efran mulled over how easily the weird snobbles eater talked to the children, and how readily they understood him.

As the procession continued south, Efran looked to the sidewalk where Delano and Madgwick had come out of the brewery to wave to them. Efran raised a hand in response, seeing that her arms were full of a little one. Although he watched warily for a while, the infant did not turn her head to stare him down malevolently. No, she was just a baby, with a baby's open mind and heart to what she would learn in her formative years.

And he remembered, "*You must be born again*"—another of Therese's Scriptures. He didn't understand it as a child, and he was not sure he understood it now. What did it mean?

Pondering this, Efran attended Minka and Ella up to the fortress, where he changed out of his uniform to join the men digging on the new switchback.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on March 11th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Featheringham Ladies*
(Book 17)

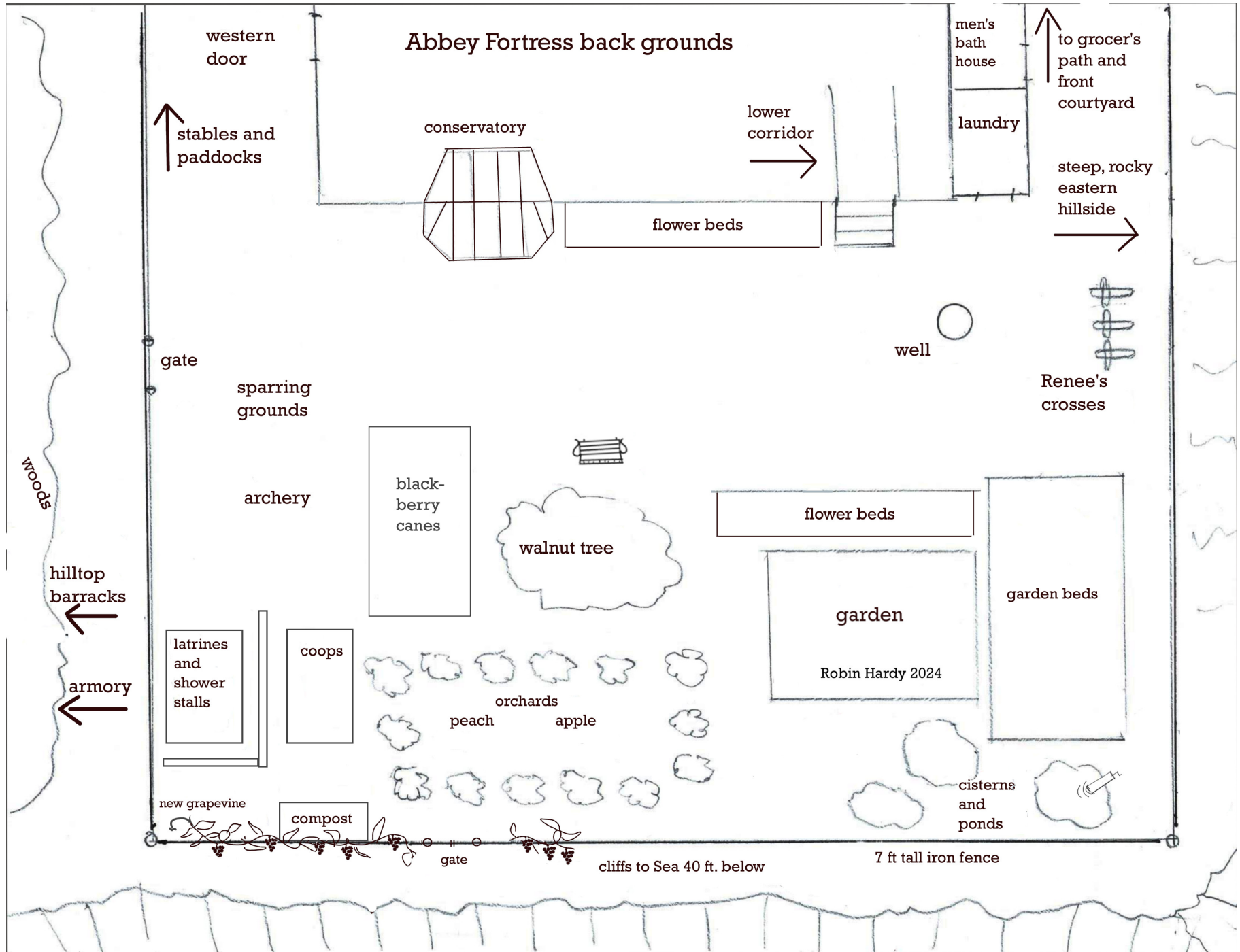
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Adele—ah DELL	<i>hanan</i> —HAN an (task)
Alberon—AL ber on	Hartshough—HART soh
Allyr—AL er	<i>hoopai</i> —HOO pay (discipline)
Ares—AIR eez	<i>hulu kukui</i> —HOO loo koo KOO ee (dancing lights)
Arne—arn	Imelda—eh MEL dah
Auber—aw BER	Imola—eh MOH lah
Averne—ah VURN	Jasque—JAS kee
Bowring—BOWE ring	Jehan—JAY han
Challinor—CHAL en or	Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
Chataine—sha TANE	Justinian—jus TIN ee un
Conte—cahnt	Ka Mea—kah MAY ah (Maker of All, God)
<i>coq au vin</i> —kok oh vahn (chicken cooked in wine)	<i>Kapena</i> —kah PEE nah (Captain)
Cordelia—cor DEEL yah	<i>kauoha</i> —kah YOU ah (order)
crèche—kresh	Keble—KEE bull
Cyneheard—SIGN herd	Kelsey—KELL see
Cyr—sear	<i>koan</i> —KOH an (soldier)
décolletage—day kow leh TAAZH	Koschat—KOS chat
Delano—deh LAN oh	Leneghan—LEN eh gan
Dierksheide—DEARK shide (long <i>i</i>)	Leviathan—leh VIE ah thun
Doane—rhymes with <i>own</i>	liaison—lee AY zahn
Dobell—DOH bull	Livy—LI vee (<i>i</i> as in <i>lift</i>)
Dolivo—doh LEEV oh	Lowry—LAHW ree
<i>dute</i> —doot (duty)	Luetngen—LIHT gehn
Efran—EFF run	Lystra—LIS tra
Eledith—ELL eh dith	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Elvey—ELL vee	Meineke—MINE eh kee
Ennemonde—EN eh mund	Melchior—MEL key or
Enon—EE nun	Melott—meh LOT
Erastus—eh RAS tis	Minka—MINK ah
Estes—ESS tis	Nephilim—neh FILL em
Eurus—YOUR us	Nesse—ness
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	Nierling—NEAR ling
Eustace—YOUS tis	<i>pahika</i> —pah HE kah (sword)
Eviron—ee VIRE un	Pegany—PEHG an ee
Eymor—EE more	Pieta—pie ATE ah
Felice—feh LEESE	Piniello—pen YEH low
Feyer—FAY er	Pleyel—PLAY el
Flodie—FLOW dee	Ploense—plonse
Folliott—FOH lee uht	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
garderobe—GAR de robe	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Geibel—GUY bull	rebozo—ray BOH soh
Ghislain—gis LANE (hard <i>g</i>)	Reinagle—REN ah gull
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard <i>g</i>)	Reynard—ray NARD
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard <i>g</i>)	Routh—roth (rhymes with <i>moth</i>)
Goss—gahs	Snearl—snurl
Graeme—GRAY em	Sosie—SO see
Greves—greevs	Spitta—SPEH tah
Guillalme—gill ALM	Stephanos—steh FAHN os
<i>hana</i> —HAH nah (work)	Stites—stights

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Featheringham Ladies*
(Book 17)

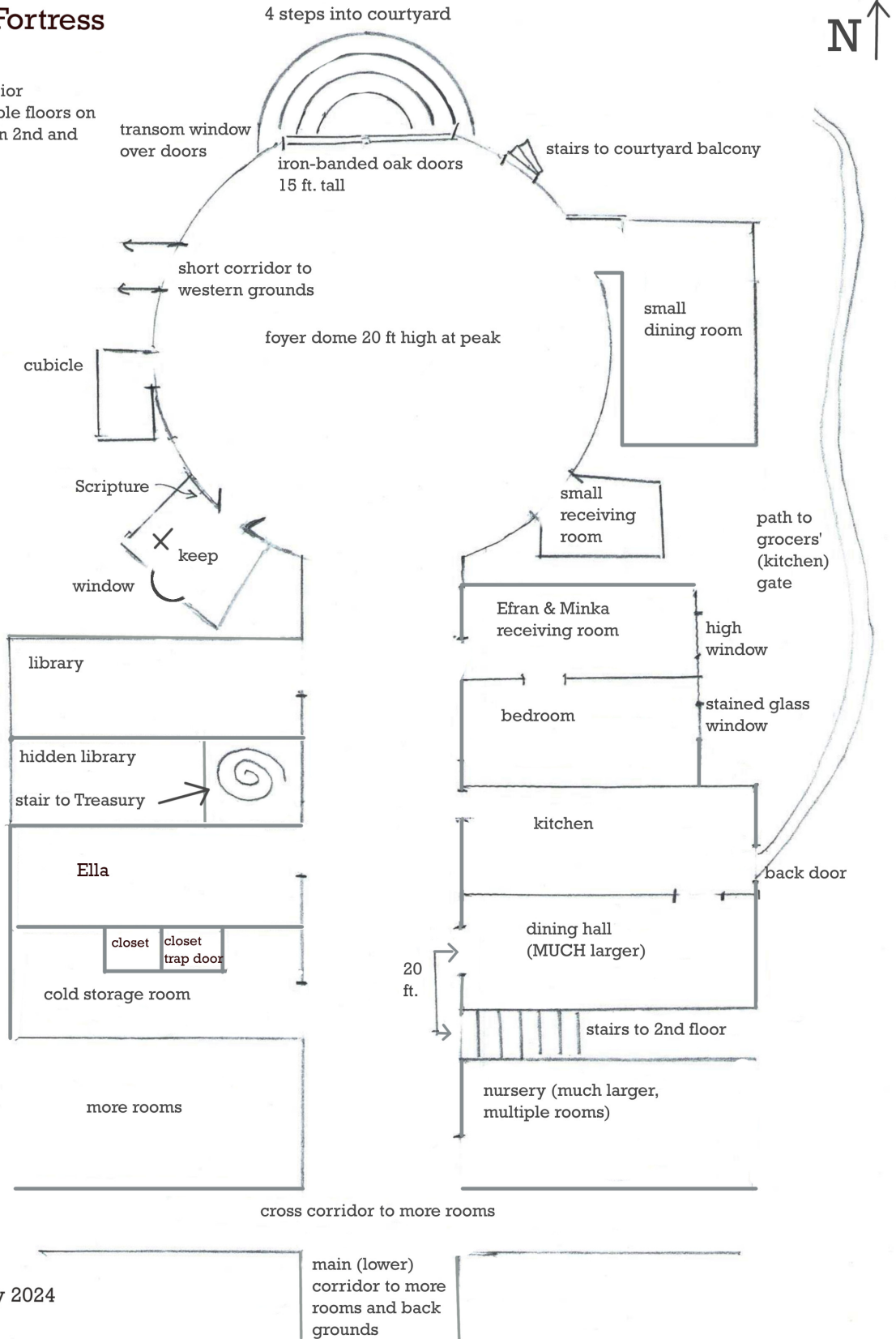
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Suco—SUE coh
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Sybil—SEH bull
Telo—TEE low
Tera—TEE rah
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Tiras—TEER us
Toledoth—TOLL eh doth
Trina—TREE nah
Venegas—VEN eh gus
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
Verrin—VAIR en
Webbe—web
Wystan—WIS tan



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



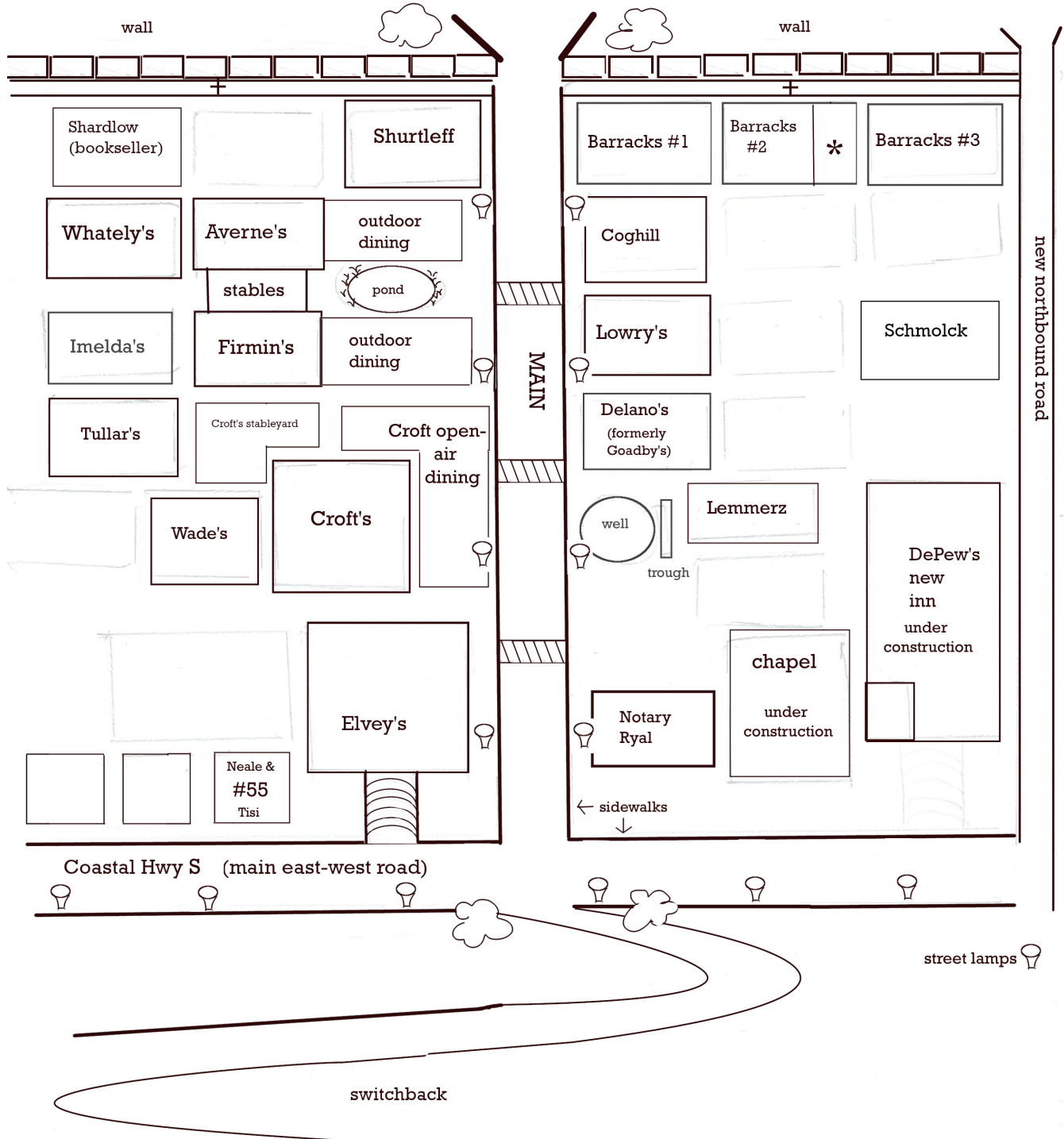
NOT TO SCALE

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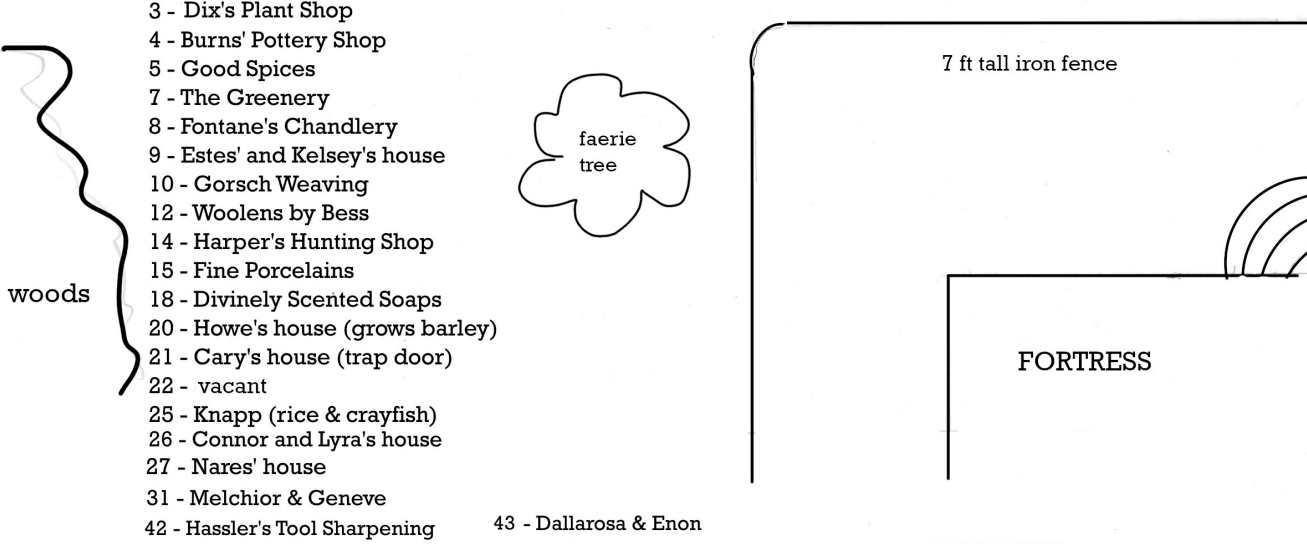
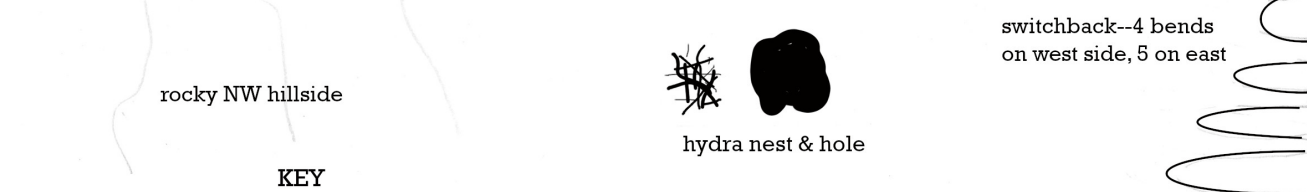
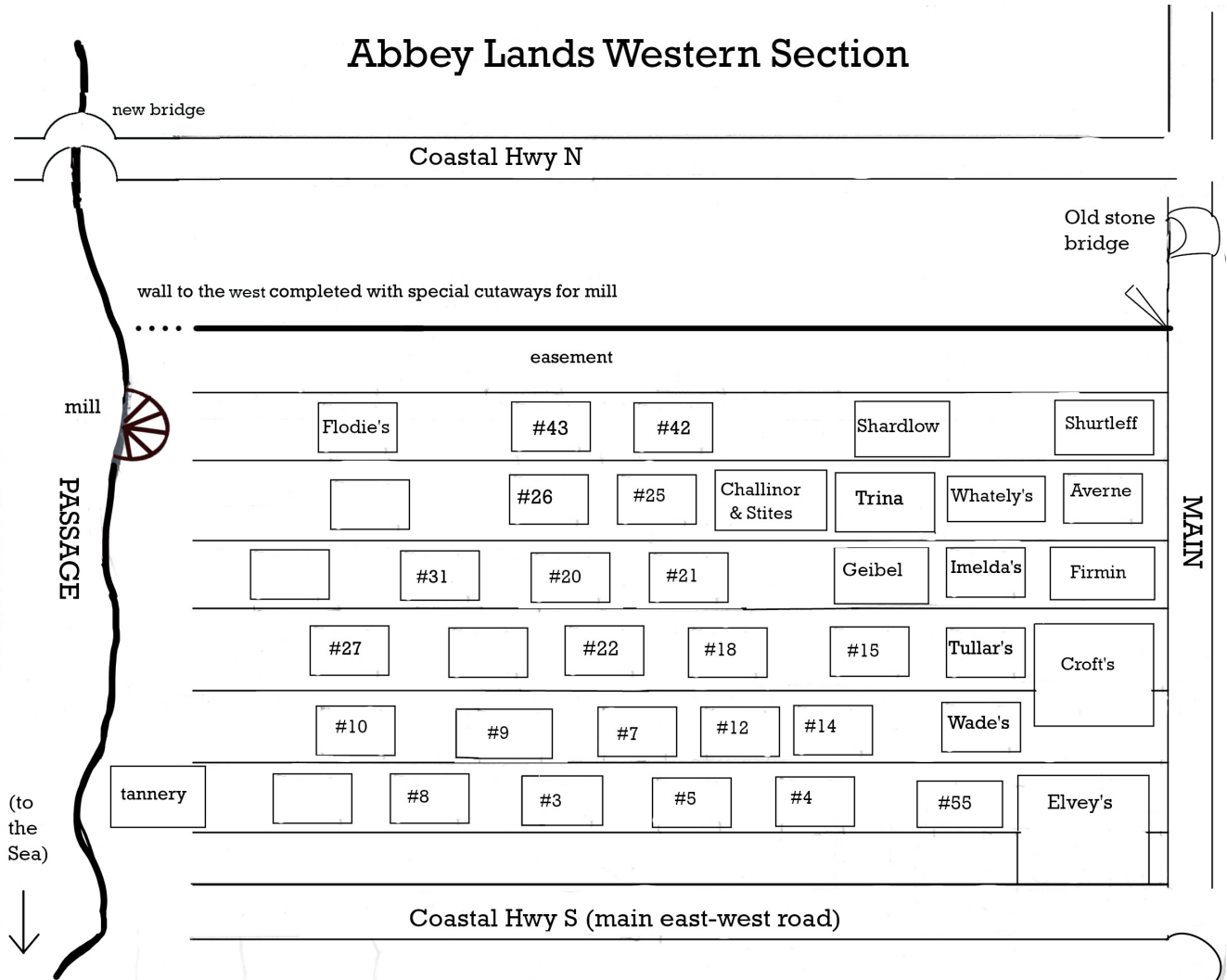
Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements



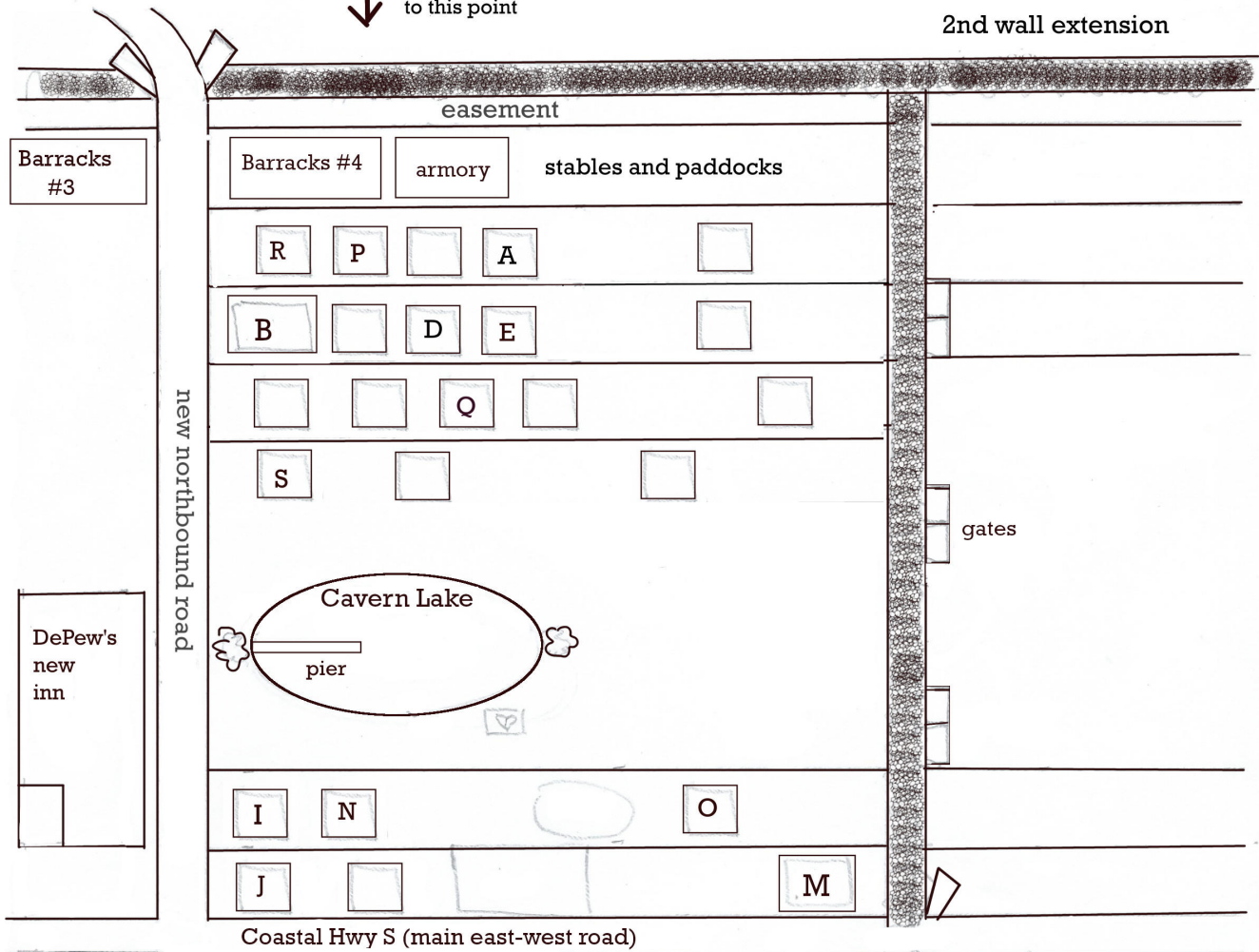
Abbey Lands Western Section



road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point



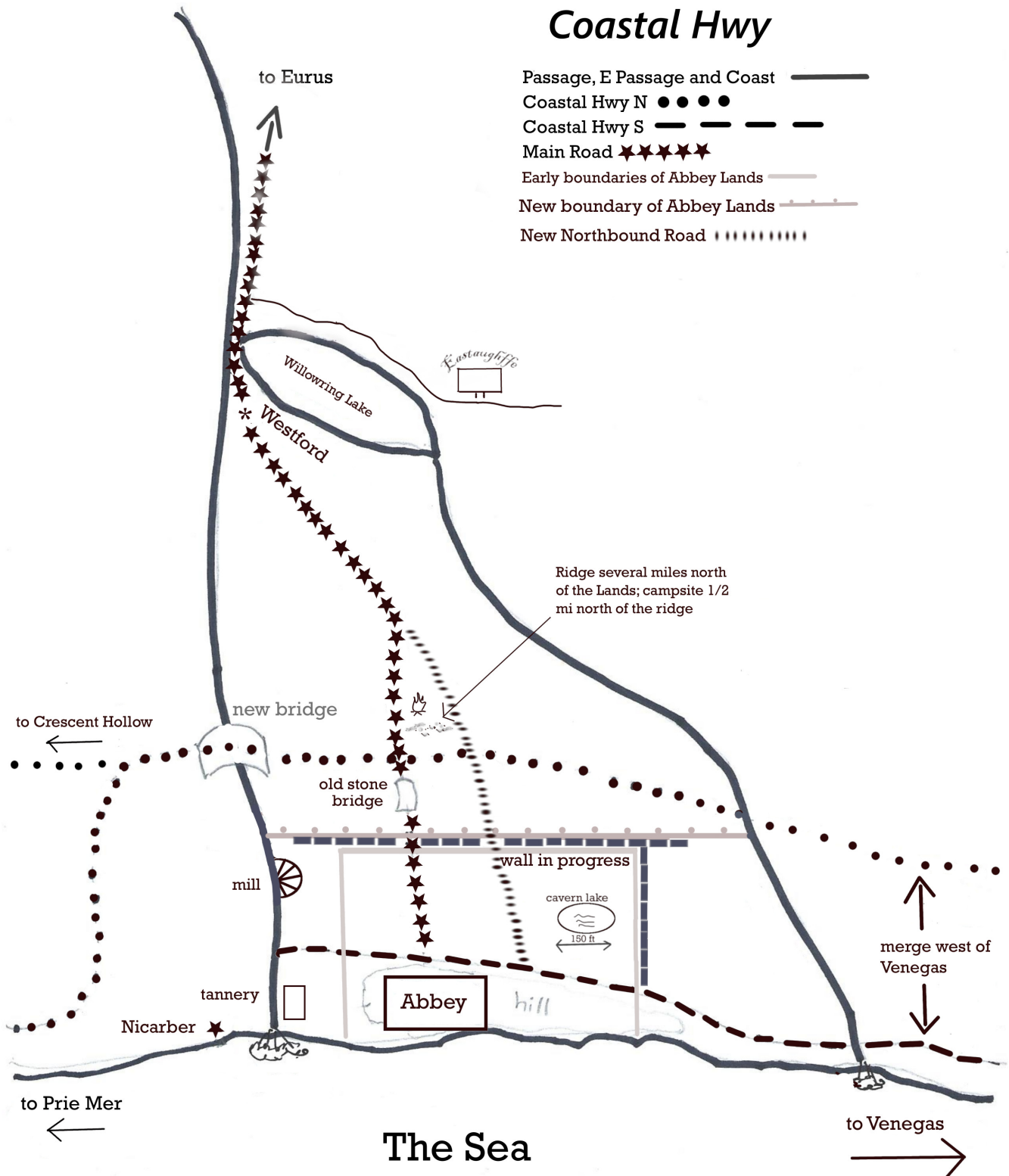
DePew's new inn

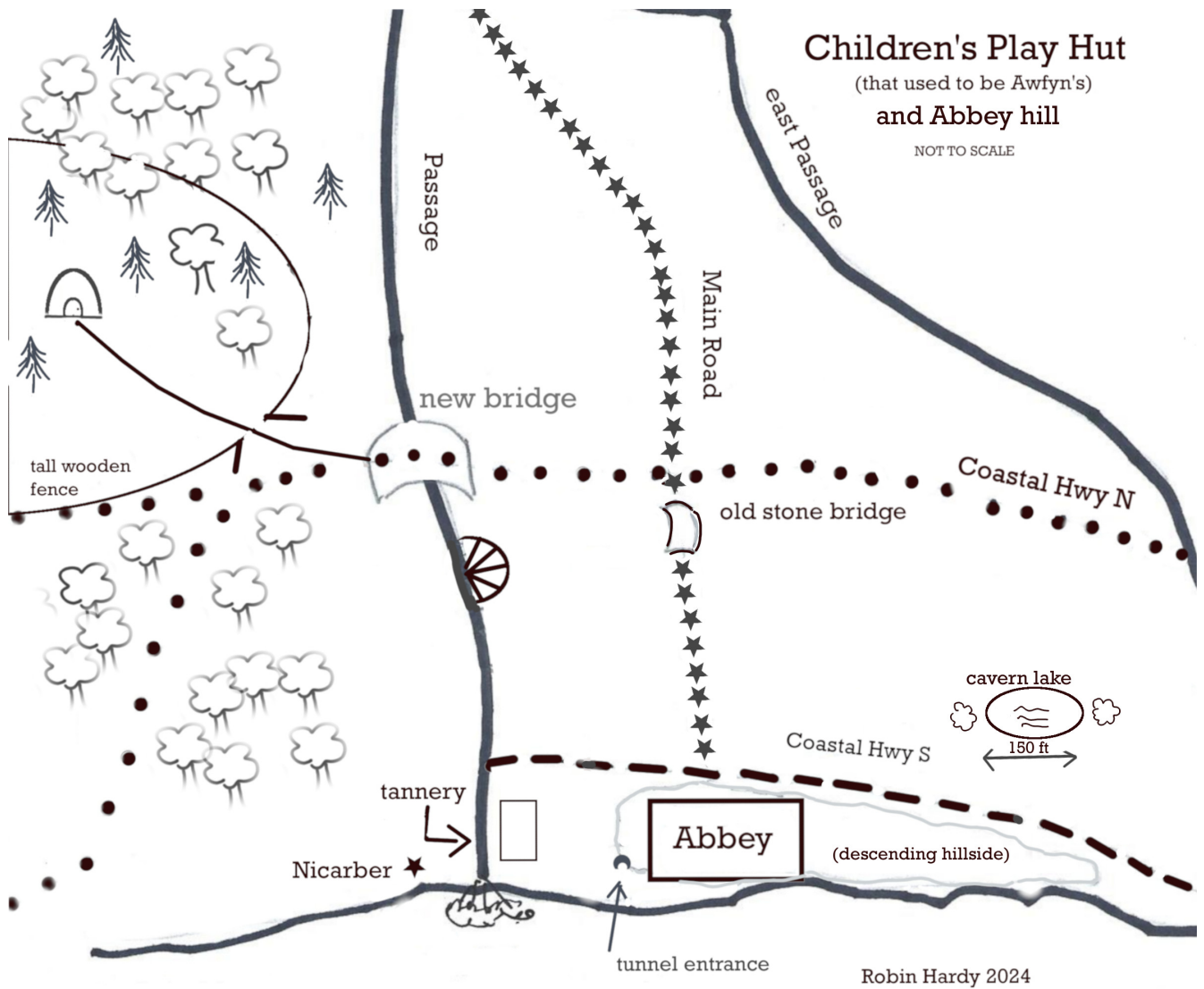
- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Follitt's house (#61)
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring's house
- R - Delano's office
- S - DePew's housing office

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Coastal Hwy

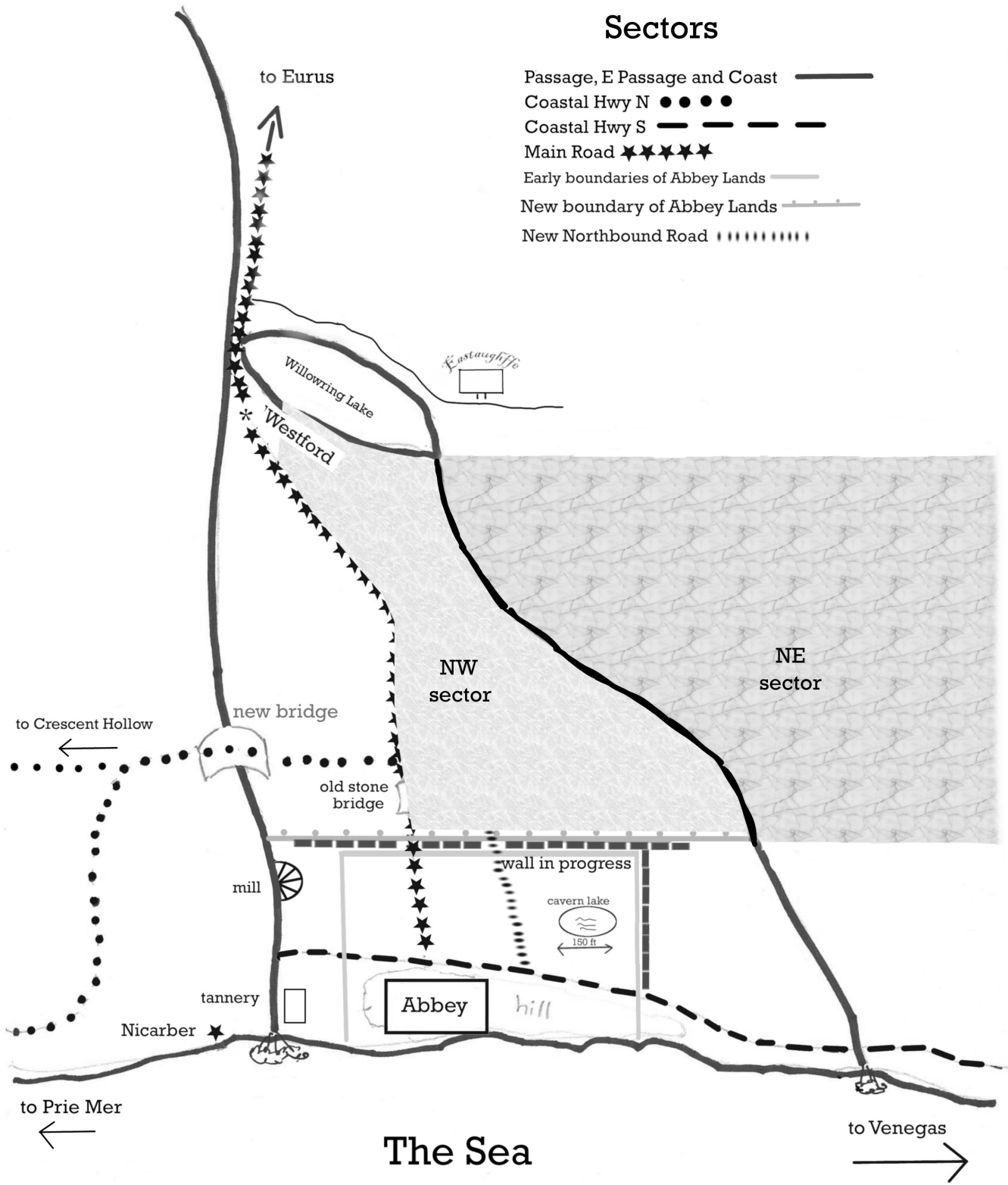
- Passage, E Passage and Coast —————
- Coastal Hwy N ●●●●●
- Coastal Hwy S - - - - -
- Main Road ★★★★★★
- Early boundaries of Abbey Lands ————
- New boundary of Abbey Lands ————
- New Northbound Road | | | | |

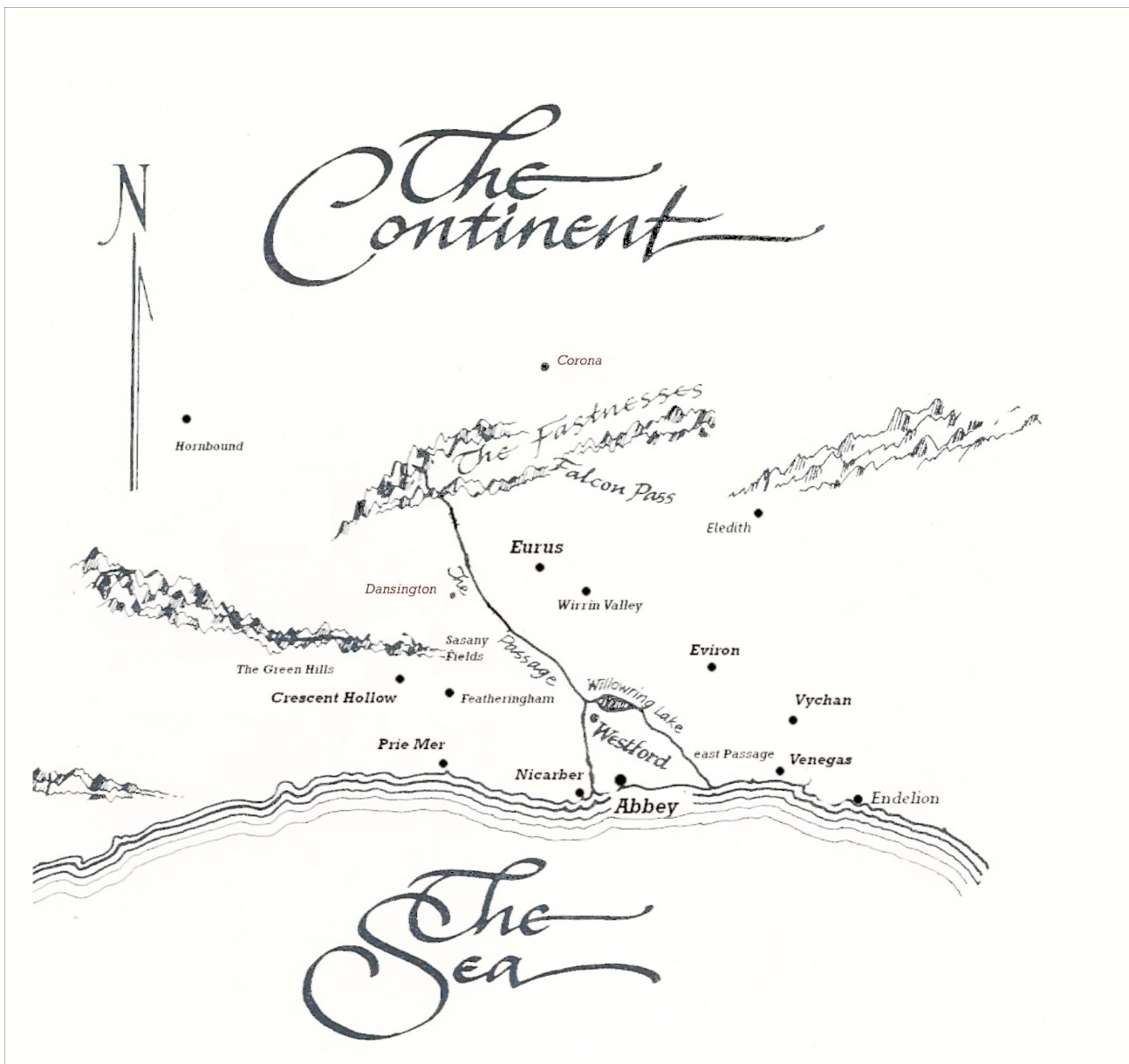




Sectors

- Passage, E Passage and Coast —————
- Coastal Hwy N ●●●●●
- Coastal Hwy S - - - - -
- Main Road ★★★★★
- Early boundaries of Abbey Lands ————
- New boundary of Abbey Lands ————
- New Northbound Road | | | | |







A lot of pieces went into this scene, obviously. The [background](#)¹ provides an air of serenity, as does the [gentleman](#)² who served as template for our visitors. The link for the fabulous jackets our visitors are wearing doesn't work any more, but there are many similar images—here are a couple on [Instagram](#) and [X](#). I found the visitors' serious faces all on Wikimedia Commons—[here](#),³ [here](#),⁴ and [here](#).⁵ The crown they're all wearing came from rawpixels [here](#). And there's [Toby](#),⁶ one of my favorite kids ever. Finally, the [Komodo dragon foot](#) came from the Cincinnati Zoo via Wikipedia.

Incidentally, I initially tried several AI sites to see if they could help with some of these images. They couldn't. But Google's [ImageFX](#) did come up with the best depiction of Symphorien I've seen yet (below). However, I can't get Google to produce a full-body image of her consistent with this. So I'm back to searches.



Robin Hardy
May 13, 2024

PS. I claim no copyright on my illustration.

1. Photographed by [Tony Fischer](#) on flickr
2. Photographed by [Mutahir Jamil](#) on Pexels
3. Portrait of a man by Maarten van Heemskerck at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp
4. Portrait of a man by Lorenzo Lotto at Kunsthistorisches Museum
5. Portrait of a man by Raphael at the Galleria Borghese, photographed by Vittoria Garibaldi
6. Photographed by [NothingAhead](#) on Pexels