



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

Book 30

Lord Efran and
the Dark Altiors

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Wendt, Estes, DeWitt, Coghill and Efran were clustered around the Lands visitor in the doctor's small examining room. The visitor, Thurlow, remained seated on the high bed in his breeches. The young soldier Youshock stood against the wall.

DeWitt said pensively, "His new name is Gabbot—like the mechanical device he stole and was trying to raise money on."

"Yes," Efran said, turning back to Youshock. "Somehow, you got that out of him—that he was looking for me in order to tell me his new name."

"That does seem to be the case, Captain," Youshock agreed.

Efran was shaking his head in confusion. "But we were talking with him for several minutes before he told me. Why—did it take him so long to come out with it?"

Youshock tilted his head dubiously. "Yes sir, it appeared to me that he had to be looking at you directly when he heard your name in order to recognize you. I don't know if that means that this was a rush job, or, that Mister Thurlow here was just a difficult subject to—make into a proper gabbot, sir."

Efran lifted his face. "So, it's a message to me from the Tinkerer."

"Possibly, sir," Youshock said.

Efran looked at Thurlow contemplatively. "And then his stuttering." Despite being questioned, Thurlow had said only one word since getting stuck on the syllable *pa*. "He said—*para—para* something. Did you hear him?" Efran asked Youshock.

"I heard that he said something, maybe even a name, but I didn't understand it, Captain," Youshock replied.

DeWitt said, "Stuttering like Shaffer at Minka's hearing." Westford's notary had been escorted to his carriage to be taken home after he had suffered a spate of stuttering.

"Shaffer had come in predisposed to overrule Ryal, according to Madgwick," Coghill observed.

Efran acknowledged that with a bare nod, studying the ceiling. He murmured, "Is there some connection with the strawmen here? With the—human replicas?"

"The Tinkerer uses a different medium," Wendt observed.

Estes posed, "Isn't every evil a perversion of humanity?"

The others considered that, then Coghill leaned forward to peer into the mechanism in the back of Thurlow's head. "Captain, the moving parts are . . . slowing down." They pressed forward to look into Thurlow's head.

Stepping back, Wendt said, "The mechanical walking stick that Thurlow stole . . . he said it was powered by a mainspring."

“Mainsprings run down, and have to be rewound,” DeWitt observed. They silently watched the components slow down to a stop.

Coghill suddenly leaned forward to catch Thurlow and lay him back on the bed. “He’s stopped breathing!”

“Where do we wind him again?” Wendt asked.

Coghill and Efran both shook their heads, and Efran said, “The doctor went over him inch by inch. There’s nothing on his body.”

As Coghill began examining him again, Efran looked at Youshock. “What does it look like to you?”

Youshock winced affably. “That he was designed to run down, sir.”

“After delivering his message to me,” Efran murmured.

They looked back to the immobile man on the bed as Coghill raised up. “Now his heart has stopped beating. By all measures, he’s dead.”

His hearers paused in shock, then DeWitt asked, “You’re going to do an autopsy, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” Coghill said. “Though I can’t imagine what I’ll find.”

“Which is why you do it. Send a report up to the workroom, please,” DeWitt said, moving out with Estes.

“Yes, of course,” Coghill said. He looked over his patient as though irritated for his cutting out on them.

“And drop by the barracks next door, if it’s convenient,” Wendt said dryly—his headquarters, Barracks A.

“Certainly, Commander,” Coghill said.

Before leaving, DeWitt abruptly turned. “I forgot. Efran, I’ve covered some concerns with Commander Wendt that I want you to know about.” With a pat to Efran’s shoulder, DeWitt left.

“Uh oh,” Efran said, looking to Wendt.

“Yes.” The Commander gestured to the door for Efran and Youshock to follow him out. “He and I would appreciate your going out to view the development in Choules’ area. DeWitt expressed some concerns about the settling, in that a far larger number of people are moving there than he had approved, which also means more unapproved building. All this is what Tourse’s men have observed. But now they’re being run off. Tourse wants authorization from you or me before he allows his men to start burning things down.”

“Not again,” Efran groaned. “What about the wolves? I gave them a five-mile run on the far eastern Lands clear to the Passage branch.”

“That’s something else we don’t know. For now, you may want to slip in quietly, as we’re confident they can do nothing to the Lord Sovereign on his own Lands,” Wendt said.

“Right.” Efran glanced back at Youshock. “Get you a horse; I’ll find mine and meet you at the stables.”

“Yes, sir, thank you, Captain,” Youshock said, then lit out toward the lower stables. Efran saluted Wendt and went to find his own horse.

He discovered Kraken blocking half the community well with his play in the trough behind it. Taking his reins, Efran muttered, “Well, I’m glad you’re geared up, at least—we’re riding out to the eastern Lands.”

Interested, Kraken allowed himself to be led away from the well so that Efran could mount and turn him toward the lower barracks stables. There, he found Youshock cinching up a sturdy roan. “We’re almost ready, Captain.”

“No rush,” Efran said idly, glancing around. “Have you talked with your parents lately?”

“Yes, Captain.” Youshock flipped the stirrup down to mount easily and turn the horse’s head. “My two older sisters Rossi and Sierra will be coming to visit soon.”

“Ho, don’t tell the men; your sisters’ll be mobbed,” Efran said, half serious.

“They’re counting on it, Captain. They’re both elderly, ready to get married,” Youshock said.

“How old are they?” Efran asked cautiously.

“Twenty-five and twenty-six, Captain. Doddering,” Youshock said with a pathetic shake of his head.

Efran laughed, “No fear; they’ll be married within hours of arriving.”

“Our parents are hoping so, sir,” Youshock admitted.

They took side roads eastward through the Lands, Efran continually glancing aside at new buildings, businesses and homes, with more under construction. There was another chapel going up, as well as another new inn. A pond near it was being enlarged. All this, still west of Choules’ group, had been authorized by DeWitt. And—Efran abruptly dismounted to rush into a new shop that had the signboard “NOTARY” above it.

Entering, he looked up at the requisite bell announcing his presence. Youshock entered behind him. And Efran watched the new, young notary come to the counter. “Oulton!” Efran cried. Last he knew, Oulton was Captain Rigdon’s scribe.

“Yes, Captain,” he smiled. “Administrator DeWitt has been helping me prepare to take some of the load off Lord Ryal for all the new residents. I passed the Notary Exam day before yesterday, and have got an almost complete copy of Roman’s Law. We’re still getting the obscure sections and Addenda copied out.”

“That’s wonderful,” Efran breathed, tears in his eyes. A customer came in behind him, so Efran backed out.

He had to stand beside Kraken just to breathe for a minute. “It’s real. The Lands are real,” he whispered, turning his eyes to Youshock.

“A lot of people seem to think so, sir,” he said as one of those new people.

“It was all just—meadowland,” Efran said, turning to look over the new construction. “When we got the charter, Minka and I, we couldn’t conceive what to do with all the land. But we didn’t have to grow it; we just had to take care of what was in front of us, and it grew up on its own.” Youshock listened silently. Efran suddenly

wondered about conditions in Nicarber, just west of them. Since the hurricane of 8152, it had been nothing but wreckage. Had anyone attempted to rebuild it yet?

Exhaling, Efran remounted. They passed through the east-facing gate of the second wall extension leading to Choules' territory. A northern wall that would turn south was in progress here, as well. Surveyors were at work staking a path for another road that would pass through a third set of gates in the north wall. All this was DeWitt's doing, as Efran knew.

But the farther east he and Youshock rode, they saw a great deal of new construction which Efran regarded in surprise. It did not look like DeWitt's preferred layout—the lots were irregular, and the structures too close together. Efran stopped to gape at a random wattle-and-daub house. DeWitt never approved wattle-and-daub; it did not hold up well in storms. (Generally, DeWitt had oversight of buildings and Estes of people.)

In growing wariness, Efran rode through more new construction, all as random as what he had seen. He paused to look over the sheep and cattle farms—belonging both to the Fortress and Minogue—and the crop lands owned by the Fortress. They appeared crowded, and Minogue's men were putting up new fencing. But the crop lands and cattle pasture were not fenced.

There was some encouragement in what Efran saw: It had been just about two weeks since the invasion of half a million walking sticks, which had eaten everything—*everything*—green in their path. Days later, the unprecedented snow covered it all. Nonetheless, he now was gazing at acres of green grass on which sheep, goats and cattle were feeding. It had all grown back in a characteristically mild Abbey Lands December.

But—“Captain, there's some contention over there,” Youshock said, nodding to one of the fields. Efran looked over to see a divided group of men arguing with each other. He recognized Bloodworth, the soldier in charge of the Fortress fields, standing with eight or ten of his helpers. Bloodworth was shouting at a group of men who were taking shovels and tools out of a large cart of building materials.

Before attending to them, Efran looked around for the red flags his men had set out marking the boundary of the 5-mile stretch to the east Passage that he had given to the wolves. Of the 40 or 50 flags they had placed, he saw only a handful remaining, which were well to the east of these fields. But beyond those few flags were more unauthorized buildings.

Having seen that, Efran spurred over to ride between the contending groups, Youshock following. Both sides fell back, and Bloodworth said, “Captain Efran! These land-grabbers think to build on our wheat field!”

Efran turned on Kraken to look at the cart, the men, and the apparent leader of the other group. “Who are you?” Efran demanded.

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Chapter 2

The head worker told Efran, “We're hired labor. Lord Choules' Administrator Lord Wolverson has authorized construction here.” Not knowing “Captain Efran,” the man replied with a touch of disdain.

Efran said, “You are on Abbey Land. Choules is not lord here, neither is Wolverson, whoever he is. Any building

here has to be authorized by the Abbey Fortress. So you go get Choules and bring him here.” The laborers looked at each other hesitantly, then the one who had spoken began walking off, and the others followed. But the driver of the cart and his helper stubbornly sat where they were.

“Captain,” Youshock said, nodding toward two other men approaching on horseback: Kaas and Skalbeck. Efran spurred toward them to demand, “What is all this?” He waved at the cart and the new buildings.

Kaas said, “New people coming down, seeing wide-open land and helping themselves, Captain.”

Efran instructed, “Go tell Commander Wendt that our ranchers and field workers need backup here immediately. Tourse’s enforcers may have to start burning down more buildings, but we need DeWitt to tell us what’s been authorized out here.”

“Yes, Captain,” Kaas said. Skalbeck saluted, and they rode off at a gallop.

Efran looked back at Bloodworth now arguing with the driver of the cart, stopped in the midst of the field with winter wheat springing up. Accompanied by Youshock, Efran rode back to tell the driver, “Get this cart out of this field, and tell your Wolverson that he has to check with the Fortress before building anything else.”

The driver regarded him for a moment, then glanced at something behind him. He smiled at Efran to say, “I don’t think you can make us.”

“Captain!” Youshock said. Efran, Bloodworth and his hands turned to see a large group of men carrying hammers, shovels or other tools approach behind an authoritative figure on a horse. Some of those men were the hired laborers who had just left.

Smiling benignly, this man drew up to Efran. As a sign of his status, he wore a leather rancher’s hat with a long feather. “I am Lord Wolverson, Lord Choules’ Building Administrator. What seems to be the problem here?”

“I am Efran, Lord Sovereign of the land you’re filling with garbage. You will stop all building until my Administrator DeWitt gives you permission to proceed.” Efran was seething but calm. More men were collecting behind Wolverson.

“Oh, my,” Wolverson said softly. “Not just Lord, but Sovereign Lord.” The men behind him grinned.

“No. Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands,” Efran corrected him. The distinction was important. “And neither you nor Choules is titled in my Lands. You will withdraw this cart and these men at once.”

“On the contrary, Lord Sovereign, I think we’re able defend whatever we choose to build on ‘your’ Lands,” Wolverson said. “And it would be a terrible, terrible tragedy for the Lord Sovereign to be killed in a construction accident on his own Lands.” His men began spreading out around them.

“Wait a minute,” Efran said, peering at him. “You’re one of them! You’re one of the men I took out of chains in Venegas.” Wolverson’s smile faded. Efran went on, “Is this how you show your gratitude?” His eyes flicked to something behind Wolverson’s men.

Wolverson studied him, then raised his brows to signal a change in tactics. “If you cooperate with us, you’ll be well rewarded.”

Efran laughed. “No. No, no—you’ve got it backwards. You cooperate with me to save your own lives. And

you'd best do it quickly. Get these men off this field! *Do it now!*"

A few of the men, turning to look at what he was watching, threw down their tools and began running. The horses hitched to the cart began rearing in panic. Kraken twitched, and Youshock's horse reared slightly, but Youshock drew him close to Kraken, and he stilled. Bloodworth and his men ran over to stand around the Captain on his horse.

Seeing what was coming, more of Choules' men began running away. Wolverson was shouting at them, but his horse promptly bucked him off to gallop west.

The men around Efran waited tensely while Wolverson's men scattered. As for those of his men who stood their ground glaring, it was too late for further warnings. The wolves were upon them.

Wolverson was among the first killed while he struggled to get up. The men who thought to fight the wolves also died. Construction workers nearby watched in horror, then threw down their tools to run. The cart driver managed to turn the horses to lurch off with the cart, saving himself and his partner.

The wolves did not chase anyone running away; they simply cleared the field—and sent a large group of witnesses running for their lives, as well. The men who were clustered around the Captain kept their eyes away from the carnage. Efran watched stonily.

In a matter of minutes it was over. The massive alpha wolf trotted toward Kraken, and Efran dismounted to go meet him. Out loud, so the men could hear him, Efran told the wolf, "I promised you that five miles because you made way for us. I'm glad for your help so that I could keep my promise, Canis. But now—all the buildings going up there—do you want us to take them down or leave them be?"

He paused to listen, then said, "Yes, if they stay up, they're liable to attract more land-grabbers. So you'll respect the lives of the men we send to tear them down, won't you?"

The great wolf bowed his blood-streaked head, and Efran said, "Good, thank you, Canis." Then the wolf led his pack back east through the silent, wind-swept meadowlands.

Looking around in the stillness, Efran noted hastily packed wagons flowing back out of the half-finished northern wall in the distance. Bloodworth and his men were gradually coming to life, exhaling, looking at each other. They all kept their eyes off the bloody heap topped by the fine leather hat with a feather.

Turning back to remount Kraken, Efran told Youshock, "We're done here." To Bloodworth, he nodded, "Carry on."

"Yes, Captain," Bloodworth said shakily, saluting.

Riding back west with Youshock, Efran paused at the tent that Folliott had erected over a test well in his scheme to get Trina out of Eurus. The well and the tent were in use, though the tent was now faded. When Efran, Minka, and their men had found it only a year ago—not quite a year—it was far from any habitation on the Lands. It would remain that way for a little while longer.

As Efran had slowed to a walk, Youshock said, "Tell me about the wolves, Captain."

Efran replied, "When we received the charter, the whole area was the domain of a clan of wolves. With just me and Minka, four orphans, and forty men, we couldn't even live at the fortress with the wolves hunting in the

meadowlands around the sole road. So we made peace with them. But the more we grew, the farther east they were driven. So I promised them the easternmost Lands as their own. They know the boundary.”

“And they respect you,” Youshock noted in awe.

“I keep my promises,” Efran said, looking back to the east.

They started riding west again, only to pause as Tourse, at the head of at least a hundred men, rode up to meet him. Tourse saluted. “We heard you might need help, Captain, which appears to be a bald-faced lie.”

Efran half-laughed, “The wolves beat you to it. But, ah, your men might have a little clean-up work to do.” He told Tourse what had happened, ending with, “After the wolves killed a handful, it looks like a number of land-grabbers ran off. Before you burn anything down, though, we need DeWitt to tell you what has been authorized or should stay up. I got permission from Canis for our men to tear down the buildings on their land, but most of the red flags marking the boundary have got to be replaced now. I promised to respect that land for the wolves giving way to us at the beginning.”

“I remember that, Captain,” Tourse said. “So, we’ll see what you’ve left for us to do here.”

“Good luck,” Efran said grimly, prompting Kraken on. He and Youshock rode through the parting Enforcement Unit while the men in dusky blue uniforms saluted.

When they arrived back at Main Street, a rider—Telo—who had been ascending the old switchback saw them and turned to begin descending. So Efran paused on Kraken, Youshock beside him. Pulling up to them, Telo saluted, “Captain, Doctor Coghill requests your presence in his quarters.”

“Yes,” Efran said, turning down Main. He nodded for Youshock to follow, noting, “That was a quick autopsy.”

“He may have found what he was looking for, Captain,” Youshock said.

Efran glanced at him, but said nothing as they dismounted at the doctor’s house. Only, he told Kraken, “Don’t wander off.” Kraken fluttered his lips.

Entering, they both looked back to the examining room in which they had left Thurlow lying, and found him there still. DeWitt was standing beside the bed, listening to Coghill. Efran and Youshock came into the room to look down on the dead man.

Apparently still dead, he was lying face down to expose a large shaved spot on the back of his head. Efran studied it, then looked up at Coghill. “Doctor?”

“Yes, Efran. This is quite an amazing trick.” Coghill handed him a hard curved piece covered with brown hair.

“Which I’ve just seen,” DeWitt said, “so I’m going up hilltop. Dinner’s soon,” he advised Efran, nodding to Youshock. The soldier saluted him.

Efran said, “Yes, I’ll be right there. Ah, I just came back from the east Lands, which—the wolves cleaned out a bit.” DeWitt stared at him, and he added, “All the unauthorized building has been stopped. Tourse will need for you to tell him what to burn down. He’s out there now, so you’ll hear from him when he gets back. Oh, and Canis has given permission for us to tear down everything that was built on their five-mile stretch, so we need to do that.” Efran waved the hard, curved hairy piece while he talked.

“Ah. That’s good to know,” DeWitt said.

As DeWitt left, Efran blinked at the piece in his hand. “What is this? It’s sticky on the back,” he said, turning it over.

“Yes. Press the soft spot in the hair,” Coghill said. Efran glanced at him, but found the same soft spot as before. Pressing it opened the small door to reveal the cams and rods, only, they were still. Efran and Youshock looked down at the bald spot on the back of Thurlow’s head.

Coghill said, “It appears that the Tinkerer shaved Thurlow’s head to create a mold of the whole back of it. From that, he made this plate just deep enough to contain the mechanical movement. He used some kind of adhesive to cover the back of the plate with the shaved hair, then glued the whole piece to the back of his head and blended in the hair. Very skillfully done.”

“How did that kill him?” Efran asked, handing him the piece.

“It didn’t,” Coghill said. “I thought at once he’d been drugged by the way he was acting, and after seeing the coating on his tongue here, I’m almost sure of it.”

“What was used?” Efran asked.

“I’ll have to do tests on his stomach and liver to tell for sure, but I believe it was Aqua Tofana. That’s a slow-acting poison which the murderer can give in doses to cause death at the time of his choosing,” Coghill said.

“Oh,” Efran breathed. He stepped back so that Coghill could cover the body with a muslin sheet. “Has Wendt been by to see this?” Efran asked.

“No. I sent a message, but he was out of the barracks at the time,” Coghill said.

“All right. I’ll—step over and see if he’s in,” Efran said. He gestured Youshock to follow him next door to Barracks A.

When they entered the barracks office, Efran looked at Captain Towner with his arm around a smiling young woman. Youshock started laughing. The pretty woman told him, “Shut up. I can still pin you to the floor, you little weasel.” She was smiling all the while.

Efran looked between her and Youshock in delight. “Is this one of your sisters? And why does Captain Towner have her locked up like that?”

“Yes, Captain—” Youshock gasped, still laughing.

“Yes, Captain,” Towner said. “This is Rossi, and we’ve just come from the notary’s office—”

“Already?” Efran exclaimed. “Well—where’s your other sister—ah—”

“Sierra,” Youshock said. “Yes, Rossi, you were in charge of your younger sister. Where did you misplace her?”

Towner and Rossi both started laughing, then. “It’s like this, Captain,” Towner began.

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Chapter 3

“Sounds like a scam already,” Efran said tentatively, which got Towner and his bride laughing again.

“No, Captain, it was just—Captain Chee was here when the gate guards escorted both sisters in, and, he took one look at Sierra, and, she smiled at him, so he just flung her up on his shoulder and left with her,” Towner explained, somewhat.

“To Ryal’s shop, I hope,” Efran said.

“Yes, they were leaving again when Rossi and I walked up—I allowed her the privilege of walking there on her own two feet as a voluntary act and, not as a prisoner of war. Chee was carrying Sierra up the switchback—not like a sack of flour, fortunately, but in his arms,” Towner explained.

Efran sobered. “Did she look all right?”

Rossi said, “Well, she had her arms around his neck like this.” And she draped her arms around Towner’s neck. He barely refrained from kissing her in front of Efran, Youshock, Viglian, and a few other men. Youshock was still laughing.

Efran turned to him. “You have three more sisters at home?”

“Yes, Captain. Three more,” Youshock said, as if presenting the answer to a calculus problem.

“Are they all marriageable?” Efran asked.

“The youngest is sixteen, sir,” he said.

Efran glanced away, then said, “Well, go get them. We have lots more officers.”

“Yes, Captain.” Youshock saluted and turned out, grinning.

Slightly disoriented, Efran told Towner, “Well, ah, Chee will have beat you to the workroom to get a house, so, you better go ahead and take her to get the next best one available.”

“Yes, Captain.” Towner and Rossi left hand in hand, still smiling.

Efran stood with his hands on his hips. “Somehow I don’t think that’s what I came in here for. Oh! Viglian, tell the Commander that Coghill has something to show him.”

“No woman for me?” Viglian asked, woebegone.

“Depends. Be here when Youshock brings the rest of his sisters, and throw the first one on your shoulder who smiles at you,” Efran said.

Viglian looked determined. “Yes, Captain.”

By himself, but still shaking his head, Efran found Kraken playing in a nearly empty water trough and took him up hilltop. He let Squirt take him to the stables to get him unsaddled and groomed, because Efran had the general sense that the dinner bell had already rung. So he only stopped by his quarters to clean his hands and face enough for dinner.

Turning out into the corridor again, he paused upon seeing the scrawny Polonti boy with the stitches in his lip waiting at the dining hall entrance. He had seen Efran go into his quarters, but continued to wait at the door, knowing that this was his destination.

Smiling on him, Efran came over quickly while Isreal waited in vindication. Efran scooped him up at the doorway to bounce him a few times, and Isreal emitted something that sounded like troll speak: “Unh unh unh.” Concerned that he was hurting him, Efran paused. But Isreal jostled his arm for more, and Efran realized that he was laughing.

“There you are!” Minka said, turning. “I’ve barely been able to guard your plate from the circling wolves.”

“Serves me right, for being late,” Efran said. Glancing around, he put Isreal on the bench to his right, between him and Minka. Ella, to his left, paused to greet him before resuming a conversation with Rondi across from her. Quennel, with Joshua on his knee, was to Ella’s left. “I’m glad that no one felt it necessary to wait on me,” Efran remarked, practically unnoticed as he sat.

He scanned the hall warily for well-dressed strangers or other alarms. But he saw a hall crowded with happy diners. At the front of the hall, Estes and DeWitt were sitting with their families. Halfway across the front, Trina was sitting in between Reinagle and Folliott. “Ho,” Efran breathed.

He looked down at Minka helping Isreal to get hold of his fork so that he could take in small bites of the rabbit pie. Digging into his own pie packed with meat and vegetables, Efran was thinking.

So the Tinkerer had sent a message to him via Thurlow in both his new name and his timely murder—after Efran had forbidden him to kill him. Yes, what authority did Efran have over him? And what was to be done about him? Neither the Tinkerer nor Thurlow was a resident of the Lands, and Efran’s charter did not extend to disciplining a rogue toymaker. So Efran saw nothing he could do at the moment.

Still, what was it that Thurlow had said at the very end? He had been obsessing about “the name, the name.” At first, Efran thought he must be referring to “Gabbot,” his new name. But if that were it, he wouldn’t have worked so hard to get out that last word—“Para. . . .” Para what? Efran’s fork went still as he concentrated on trying to remember.

Connor, across from him, remarked, “I saw Captain Towner coming out of the notary’s shop with a girl, Captain.” That caused the immediate cessation of several conversations in the vicinity.

Wiping his mouth, Efran laughed, “Yes, two of Youshock’s sisters came to visit, and both got carted off to the notary’s right away. Captain Chee snagged the other one.”

“Are there more?” Coxe asked, next to Connor.

“Yes, three more. I sent Youshock back for them, but you’d better camp outside Barracks A to get a shot at one,” Efran said, taking another bite.

“You make it sound like they’re hunting game,” Ella objected.

“They are,” Quennel said, as though it were obvious.

Grinning, Efran looked over Isreal’s head to Minka as he asked, “But who is the hunter, and who is the hunted?”

She glowed back at him through her wispy white angel hair. “You were so helpless,” she murmured.

Amid the laughter, he nodded.

The following day, December 8th, outdoor work and play were suspended for a torrential rainfall on the hilltop and the Lands. But there was no snow, nor lightning, nor flooding, even though the Passage roiled with the additional million gallons.

Since there was no point in trying to ride anywhere, Efran stopped by the children’s classroom. As they surged up from their tables around him, he said, “Apologies, Mistress Hazeldene. You’re doing good work with them.”

Flustered, she said, “Thank you, Lord Efran.”

Calix said, “We have something to show you, Efran!”

“Yes?” he said, smiling on them.

“Yes, Toby started it, but we’ve all been helping, haven’t we?” Calix demanded as the other children nodded vigorously.

“All right,” Efran said, kneeling to get down on their level. Joshua toddled over to be picked up, then demanded to be let down again. Nakam also came over to be petted. Efran absently stroked his head while looking to the children.

“Come, Isreal,” Elwell said, taking his hand to place him front and center before Efran.

He froze with all eyes on him, so Efran just waited, smiling. Looking at him only, Isreal opened his stitched mouth and said, “You tink I am dead the apple tree said, becos I ha’ no leaf to show. Becos I stoop, an’ branches droop, and—dull gray moss o’er me grow. But I am alive, becos—” He got stuck here, and the children watched with hands clasped and breathing suspended.

Seeing Efran’s tears, Isreal finished, “Becos Efran haf Isreal.”

One or two children groaned at the improvisation. But Efran took him snugly on one arm for Isreal to throw his arms around his neck. Then Efran reached out the other arm to Calix with, “That’s the best poem I ever heard. You’re good friends to teach it to him. Thank you.”

The children congratulated Isreal and each other on the successful recitation as Efran stood. Nodding to the tutor, he said, “Carry on.” With a pat to Isreal’s head, he left them to their work.

Walking down the corridor, wiping his face, Efran thought, *This is our charter; this is my concern.* But then he got an idea of what to do about the Tinkerer: *He has to have a workshop. If I can find that. . . .*

Efran stopped in the corridor to think about this. The more he thought about it, the more he thought it might prove to be a reliable path ahead. So he went upstairs to the workroom.

Because of the heavy clouds pouring rain, Estes and DeWitt had lit several lanterns and candelabra to work by. Without bothering to sit, Efran noted, “We have so few storms on the Lands, it’s—weird to walk into a dark workroom in the middle of the morning.”

“It seems that way, doesn’t it?” DeWitt asked, searching among his papers. “But Ploense has been tracking the rainfall for the Lands and the hilltop ever since he arrived in February, and he’s found that it consistently exceeds Westford’s levels, historically.”

Efran peered at him. “You’re making him track the amount of rain we get, on top of all his other work?”

Estes looked up, laughing, and DeWitt shook his head. “This is something he does when we don’t funnel enough work to him.”

“Oh.” Efran thought about that, then shook it off. “Did you talk with Tourse?”

“Yes,” DeWitt said. “I rode out there briefly yesterday with our book of East Lands building permits, but there was so much new construction that I wasn’t able to check it all. Since all building has been stopped, I left the book with Tourse. He and his men will be out there today, God help them.” DeWitt glanced toward the dark east-facing window.

“You’ll need to talk to Choules, who’s titled himself,” Efran said idly. “Oh, and I stopped by the new notary shop with Oulton, which I was glad to see. He’s not in their area, but near the lake. He says he has an almost complete copy of Roman’s Law.”

Estes glanced up to note, “Yes, Ryal has been helping him with that. We’re going to provide a stipend for others to study for a notary license, as the work has overwhelmed Ryal, even with Giardi and Soames helping him.”

“Yes, don’t overwhelm Ryal,” Efran muttered. “All right, then, I’m going down to the chapel; see if I can catch Justinian.”

“Oh, good! I’ll come with you!” Minka said, entering the doorway behind him.

He turned, sighing, “It’s raining, hard.”

“Oh dear,” she said indifferently.

“I don’t want Joshua in it, after being sick,” he said.

“I don’t either, but he’s fine with the children. Oh, did you hear Isreal’s poem?” she asked warmly.

“Yes,” he said. “The children have a new pet.”

“They’re fine, then. I’ll get our cloaks and meet you in the foyer.” Then she turned out without waiting for permission.

Glancing back at his administrators, Efran muttered, “Women.”

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Chapter 4

“For whom we’re very grateful,” Estes said, eyes on his ledger. DeWitt leaned over to show him something, upon which Estes added, “Oh, Efran, I forgot.”

Efran turned back for Estes to explain, “There’s a new shop in the east Lands which Ryal approved, but we got a complaint that they were selling magick, which Roman’s Law doesn’t allow. [This included spells or incantations helped along by the ingestion of dangerous chemicals.] So we thought you might want to go have a look, whenever the rain lets up. It’s called Wonders and Illusions, and it’s right off New North Road.”

“All right. Minka and I will drop in,” Efran said, turning out again.

As she had threatened, Minka was waiting for him at the foyer door, armed with a cloak for him and already wearing hers. “Horses are coming,” she said. He nodded, glancing back at someone passing through the foyer to the western door. Then she asked, “Why don’t you want me to hear you and Justinian?”

He paused to ask, “Did you get that impression?”

“Yes,” she said, studying him.

“No reason,” he shrugged, then added, “You can come. But we have a detour to make.” And he told her about the new shop Estes wanted them to see. Minka was agreeable to checking out a new shop. So he had to stop by Doane’s cubicle for a small pouch of royals.

The rain was beginning to let up now, so they rode easily to New North Road. Efran pointed out the sign for “Wonders & Illusions” to the right. They rode up to the shop, which had a similar signboard in front. When they entered, the tinkling bell above the door put Efran in a receptive frame of mind, as it reminded him of Ryal’s shop.

The proprietor smiled at them. “Welcome to Wonders and Illusions, where you will find—”

“Efran—!” Minka grabbed his arm, and he looked down, teetering on the edge of a gaping hole in the floor. Inevitably thrown off balance, he stepped into the hole—but did not fall.

They both stared at the rug they were standing on, which had been cleverly painted so as to give the impression of a real hole underfoot. Laughing, they looked up to the proprietor. “—entertaining illusions,” he finished.

Efran and Minka split up to look around, then. She studied paintings that teased the eye—circles that seemed to rotate, clouds that morphed into sailing ships or figures in white, a chessboard in the sky that melded into real towers, snowy fields, and far-off mountains. Then she stopped to gaze at a painting of a woman composed entirely of lilies and leaves.

Meanwhile, Efran was surveying the items on the shelves behind the counter. There were puzzles, mostly, and little decorative figures of the man in the moon or people entwined in trees, rocks or flowers. Efran shook his head mildly: he saw nothing illegal here.

But he drew in a breath at the sight of something else— “You’ve got a walking stick on the shelf above you!”

The proprietor turned to take the five-inch figure off the shelf. “Yes, do you like it? And if you put it on an incline, it walks.” This he demonstrated by placing it on a board resting at an incline on the counter. The walking stick then began creeping down it on jointed wooden legs.

Efran picked it up to examine it. “That’s fantastic. How many do you have?”

“Um, let me check in back,” the man said. Shortly, he returned with a box. “Twenty, in all.”

“Give me those,” Efran said, pulling out his pouch.

Minka came up with the portrait of the lily woman. “I want this.”

Efran glanced at it. “We’ll take that as well,” he told the proprietor.

“What are you buying?” she asked. When he showed her, she laughed, “Efran! What are you going to do with twenty walking sticks?”

“Give them to the children, of course,” he said, grinning.

As the proprietor took his money, he paused. “You wouldn’t be Lord Efran, would you?”

Efran glanced up, smiling. “Yes. And if anyone else complains about your stock, refer them to the fortress.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” he said, sincerely.

So Efran and Minka had to return to the fortress with their purchases before going on to the chapel. Minka demanded that the painting be hung in the foyer, which it was, promptly. Efran sent one walking stick figure up to the workroom with the message that Ryal was correct in permitting the shop to do business on the Lands. Then Efran sent the rest of the walking sticks to the children via Eustace.

Unfortunately, they were still in class at the time, so Eustace’s walking in with a boxful of toys created such a disruption that Mistress Hazeldene gave up on lessons for the day. The girls screeched at the spindly sticks, throwing them at the boys, who picked them up to throw them back. But a few of the children—Toby, Almund, Elwell, and Hassie, first—discovered their ability to walk down an incline. So Mistress Hazeldene had a lesson after all in the discussion of gravity and mechanics. However, she had to remove the pieces of one walking stick from Joshua’s mouth and rescue another from Nakam.

Meanwhile, Efran and Minka put back on the cloaks to get to the chapel, as a light rain had begun again. Eryk was waiting to take their horses at the front doors, then Hartshough met them. “Good morning, Lord Efran and Lady Minka. May I offer you a hot beverage this morning?”

Minka said, “That sounds wonderful, Hartshough.”

Efran was talking to one of the door guards, who saluted and trotted off in his uniform cloak. Efran turned back to say, “Yes, thank you, Hartshough. And send one up to Justinian, if you will.”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said, taking their cloaks.

They went over to the seating area, where Marguerite met them. “Oh, my. This must be important,” she said, squeezing Minka in a hug. Minka was grateful, again, to see her auntie’s short hair. It was so cute and innocent that most people stopped staring at Minka’s hair.

“He wants Justinian to tell him something that he doesn’t want me to know about. Is the patio all wet?” Minka asked, looking to the back of the house. Efran directed a long glance at her.

Marguerite said, “Oh, yes, much too wet to sit. You and I will talk here and send the men to the dining table.”

“That would be fine. Thank you,” Minka said, settling on the divan. Efran remained standing, but watched her.

Hartshough brought over a tray with steaming mugs. “Here you are. I hope you enjoy it.” He set the tray on the small table, then handed mugs to the visitors, first, then to Marguerite. Taking up the last mug, he said, “I shall deliver this one to Lord Justinian.”

“Thank you,” Efran murmured from his mug. He sipped, then raised his face knowingly. But having been chastised about competitions identifying ingredients, he said nothing.

Minka tasted hers and breathed, “Oh, that’s wonderful. Is this the new caova everyone’s talking about?”

Hartshough paused on the stairway to tell her, “Yes, Lady Minka.” He then proceeded up to Justinian’s room on the loft.

After sipping her drink, Marguerite said, “Oh, my. I don’t know where he comes up with these amazing combinations.”

Taking another sip, Minka asked, “What is that seasoning? It’s not cinnamon or nutmeg. . . .” Mute, Efran kept his face down. “Anise?” she murmured thoughtfully. Efran’s mouth was shut so tightly that he couldn’t drink for a minute. “What do you think it is, Auntie?” Minka demanded.

Marguerite sighed, “I’m afraid I don’t know.” Efran inhaled deeply through his nose, as his mouth was shut.

Before long, Justinian made his way down the stairs with his eyes closed, one hand on the rail and one on Hartshough, who guided him to the divan, upon which he sat. He put his elbows on his knees so as to use both hands in receiving the cup from Hartshough and raising it to his lips.

His eyes opened to slits. “Unique flavor,” he murmured. “It’s seasoned with . . . thyme?”

“No, Lord Justinian,” Hartshough said. Everyone looked at Efran, whose head was bowed. But he was silent.

“Not thyme,” Justinian said pensively. Everyone watched as he took another sip. “Oh,” he said in enlightenment. “That’s sage, of course.” Efran’s jaw was working, but he held it closed.

“Regrettably, no, Lord Justinian,” Hartshough said.

“Now, this is a challenge,” Justinian said as though taking up armor. He took another drink, pausing to swish it around his mouth. “Marjoram,” he declared.

Hartshough began, “I’m so sorry—”

“Savory. Oregano. Basil,” Justinian fired off.

“Oh, dear,” Hartshough said. Efran was drawing shaky breaths, practically weeping.

Marguerite put her cup down with finality on the small table. “Oh, this is absurd. One of you tell us what it is right now!”

Everyone looked between Hartshough and Efran, who was still standing. When the latter remained stonily silent, Hartshough said in deep regret, “Rosemary, Lady Marguerite.” And Efran choked on a sob.

Minka practically slammed her mug to the table to jump up and hold him tightly. “I’m sorry! You can tell us whatever’s in anything from now on!”

“Thank you,” he said happily, raising his dry face in satisfaction.

“Oh! You!” She attempted to beat on his chest, but he was holding her close, laughing.

Marguerite threw her hands up and Justinian said, “Well, at least I’m awake now. Rosemary. Well done, Hartshough.”

“Thank you, Lord Justinian,” Hartshough said.

At that time, the front doors were opened to permit the entrance of Youshock, dripping. Hartshough hurried forward to take his cloak. Youshock came into the seating area to salute Efran. “You summoned me, sir?”

Efran said, “Yes, Youshock. You saw everything that happened with Thurlow at the end there, before he died, and you saw most of it before I did. So, Justinian—how do we find the Tinkerer?”

Justinian surveyed the two soldiers almost in pity. “First, you both need decent haircuts and decadent clothes.”

Efran said, “It won’t do any good. The Tinkerer has already seen me.”

Justinian corrected him: “We’re not trying to fool *him*, dear brother, but the people who will tell you where he is.”

“Ah,” said Efran.

“Now,” Justinian began, then paused as Hartshough approached with a breakfast tray. “Ah. Excellent. Thank you, Hartshough. Now, can you give these two men upper-tier haircuts?”

“Yes, Lord Justinian,” Hartshough said.

Efran eyed Justinian’s longish brown, slightly wavy hair. “Like yours? I’m not getting curls,” he declared.

Justinian sighed, “No, dear brother. My signals are considerably subtler than you want.”

“Oh,” Efran said warily.

“Hartshough, please cut their hair after they *bathe*. *Both* of them,” Justinian said.

Efran and Youshock looked at each other, then Youshock said, “Pardon me, Lord Justinian, but—may we just stand out in that heavy rain out there? Er, out of uniform? Sir?”

Justinian glanced up over his breakfast. “Yes, if you take soap. And use it.”

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Chapter 5

Marguerite said, “Hartshough, please get them soap and have Eryk set up bathing panels in the backyard for them.”

“Yes, Lady Marguerite,” Hartshough said.

When Hartshough brought their soap, Efran and Youshock went out to the backyard, stripping down to their breeches on the patio. These they removed when they went out into the yard. Trusting the hedges along the iron fencing to shield them, they began bathing before Eryk got the panels set up. It was just a coincidence that several women had to test their waterproof cloaks by passing repeatedly on the sidewalk next to the chapel yard.

By the time Efran and Youshock came in to dry off and get their hair cut, Justinian had dressed in one of his elegant suits to pay a visit to Elvey’s. First, she sent over a seamstress to take both men’s measurements. Youshock submitted, but Efran argued that they already had his. Nonetheless, the seamstress insisted on new measurements. So Efran had Minka do his.

Then Justinian sent over several partially completed suits of the style that he wanted them to wear. The ones that fit them best would be sent back over to Elvey’s for quick finishing (all paid by the Fortress, of course). Minka helped Efran dress, and Hartshough helped Youshock. Then they went to Justinian’s room to look at themselves in his standing mirror. Hartshough made adjustments to the layers as Marguerite and Minka stood in the doorway to watch.

Youshock’s suit was turquoise and Efran’s dusky rose. As he peered at himself in the mirror in the frilly shirt and distinctive haircut—long on top and practically shaved on the sides—Efran murmured, “I’d be tempted to punch a man who was wearing this.”

“That’s the point, dear brother,” Justinian said, entering.

“You don’t look like this,” Efran argued, turning.

“That is because my clothes signal my nobility. Yours tell the world that you’re a wealthy scoundrel,” he patiently explained.

“Oh,” Efran said. “This, too?” he asked, waving helplessly at his hair.

“Oh, yes,” Justinian said. “That sends a definite message.”

“Which is—?” Efran asked, squinting in the mirror.

In reply, Justinian turned inquiring eyes to Minka. Efran looked. She was eyeing him dubiously but, definitely interested. “You like this?” Efran asked her, astonished.

“It’s . . . different,” she said, then took herself in hand. “I’m going to wait downstairs.” And she turned as if having been propositioned. Efran and Justinian both laughed silently, then looked at Youshock. He was blushing.

“I suppose I have to take the hair with me when I go back on duty,” he posed, as it was an unapproved cut. But he added, “I need all the help I can get with the women, sir.”

“At ease,” Efran said, amused.

Before too long, they were fully dressed out in suits, hats, capes and walking sticks. By now it had stopped raining. The door guards Loseby and Milo watched attentively as the three men gathered in the foyer, shaking down all the layers while Hartshough went around with a clothing brush.

Justinian said, “I’m going to take you in my carriage around to several places in Westford whose operators may give us the information you need. I’ll tell you exactly what to say on the way up. Have you got a lot of royals? At least fifty?”

Efran opened his hands, then looked toward Loseby, who extended a loaded pouch that had just been delivered. “Administrator DeWitt wishes you the best of luck, Captain.”

“Thank you.” Efran took the pouch of royals, then paused as Justinian cleared his throat. “What?” Efran asked.

Justinian turned. “Dear Marguerite, may we borrow a large purse with a shoulder strap?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” she said, retreating to her bedroom.

“I have to carry a woman’s purse?” Efran asked in disbelief.

Justinian sighed. “The point is, that anyone who questions your masculinity regrets it.”

“Oh. So I may have to hurt some bricklayers who get fresh with me?” Efran asked.

“No, just make them think you will,” Justinian patiently explained.

Marguerite returned to hand him her purse, which he transferred to Efran’s hand. He dumped all the royals into it, tossing the empty pouch back to Loseby. Before he could hang the purse on his shoulder, Justinian reached over to detach the cape and assist him out of the suit jacket. Then Justinian hung the strap on his neck for the purse rest at his side. A steel clip on the purse secured it to Efran’s belt.

Hartshough lifted the jacket for Efran to shrug it back on. “Oh, that’s why the panels are so large,” Efran murmured. Then Hartshough replaced the cape over the jacket, smoothing it down over the purse. Efran said, “That’s good, Hartshough, but please put our regular clothes in the carriage for when we don’t need these any more.” He didn’t know how to ask for his regular hair back.

“Pardon, Lord Efran, but that has been done,” Hartshough said.

Efran exhaled, “You think of everything.”

He took up the feathered hat, and they paused as Verlice descended the stairs to join them, wearing a similar ensemble. "Well, well, well!" he said in admiration. "Is that Efran? It is! You look almost presentable, my friend. May I take you around to meet some of my acquaintances?"

Furtive looks went around the group, and storm clouds gathered on Marguerite's brow. Efran said, "Perhaps later, Verlice. We have an errand to run at the moment."

"Very well. I'll be in late, Mother," Verlice said, bending to kiss her cheek.

"We'll talk," she said blankly.

"Certainly." He set his hat on his head with a pat and strode out.

Grinning, Efran turned to Minka to take her in his arms. "Don't embarrass me," she said, half angry and half interested.

"All right." He kissed her head so that she looked patently dissatisfied.

Pulling away, she crossed her arms and said, "Don't you dare get hurt. You too, Youshock."

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said.

Pulling on gloves, Justinian said, "I, of course, never do."

Minka slitted her eyes at him. "Because you don't associate with their crowd, *do you?*"

"No, of course not, dear Minka," Justinian said quickly. Then he hustled his companions out.

They three went out to Justinian's elegant carriage in the late morning. Mumme and Stephanos were dressed as driver and footman, and Hartshough had considerably packed a traveling luncheon for the party. When the carriage started out with a lurch, Justinian held his ale out so that it didn't drip on his suit. As they ate and drank, he sketched out a preliminary plan.

"I will check first with a contact to see who is likely to have information about the Tinkerer's whereabouts. Then I will give you certain code words to drop. As hard as it may be, Efran, you simply have to be smooth and charming. Your name is Lord DiMaio. Youshock, you're Lord Unver," Justinian said.

"Thank you, sir!" Youshock said.

"You're welcome. I have no name; you won't reference me at all," he told them. During the quick trip, he covered minor details with them, especially how to sit in their bulky costumes, as well as when and how to remove their hats.

As they were approaching Westford, Mumme pulled over to lean down and shout, "Where to, Captain?"

Efran looked at Justinian, who called back, "The Porterhouse!"

"Aye, sir," Mumme responded, and clucked to the horses again.

"Who's your contact at the Porterhouse?" Efran asked.

“Goggin,” Justinian said. “Disgusting fellow, but greedy and too cowardly to lie to me.” Efran nodded minutely, smiling.

When the carriage came to a stop in front of the Porterhouse, Efran and Youshock waited while Justinian exited to trot up the stairs into the new inn. Looking across the street, Efran nodded to Lovedahl’s Beauty Treatments. “That’s where Minka got her hair done,” he murmured to Youshock, who studied it through the carriage window.

Noting the boy working in the backyard, Youshock said, “And that’s who she got the clothes from.”

Efran looked over the yard. “Yes, that’s likely.”

Justinian returned to the carriage within minutes. Before climbing in, he called up, “Just pull around to the side of the Porterhouse here.”

“Yes, sir,” Mumme said.

Justinian dropped onto the cushioned seat in disgruntlement. “Someone struck fear into Goggin’s shriveled heart; he didn’t have any name to give me but Lovedahl there.” His eyes flicked toward her shop.

“Excellent,” Efran breathed.

“The words you need to drop are *primrose*, *barley*, and *nighttime*,” Justinian told him.

Efran scowled. “That will take a couple of paragraphs if I want it to make any sense.”

“Don’t bother with reason or rhyme; just put the words out,” Justinian said, and Efran exhaled.

When the carriage pulled to a stop beside the Porterhouse, Efran and Youshock climbed out. Mumme and Stephanos also dropped down for Stephanos to ask, “Where’re you going, Captain?”

“Lovedahl’s across the street,” Efran said in a low voice.

“We’ll be working on the carriage while we keep an eye out, Captain,” Stephanos returned in like voice.

As Efran and Youshock crossed the street, Efran murmured, “I’m DiMaio and you’re Unver. Help me remember.”

“Yes, Lord DiMaio. I’m Unver, Lord DiMaio. Did you say your name was DiMaio, sir? How do you do? I’m Unver,” Youshock rambled so that Efran was almost laughing by the time he opened the door of the beauty shop.

There were no customers inside. As Lovedahl approached them, evaluating, Efran swept off his hat to bow to her. With the lilt of high Westfordian (incongruous with his Polonti features) he said, “Good afternoon. I am Lord DiMaio; this is my associate Lord Unver. I’m looking for a gift for a special lady, and I hope that you have something in the way of primroses or barley bread. I’ve traveled a good ways to get here, and want to get back to her with something by nighttime.” He crinkled his eyes at her, just trusting that his costume and demeanor would prevent her recognizing him.

“Lord DiMaio, is it?” she murmured, a hand to her hair. “I don’t know; I’ll have to check my stock. Primroses are so expensive, you know.”

“I’m anxious to have them,” he said, reaching for his purse.

During this opening gambit, Youshock had taken off his hat to look around. Seeing the boy just inside the back door, Youshock ambled over in a friendly manner and said, “Nice plot you have here. What are you growing?” He did not attempt to disguise his rural accent.

The boy glanced indifferently to the yard. “Just poppies and some lavender that Lady Lovedahl uses.” He paused with something on his mind, and Youshock waited with an easy, attentive air. Then the boy whispered, “Did your master get ’er back all right? He was mighty torn up when he came in looking for her.”

“Yes, of course! That’s why he came back here, to get her a gift. Say, I’m Unver. What’s your name?” Youshock asked.

“Jian. So, they’re back together?” he asked hopefully.

“All good and well. My friend in the carriage will tell you about it, and we’ve got some really good eats to share there, too. Some pork on a stick—”

“You got pork on a stick?” Jian breathed.

“Yeah, come have some,” Youshock urged. When Jian glanced back at Lovedahl, Youshock gestured, “Eh, they’ll be talking for hours. I’ll get you back okay.”

“If you promise,” Jian said.

Youshock nodded most earnestly, and they slipped out the back door. From there, Youshock took Jian across the street to the carriage. Mumme looked over quickly as Youshock opened the door and nudged his new friend inside. “Coo!” Jian breathed, taking in the luxurious appointments.

Justinian looked over languidly. “What’ll you have?”

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Chapter 6

Following Jian into the carriage and closing the door behind him, Youshock said, “My friend Jian would like the pork on a stick, if there’s any left.”

“Of course. Have an ale with that,” Justinian said, reaching into the basket for the wrapped pork.

Jian took the stick, still gazing at the carriage interior in wonder. Youshock said, “Jian here recognized Lord DiMaio from when he came to get his sweetheart earlier. Jian wanted to know that she got back all right.”

Justinian sat up. “You’re a very perceptive and kindhearted young man. Yes, she did, Master Jian, and now Lord DiMaio wants to thank Lady Lovedahl for helping her.”

Jian mumbled something around the pork, then cleared his mouth to tell him, “That’s good to know. He was so torn up coming in to look for her, I could see that he loved her, and she needed to be back with him. I saw her walking to the southbound road the next morning, and just hoped really hard that she made it back all right.”

Youshock said, “She sure did. Would you like to go down and see her? It’s about a half-hour ride.”

Jian looked torn. “I’ll get in trouble if I go missing when I need to be working. I need the job.”

“I understand, Jian. But when Lord DiMaio hears how concerned you were about his sweetheart, he’ll make sure you’re all right,” Youshock said.

Justinian said, “Here. Have another pork on a stick. And another ale to go with it. Oh, go ahead and finish that ale, and I’ll get you another.”

“If you’re sure,” Jian said.

“Absolutely, my young friend,” Justinian said. Nodding to him, Youshock backed out of the carriage to return to the beauty shop. A few minutes later, Jian was asleep on the cushioned seat.

Very quietly, Youshock reentered the shop’s back door as Lovedahl was saying, “Well, you’re very generous, Lord DiMaio. But I would have to know that I won’t be—exposed.”

“I take care of my friends, Lady,” he said softly, leaning down to brush the top of her head with his lips. He grimaced at the pomade, but went on, “And however I can serve you, I would be . . . delighted. . . .”

Efran moved his lips down to Lovedahl’s. As she raised her face, eyes closed, he added, “. . . when I get back.” And he lifted up, crinkling his eyes in a promise.

Both irritated and attracted, she exhaled, “In the basement of Wigglesworth Dry Goods up the street.”

“Thank you, dear lady.” Efran took her hand to kiss it lightly, bowing to her at the same time. Then he raised up to replace his hat, glancing at Youshock. They two left by the front door with Lovedahl watching out the window.

Efran and Youshock trotted to the carriage half-hidden beside the Porterhouse. Mumme had turned the rig around to face the street. Opening the door, Efran began tossing in his hat, cape and cane, then paused upon seeing the sleeping boy. Justinian said, “We have a guest for the return trip.”

Youshock added, “This is Jian; he recognized you from when you came the first time, Captain. And he was very relieved to hear that the lady got back to you safely.”

“Ah,” Efran said. He asked Justinian, “How likely is the basement of Wigglesworth Dry Goods to be it?”

Justinian raised his eyes to think. “Wigglesworth. . . . Yes, quite likely. But you can’t simply go down to the basement; you have to follow Wigglesworth, only, his name is Quant. If you address him, you have to call him that. You also have to produce a compelling reason for him to lead you down to the basement.”

“Any ideas?” Efran asked.

Justinian looked off in searching thought. “Something about . . . the Tinkerer’s daughter.”

“Oh, tell me that you know where she is,” Efran breathed. By now he was in the carriage, stripping off the decadent clothes to put on his own. Youshock was redressing in workman’s clothes as well. But the hair on both remained as it was.

Justinian answered pensively, “No, no one knows her location, and the more oblique you make the reference, the better.”

“What do I call the Tinkerer when I ask Quant about him?” Efran asked, straightening to button his pants.

“Nothing, absolutely, just ‘he.’ I doubt that anyone knows his name, either,” Justinian said, and Efran raised his eyes. *Para, para something. What did Thurlow say? What does it mean?* Efran thought hard about this.

Opening the purse, Efran took out a handful of royals which he put in his pocket, and gave another handful to Youshock. Leaving the purse, Efran stepped out with Youshock following. Efran paused to regard the sleeping boy, then told Justinian, “I want you to take the carriage back now. Take him to Estes; if he’s too old to be with the Abbey children, find him a job.”

Justinian nodded; Efran looked up to Mumme and Stephanos. “Tell Commander Wendt I want ten men in tradesmen clothing. Youshock and I will be at Wigglesworth Dry Goods, but they’re not to force an entry unless something looks really wrong, or I don’t come out by nightfall.”

“Yes, Captain,” Mumme said, refraining from his usual salute. Efran and Youshock stood back as the carriage departed. Then they watched Lady Lovedahl step out of her back door, calling, “Jian? Jian!”

“Let’s go,” Efran said.

As they walked leisurely up the sidewalk in the direction of Wigglesworth, Efran said, “I’m going in to talk to Quant. You’re to enter a few minutes later just to look around, so that we won’t be seen as together. Just—keep an eye on things.”

“Yes, sir,” Youshock murmured, pulling on a flat cap to hide his hair. Efran hadn’t thought to bring one.

Approaching the door, Efran raised his eyes to the unseen. *How do I do this? If You really directed me here, then show me what to do.* And he opened the door.

There was a customer at the counter, so Efran paused at the shelves of hardware supplies. Fingering a hammer, he began taking shots in the dark: *It had four syllables—four? Yes, and ended in a long e sound, like, Parabeesly. No. Paraleevy. No. Paraskely. No. Why is this important? Is it important? It must be for Thurlow to remember it, drugged as he was.* The woman at the counter was lingering to chat, and Efran glanced up to see Quant eyeing him. So Efran knew he had one chance to get past the watchman here.

Paraslevy. No. Since Quant was aware of him, Efran wandered over to stand at the counter behind the woman. She was saying, “So I told her, no, of course not, you wouldn’t see anything like that for sale at Wigglesworth.”

Quant glanced back at her to say, “You’re quite right, Mathilde.” Then his eyes turned back to the rakish Polonti, who was watching him, as well.

“Thank you, dear Wigglesworth; I can always count on your stock. Now what happened to the Skevi lace?” she demanded.

A bolt of lightning passed through Efran's brain, and he said softly, "Perhaps you're looking for Paraskevi."

She turned around to him in mild umbrage, especially regarding his hair. "I never heard of Paraskevi lace."

"Then I'm mistaken," he replied to her while looking at Quant, who was now tense.

"Perhaps," she said, slightly flummoxed. She took up her basket of purchases to leave.

Efran kept his eyes on Quant, who regarded him indecisively, then called over his shoulder, "Loughy, come watch the counter a moment."

"Yes, sir." The young apprentice scurried over to take his place. Glancing at Efran, Quant began walking toward the back, and Efran followed. Youshock entered to see the shopkeeper open a door in the back of the store which he and the Captain passed through. As it wafted shut, Youshock contemplated the fishing rods in front of him.

Quant began leading Efran down dimly lit stairs. Efran glanced at stacks and shelves of boxes in the basement below them, and a long table in the midst of the shelves, well lit with lanterns. It was cluttered with mechanical parts. Efran's heart began to beat faster.

At the last step, Quant abruptly turned to reascend the stairs behind Efran. Remembering something that Justinian had said about exiting the stairs *after* Quant, Efran remained on the last step. Even after the shopkeeper had returned to the ground floor, Efran stood waiting. *What is this? What am I looking for?*

A glint caught his eye, and he saw a thin wire almost invisibly stretched across the last step at knee level. So he remained on the step without moving.

Efran's hair stood on end before he even saw the Tinkerer shuffle out from behind a shelf. They regarded each other across twenty feet of floor space, then the Tinkerer reached down to lower an obscure lever under the table. Efran saw the glint disappear as the wire dropped.

He stepped over it onto the concrete floor of the basement, but did not approach the table. Almost before he realized that he was speaking, he said, "I know where she is."

Those unnaturally large eyes rested on him without blinking, and the Tinkerer said, "You can't know."

Efran smiled. "You don't know everything."

Something pulsed behind those faded eyes, and the Tinkerer said, "What do you want of me?"

"When I have her, I will send a message to the shopkeeper as to where you're to come. Meanwhile, you don't tinker with anyone else, regardless how much he deserves it," Efran said.

The Tinkerer stared at him without speaking, and Efran turned to trot back up the stairs and open the door to the shop floor. As he passed the counter, Quant looked up, startled, and Efran smiled vaguely on him. Youshock was in the midst of purchasing a fishing rod.

Efran left the shop to begin walking back toward the Porterhouse. When he was almost to its side door, he looked back to see Youshock striding swiftly after him. Since they were out of sight of Wigglesworth, Efran waited for him.

Winded, Youshock caught up to him. “Well, you’re alive. Let me just feel the back of your head before giving you the all-clear, sir.”

Efran laughed, “We’ll talk on the way. Are you going to try your luck at Cavern Lake?”

Hoisting the rod, Youshock said, “Yes sir, I thought to do just that, assuming that you came out again.”

“Yes, well, I’m not exactly ‘out’ yet, but I’ll tell you about it.” Efran nodded toward the main southbound road as they began walking.

Halfway to the Lands, they saw the mounted men coming that Efran had told Mumme to send. So Efran and Youshock waited for them in the middle of the road. When the lead riders, Cudmore and Heus, stopped, the men behind them paused as well.

“The hair’s got them confused,” Efran murmured to Youshock, who grinned. Then Efran called, “Cudmore, have you got a few extra horses?”

“Yes, Captain.” Cudmore saluted in relief. And the twelve of them rode back to the Lands together.

When Efran passed through the wall gates, waving to the gate guards, they rang the alarm bell as was customary on his return from anywhere. He paused to send a man into Barracks A to invite Commander Wendt to come to his own home—the chapel—to hear Efran’s report. He sent another man up hilltop with the same invitation to DeWitt and Estes, and a third man to Ryal’s shop.

Efran and Youshock were welcomed into the chapel with cries and hugs from Minka and Marguerite. Justinian was out on his usual information-gathering rounds, but Marguerite dispatched Eryk to see if he could locate him. Then Minka pulled Efran out to the back grounds, calling, “Jian!”

Efran looked over at Lovedahl’s helper, who had been exploring all the plantings back here, as well as the fountain. He was a little damp for being teased by the water faeries when he tried to find out how the water was pumped up. Also, he’d found a helper in Kraken, who discerned that this was a possible adjacent human. But since Kraken disapproved of the beauty treatment odors that clung to him, he kept knocking the boy over to roll him in the grass.

Jian and Kraken both came trotting over at Minka’s summons. “Yes, it is you!” Jian said, eyes wide. “Lord DiMaio?”

Minka cried, “No, Jian, I told you! This is Efran.”

“Hello, Jian,” Efran smiled down on him. “I was told of your concern for my Minka, and I hope you find a place with us.”

Jian looked conflicted. “Your city is grand, but, do I have to work in a beauty parlor?”

“No, Jian, there are lots of other things you can do!” Minka said.

Efran was briefly arrested by the word *city*. This was the first time he had ever heard the Lands referred to as such. True, it was a child’s opinion, but a child could only express his honest perception. Behind him, Marguerite was saying, “Oh, Efran, come in, so that you can tell us what happened.”

“Yes,” Efran said, turning with Minka in hand.

Jian came along with them. “What is your Hartshough making?”

“Something wonderful, as usual,” Minka said. “Efran will tell us what’s in it. Once or twice he may be wrong, but Hartshough will let you know if he is.” Efran glanced in disgruntlement at her, but Jian nodded as though this were something important to take into account.

As Efran approached the dining table, Wendt leaned back in his chair in expectation. Hartshough opened the door to Gabriel, DeWitt, Ryal, and Justinian. Plus, all the men who had been dispatched to Westford after the Captain were standing around the table, expecting to be informed.

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Chapter 7

Sitting with his elbows on the table, Efran refused Hartshough’s offer of refreshment—“Thank you, but it will distract me so much trying to figure out what’s in it that I’ll forget what I’m supposed to tell you all. So, afterward,” he said to the others’ amusement. Hartshough acquiesced. Meanwhile, several of the men were studying his haircut.

“Bold styling. I wasn’t sure it was you, at first,” DeWitt noted.

Efran laughed, “Now I’m sympathizing with Minka”—for all the stares she drew after cutting her hair. “At any rate, I’m still not sure I can tell you what happened, and I sure don’t know what I’ve done.” So Efran laid out the bare facts of talking to Lovedahl, going to Wigglesworth, and following Quant down the stairs to find the Tinkerer.

“I’ve been obsessed with trying to remember Thurlow’s last word, what he said in the middle of his stuttering. I finally remembered, standing at Wigglesworth’s—Quant’s—counter: ‘Paraskevi.’ It struck me as the name of a place, and when I repeated it to Quant, he took me downstairs. So that was something that involved the Tinkerer. He was there, and I blurted, ‘I know where she is’—just because Justinian said something about his daughter?” Efran paused to look at Justinian, who nodded slightly.

Efran resumed, “He told me, ‘you can’t know,’ and I told him that he didn’t know everything—which sounds like a child’s taunt. Annd, I told him I’d send him a message when I’d found her. Why I said all that, I wish I knew. But I told him not to tinker with any more people.”

He spread his hands in mild disgust. “Why should I care? And what’s worse, bait him? But, I can’t shake the feeling that I was supposed to go do that.”

He looked around in the silence, almost begging for a lecture. Ryal said, “Interesting. ‘Paraskevi’ is a woman’s name. In fact, the original Paraskevi of Rome was a Christian who was killed for her faith many years ago. Her name is Greek, meaning ‘preparation.’”

Those around the table listened quietly. Efran said, “Perhaps I need to prepare.”

When no one else had anything to add, the meeting broke up.

The following day—December 9th—clueless as to what he should do to prepare for finding Paraskevi, Efran went with Minka to Law class. Soames tried to defer the teaching of the subject to him (which was on the obligations of nobility) but Efran refused in alarm: “I’d just demonstrate how little I know. You’re the teacher; take the blows.”

The men laughed, but Soames said, “That’s figuratively, gentlemen.” So they covered the topic, and Efran was relieved that he knew these obligations, and—for the most part—practiced them. He had not remembered the specific wording of one such obligation, however: “to uphold the rights of the poor and the downtrodden.”

The Law did not require alms to the poor, although a condition for nobility in the Lands was a contribution to the Fund of St. Benedict (the Widow’s Fund) in accordance with one’s income. In fact, nobles who gave at least 30% of their income to the Widow’s Fund were exempt from taxes altogether.

But what the Law stipulated was that the poor and the lower class be allowed the same rights as the well-off and the titled. That, and not alms, is what enabled the poor to escape poverty. What if the Abbey charter had prohibited Polonti from obtaining the bequest? Efran would have been a poor soldier for the rest of his (probably short) life.

He was still mulling this over when he and Minka went out to the back grounds to await the children, who were in their morning class. Since becoming lord of the Abbey, he had almost forgotten the stigma of being Polonti in the Southern Continent. In the Hall of Memories, he had seen several Polonti who had likewise been its lord over the centuries. But in some places, like Eurus and Crescent Hollow, it was unthinkable for a Polonti to attain such status.

Due to Roman’s enduring influence, Westford had stubbornly clung to his Law, protecting the poor and the disfavored, for over 200 years. But now? Efran looked around, then gestured to the first soldier he saw, Eymor. The young man ran up, saluting. “Captain?”

Minka looked over as Efran said, “Yes, go up to the second-floor workroom and ask DeWitt if the Westford nobles are still interested in an alliance with us.”

“Yes, Captain.” Eymor took off at a run.

“What are you thinking?” Minka asked, holding his arm.

He looked down at her. “Remember when we were afraid of being seen too close together, so that I’d be hanged?” The leniency that a guardian who was a Southerner might receive would not be given a Polonti.

“I try not to,” she said, twining her fingers in his.

He nodded slightly. “I considered it worth dying for.”

“Why are you thinking of that now?” she asked warily.

“Joshua. Isreal. Chorro, and Pia, for starters,” he replied—the Polonti children of the Abbey. She leaned into him, and he kissed her head. “No pomade,” he noted.

She reared up. “I hardly ever used pomade, ever, and when I did, I washed it right out again!”

“Yes, but if you ever got a mouthful of it, you’d never forget it, either,” he said. She beat on him and hugged him.

Shortly, Eymor returned to salute. “Captain, Administrator DeWitt says, yes, they’ll be coming down to talk again in the next few days.”

Efran said, “Tell Administrator DeWitt that they must agree to abide by the Law of Roman to get my signature. That wasn’t in the agreement that I read earlier.”

“Yes, Captain.” Eymor ran off again. Minka cuddled Efran.

They both looked up as the children came pouring out of the back corridor around Eymor. Most of them went right over to their favorite play areas—some with surviving walking sticks—but Isreal paused to look all around the grounds. When he saw Efran (recognizing him despite his new hair) his face lit up and he came running over.

Smiling, Efran bent to hold out his arms. But before reaching him, Isreal skidded to a stop, holding up his hands. He searched the ground, then took up a stick. In a bare patch of dirt in front of the bench, he got on his knees to write, I S R E A L. Then he announced clearly around his stitches, “I am Isreal.”

“Yes, you are!” Efran grabbed him to toss him in the air a few times while he emitted his troll-like laugh.

Minka exhaled, “Oh, Isreal, that’s wonderful! We’re so proud of you.”

Seeing an entertainment that they had overlooked, the other children ran over to demand their turn, including Joshua. So Efran had to throw the rest of them up in the air—except Ivy, who was disdainful, and Acy, who was scared. But her little brother Pim laughed his head off.

Eymor ran up again to tell Efran, “Captain, Administrator DeWitt says, ‘That’s good.’”

Efran laughed, “Excellent,” and Eymor saluted to go attend his duties. Watching Isreal run to play with the other children, Efran told Minka, “That was DeWitt’s way of telling me that I killed the agreement, and he’s fine with that.”

“Good,” she said, sounding like Joshua, and he laughed again.

That evening, tucked tight into Efran’s side, Minka murmured, “I could live in a cave of snow as long as I had you to warm me at night.”

Almost asleep, he opened his eyes. Then his brows drew down. “Where did you sleep that one night at the Porterhouse?”

In something between a grunt and a bark, she said, “A kitchen cabinet.”

He thought about that. “One of those long ones? On the floor?”

“Um hmm,” she confirmed, wrapping an arm tighter around his waist.

“Wasn’t it cold?” he asked.

“Freezing,” she murmured into his side.

He writhed a little, tickled by her breath. “Well—how were you able to sleep?”

She lifted her face to say loudly, “I stole Goggin’s stinking coat and had to wear it halfway to the Lands!”

There was a breathless moment as she waited for some sympathy. And he said, “Well, don’t do that again.” With a cry of fury, she scrambled on top of him to pin him, which he enjoyed.

The following day, December 10th, DeWitt sent a messenger to Efran to tell him that he had Tourse up to give a report on Choules’ area in the east Lands. By the time Efran got up to the workroom, Tourse was gone, so DeWitt gave him the abbreviated version: “None of the buildings that had been started in the last three weeks were approved. I’m still thinking about what to do with them. The men who had begun those buildings transferred the materials to start construction just north of us. So Tourse sent some men out to tell them that they could build only single-family houses that close to our walls; anything else we’ll burn down.” Efran silently agreed.

Thinking further, DeWitt added, “Ah, Tourse talked to Choules, who denied responsibility for the unapproved buildings, for the attempts to appropriate our fields and livestock, and for designating himself lord. So, the wolves shook them up pretty badly. How did you summon them, Efran?”

“I didn’t. I just invoked my title. As soon as I saw them coming, I tried to warn Wolverson. Most of his men listened, and ran. The ones who wouldn’t listen died,” Efran said.

He pressed his lips together tightly, looking out the east-facing window. “Abiding by our agreement with the wolves has been good in several respects—first, it’s simply a point of honor to keep our word. But also, their presence prevents our getting overcrowded. We need the space; we need the fields and the open meadows. Our charter is to take in *children*, not simply everyone who wants some land. This keeps our priorities straight.”

Estes nodded and DeWitt said, “I can see that.” Then they got back to work.

Efran got a message from Coghill, as well, that he had completed the tests on Thurlow’s organs, and had a brief report, if the Captain cared to stop by. Efran cared, and took Kraken down immediately to hear what he had to say.

Waving something pale gray in a glass bottle, Coghill told him, “Yes, Efran, as near as I can determine, he ingested several doses of Aqua Tofana. The effects are much like arsenic, except subtler, so that the time of death can be manipulated.”

“Is there an antidote?” Efran asked.

“Yes, a mixture of lemon juice and vinegar. I’ll have Delio prepare a batch, just in case,” Coghill said.

“Good. Now, what caused the stuttering?” Efran asked.

“As far as I know, that’s a sign of the brain shutting down as death approaches. As for Lord Shaffer’s stuttering before he was sent off in his carriage, he may have been poisoned as well. But I would have to examine him to know,” Coghill said.

Efran looked dissatisfied. “Then what accounts for the—the orders they were given? Thurlow was sent to me with the message that he had a new name. And Shaffer came to the hearing set to overrule Ryal. How can a poison do that?”

“The dosing would have to incorporate some strong suggestion or hypnosis by an experienced practitioner,” Coghill said.

That would describe the Tinkerer, Efran thought. He said, “I see. Thank you, doctor.” Coghill nodded and Efran walked out, musing, During all that, Thurlow somehow managed to overhear this important name and relay it as a message of his own.

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Chapter 8

Ever since the hearing five days ago (to determine whether Minka should go to trial for perjury, which she didn't), Windry had been so busy making and selling dresses that she hadn't given a thought to the disappointing outcome, or Efran, or her children, or Surley. But today, December 10th, she received a sealed message from Surley's boss Grosvenor. However, the messenger wouldn't hand it over until she had paid him two silver pieces.

This she did irately. He left without waiting for a response, and she broke open the seal to read:

“To the Widow of Construction Supervisor Surley
“From Westford Construction Overseer Grosvenor

“Dear Madam,

“It is my grievous duty to inform you of the death of your husband, fill in the blank here. He died of state cause of death. Therefore, you are urged to come clear out his residence at put address here as soon as possible.

“With deepest Sympathy,
“Westford Construction Overseer Grosvenor”

“What—?” she gasped, studying the parchment. “Surley's dead? And I have to come clear out Normous?” Waving the notice in bewilderment, she said, “I need—help. I need Efran. How can I—” She barely remembered to close the door behind her before running down the street to Main, and from there to the notary shop.

Bursting in, she pushed past the waiting customers to thrust the notice at Ryal. Giardi, beside him, glanced over from her customer. Windry cried, “Ryal, I need Efran! Surley has died and I have to clear out his house!”

Ryal read the notice gravely. He paused, then went to the door of the back room. “Soames, will you please come assist Giardi for a moment? I have an urgent errand.”

“Yes, Lord Ryal.” Soames left his copying and came out to stand behind the front counter. Giardi nodded to him as he asked the waiting customer, “What can I do for you?” The woman presented her request.

Ryal took Windry's notice to tell her, "We'll go to the Commander for assistance." He led out of the shop and down the sidewalk. As that was better than nothing, Windry followed.

Entering Barracks A, Ryal saw the Second Gabriel with the scribe Viglian in the front office. Gabriel looked at the visitors in wary surprise. "Lord Ryal! What is it?"

Ryal handed him the death notice. Gabriel read it several times, squinting, and Ryal said, "This is rather unusual, but I am requesting a cart and a bodyguard to accompany Windry to her husband's house at the construction area in Westford. If at all possible, we want to bring back Surley's body for Coghill to look at."

Offended, Windry said, "Well, I need his things, first."

Ryal noted, "Yes, a wagon, if possible, Gabriel."

Handing the notice back to him, Gabriel said, "Right away, Lord Ryal. If you'll wait here, please."

"Get Efran," Windry instructed.

Gabriel paused, then told her, "I don't think you want to wait till he's available. Let's get you men who can take you right away."

"Yes," Ryal said. Windry exhaled in dissatisfaction, but that seemed to be the only course open at the moment. She went to look over the refreshment table, then picked up an ale and a twisty roll.

Within a half hour, Gabriel leaned in the front door to tell her and Ryal, "All right, then; we've got your wagon and your bodyguard."

"Thank you, Gabriel," Ryal said, leading Windry out.

The large wagon with the driver, Doudney, and four mounted men, armed, were waiting at the front gates. Doudney leaned over from the driver's seat to give Windry a hand up, then Ryal handed her the notice. "Thank you, gentlemen," he said, stepping away.

"Wait! Aren't you coming?" Windry asked him.

"No, but I would like to hear when you return," Ryal told Doudney.

"Yes, sir," Doudney replied. The gates were opened to them, and they departed.

Ryal turned to Gabriel to request, "Send a message up to the workroom, if you will. Windry told me that Surley was stuttering before he left the Lands at the conclusion of the hearing. Also, he had advance knowledge that Lord Shaffer was going to overrule me."

Gabriel drew a quick breath, then said, "Yes, Lord Ryal." Nodding, Ryal returned to his shop. And Efran had returned to the workroom in time to hear the message.

Estes, DeWitt and Efran sat silently contemplating this development. DeWitt observed, "This begins to look like a conspiracy."

Efran was shaking his head. “They were puppets. That, again, reminds me of the strawmen.”

Estes said, “I wish we knew what happened with Shaffer.”

Efran grimaced. “That would require sending a messenger, and I don’t know that I want to send anyone else to Westford right now.”

DeWitt said, “Then we wait for other bits of information to float down to us.”

Efran glanced at him wryly. “So is the agreement with the nobles off?”

DeWitt raised his hands, and Estes said, “For now. We can’t get around your insistence that they agree to abide by the Law of Roman. I didn’t notice that it wasn’t in the draft we signed.”

“Neither did I. It just seemed to be a given. How are we missing all this?” DeWitt asked Estes in aggravation.

Efran leaned back, drumming his fingers on the table. “Marguerite told me that Cocci is a dark altior.”

DeWitt squinted. “What’s that?”

Efran explained, “Altiors are the higher class of faerie, most like humans, which Marguerite and Minka are. Marguerite is her great-grandmother, you know. Dark altiors have no soul and no conscience—on top of whatever other power they possess. Lissa was also a dark altior. Oh, and Cocci told her that I didn’t want to marry her, after all—which I never knew until days ago.”

“Dark altiors,” DeWitt muttered. “How many of those are running around?”

Efran gestured, unknowing, but Estes asked, “Do you suppose that’s what the Tinkerer is?”

Efran sat up. “That’s something I need to ask Marguerite. She saw the Tinkerer when he came to the chapel after Thurlow and his—gabbot.”

“Let us know,” DeWitt said, returning to his worksheets. So Efran got up to go find Minka.

She was on the back grounds, of course, exploring the children’s winter gardens. After showing her all they had done, they were back at play. Noah was off with Bethune’s Erastus, probably getting into trouble, while Toby, Alcmund, Elwell and Calix were catching frogs to race them in the pond. Chorro and Isreal were attending Tourjee in the garden. (Despite Isreal’s deformity, Chorro was drawn to him as the only other Polonti boy his age at the Abbey.) Efran didn’t see that Tourjee was showing them an assassin bug—useful for killing pests, but not good for touching, as it delivered a painful bite.

Efran grew tense looking for Joshua, then found him riding Kraken to deliver another load of compost to the gardens, which seemed a never-ending task. There was a young soldier, Tomer, walking alongside to somewhat guard against Joshua’s falling, but mostly to keep an eye out for strangers on the back grounds. Noticing the Captain, Tomer saluted, and Efran nodded in response.

Seeing the salute, Minka saw Efran, so came to him at the back door. He folded her into him, stroking her wispy hair. He still liked it, especially as it was regaining some curl. When she turned her face up to him, he told her, “I need to talk to your auntie, but I don’t want to yank the children away, especially Kraken, who’s as much trouble as a child. Let’s just walk down.”

“All right,” she said happily. So they went around the east side of the fortress to pick up a pair of men—Seagrave and Ley—and walk down the new switchback to the chapel.

Hartshough let them in, as usual: “Good afternoon, Lord Efran, Lady Minka. Lady Marguerite is on the back patio.”

“Thank you, Hartshough,” Minka said, patting his arm. Efran went on a few steps, then slowed to a stop. “Efran?” Minka murmured. He didn’t reply, head turned over his shoulder toward Hartshough. “What is it?” she whispered. But he was still, waiting.

Hartshough finally said, “I would offer refreshments, Lord Efran, but I do not wish to provoke you.”

“Bring it,” Efran said, resuming his walk to the patio. Minka swayed in imitation of his usual expression of impatience. But when he glanced back at her, she was still.

He greeted Marguerite cordially before sitting Minka in the chair to her left. Then he sat across from her and waited for the women to get their small talk out of the way. Seagrave and Ley sat apart with a small table between them. Minka asked her auntie warily, “Is Verlice here?”

“No,” Marguerite said. “I think he knows I want to talk to him, so has made himself scarce.”

They both glanced at Efran, who was silent, amiably looking over the yard with the fountain, cabbage tree, and faerie tree in the far corner. So Minka and Marguerite chatted between themselves until Hartshough brought over a tray with five warm mugs. “I found a new recipe for a winter bracer which you may enjoy,” he said. After serving them, he placed the last two mugs between the men, who raised them in appreciation.

Minka and Marguerite tasted their hot drinks cautiously. Minka breathed, “That’s amazing. Intoxicating!”

“Is there alcohol in it?” Marguerite asked dubiously.

“No, Lady Marguerite,” Hartshough said. Seagrave took a careful sip while Ley drained his in one draught. Then they all looked at Efran as he tasted his.

He was silent, eyes on the distance. “This one is tricky,” he murmured, glancing to Hartshough, who bowed. Taking another sip, he began, “Cacao, obviously.”

“Obviously, Lord Efran,” Hartshough confirmed.

“Vanilla,” Efran said, not quite as adamantly.

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said.

The women were silent while Efran took a third drink. He looked hard at Hartshough, who was waiting impassively. Efran’s jaw worked as he debated the risk of announcing what he thought it must be, unlikely as it seemed. There was utter silence until he said, “Chile pepper.”

Hartshough bowed. “That is correct, Lord Efran.” Efran only straightened a little, but his adoring female audience clapped and cooed. His men grinned at each other as he called for another round.

With the dragon of the day slain and the second round of drinks distributed, Efran said, “Auntie, you told me about Cocci being a dark altior. But you also saw the Tinkerer. Is he a dark altior as well?”

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Chapter 9

Marguerite paused only a moment before replying, “No, Efran. I feel certain that he’s human.”

Leaning toward her, he exhaled, “Where does he get this power? I can feel it surge through him before I even see him.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been around him enough to discern that,” she admitted.

“Is he a threat to us?” Efran asked. She shook her head, unknowing. He sat back, groaning, “I led him to believe that I knew where his daughter was—Paraskevi—*if* that is her name.”

Hartshough appeared at the door so obliquely that only Minka saw him. At his hesitancy, she demanded, “Hartshough, what is it? You know something. What do you know?”

Reluctantly, he came out to the patio. “Very little, Lady Minka, and I fear to muddy the waters with my inadequate knowledge—”

“—but,” she said leadingly.

“Yes, Lady Minka. As Lord Ryal said, Paraskevi is an historical figure, but, the name also refers to a local cave which some groups use as a training ground for their arts,” Hartshough said.

“Arts,” Efran repeated. “What arts? Martial arts?”

“Not precisely, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said.

“Then what?” Efran asked with a tinge of urgency.

“You might say, philosophical arts, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said.

There was silence around the table until Efran asked, “Do you know them?”

Hartshough replied, “I know of them, Lord Efran.”

“Can you get me into their cave just to look around?” Efran asked.

“Not without their knowledge, Lord Efran. But as this is a matter of importance to you, I will make inquiries,” Hartshough said. Seagrave looked thoughtfully to Hartshough, and did speak with him later.

“Thank you,” Efran said intently. Then he took up the mug and chugged it.

The rest of them finished their drinks. Minka was asking Marguerite about Faciane when Justinian appeared at

the door from the kitchen. "Hello, all," he said, taking in those at table while he removed his silk gloves.

"Sit, Justinian," Marguerite said. "Hartshough, bring a bracer for Justinian, please."

"Certainly, Lady Marguerite," he said, withdrawing to the kitchen as Justinian sat.

Placing his hat, walking stick, and gloves on a chair behind him, Justinian said, "I've just come from the front gates to see Windry and her escort return from her husband Surley's house. She was angry because the furnishings that she was able to carry away were few and practically worthless, and there was no money to be found. She's crying foul, which is understandable, but the larger concern is that there was also no Surley. No body, and no indication of what happened or where the supposedly dead man was taken. The bodyguards inquired of Construction Supervisor Grosvenor, who knew absolutely nothing. They then found the Westford notary's office, which was closed, and no sign of where the notary might be.

"So the bodyguards loaded up the wagon with what they could, then two accompanied Windry back here while the other two, ah, Truro and Stourt, went looking for the Lords Colquhoun or McElfresh to see if they might help clear things up. Ah, thank you, Hartshough," Justinian ended as the steaming mug was placed before him.

Efran stood. "I'm going to check in at the front gates." He bent to kiss Minka's head.

"Oh, my, excellent concoction, Hartshough," Justinian said. Efran paused at the doorway to the kitchen. Everyone else was silent as Justinian evaluated the drink. "Hmm. Interesting combination. Cacao, with just a touch of vanilla," Justinian announced.

"Yes, Lord Justinian," Hartshough said.

Efran lingered at the doorway while Justinian took another drink. "And . . . a dash of something incongruous." He swirled the concoction around on his tongue. "Paprika?"

"No, Lord Justinian," Hartshough said in regret. Behind them, Efran smiled.

Justinian took another taste. "Red pepper?" Seeing a negative forthcoming, Justinian posed, "Cayenne?" Efran walked on out in victory.

He took shortcuts to gain Main and then trotted up the sidewalk toward the gates. He tried not to jostle anyone, but Leila in her dress took up practically the whole sidewalk. So he brushed by her, and she shouted after him, "Efran! What did you do to your hair?"

He turned to trot backwards. "I cut it!" Then he stepped off the sidewalk to run in the street so as not to inconvenience anyone else. But many others swiveled to stare at his daring hair cut. Not much later, a swarm of men, both on Main and in the fortress, demanded of their barbers a similar cut.

Glancing at the front gates, Efran saw nothing of the two bodyguards who had remained behind in Westford, so he went into Barracks A. Finding Gabriel with Viglian, Efran asked, "Where is the Commander?"

Gabriel replied, "He took a group to look over Choules' area with Administrator DeWitt, to nail down the particulars of who was building what where in that area. The Commander was disturbed to hear that your life was seriously threatened."

Efran waved. "That won't happen again for a while. Now I want to hear what came of the search for Surley."

So Gabriel gave him an extended version of Justinian's account. "Doudney said it was strange how they couldn't get any information from anyone about what had happened to Surley. He said it was like a blanket covering anything that had to do with him."

"Was his house ransacked?" Efran asked.

"Not that they could tell, but none of them had ever seen the inside of it before," Gabriel said.

"I have," Efran said. That was six months ago, when he had taken a group of men to go get Windry's children Lilou and Calix. "Was his housekeeper there?"

Gabriel shook his head. "They didn't find anyone else there."

"Without the children, he might not have needed her," Efran mused. "And no sign of Shaffer. That's not good. Are they still snowbound?"

"There are a few remaining drifts, but nothing that held them up," Gabriel replied.

"How about the walking sticks?" Efran asked.

"Not a trace of live ones, but there were piles of what might have been remains," Gabriel said.

"All right," Efran said, perturbed. "I want to know—" He broke off at the sound of the wall gates' alarm bell.

Efran, Gabriel, and Viglian ran out to see the guards opening the gates for two riders approaching at a trot—Stourt and Truro. It was immediately apparent that something was wrong, for they rode limply, bouncing in their saddles like new riders, not guiding the horses at all. They entered the gates without a word, looking blankly ahead.

Efran ran forward as one of the gatesmen, Elrod, pulled Truro down from the saddle. He landed on his feet, but looked around as if seeing nothing. "They've been drugged," Efran breathed. "Bring them both to Coghill's!" he ordered, running to the doctor's house.

Flinging open the door, he startled Delio, who sprang up. "Captain—?"

Efran swallowed and said, "Get the antidote to the Aqua Tofana. We've had two men poisoned."

"Yes, Captain. Bring them into this room," she said, nodding behind her. Efran turned in the doorway to whistle.

Shortly, Stourt and Truro were brought in to sit on the high bed of the examining room. First thing, Efran anxiously felt the backs of their heads, but found nothing foreign or unusual. Tolliver came in with a bottle and two cups. "Coghill's out on a call, but I can help you get this down them," he said, pouring. "Hold him. Once he gets it down, it'll come right back up." He nodded toward Stourt, who was sagging.

Graeme held Stourt upright while Tolliver brought the cup to his mouth. "Drink," he ordered. Stourt obeyed, wincing. "Get the bucket down there," Tolliver said, and Nyarko brought it up barely in time for Stourt to vomit forcefully into it.

"All right, that should help. Lay him on that other bed," Tolliver directed. Graeme and Nyarko hoisted the

groaning man to lay him down as instructed while Tolliver turned to administer a dose of the antidote to Truro, who disgorged the poison in like fashion.

Tolliver had both given water to wash out their mouths and drink. They were waking, but Truro peered at Efran without recognition. “You don’t know me? I’m Captain Efran,” he said tensely.

“Yes, sir. I didn’t recognize the hair,” Truro muttered.

Efran swayed only slightly, and the other men laughed in relief. But Efran asked, “*What happened?*”

“Yes, sir,” Truro said, sitting up to blink. Still groggy, he looked over to Stourt.

Unsteadily, Stourt said, “We . . . got the lady to her husband’s house, but, he wasn’t there. No blood or signs of fighting. So we asked around, and, ah, Doudney sent us to the notary’s shop. No one there. So we—stopped by—what was the name of the shop?” he asked Truro.

Truro closed his eyes to think. “Um, Wigglesworth. It’s a general store, like Froggatt’s. We . . . went in to ask where Lord Colquhoun’s house was. Didn’t we?” he asked Stourt.

“I think so,” Stourt said. They were both in uniform, as were all the men who had escorted Windry.

Truro and Stourt sat looking at each other, then Truro shook his head. “I can’t remember anything after that. Only . . . bright spots,” he said.

Stourt nodded in remembrance. “Two bright spots, close together, like, sunlight reflecting off the doctor’s spectacles.”

Efran slowly lifted up. “All right, then. You both rest here. How long do you need to keep an eye on them?” he asked Tolliver.

“Till tomorrow morning, for sure. We’ll want Doctor Coghill to look them over,” Tolliver said.

“That’s good, then. Who’s your Captain?” Efran asked Truro.

“Captain Stites, sir,” Truro said.

Patting Graeme, Efran said, “Go tell Captain Stites that Stourt and Truro need to stay here at Coghill’s today and tonight.” To Tolliver, he said, “Alert me if anything changes.”

“Yes, Captain. At least the antidote appears to be effective,” Tolliver said.

“For which we’re grateful,” Efran said. To Gabriel, he said, “There’ll be no travel to Westford for anyone in the Lands for the time being, except—Delano will need to get to his brewery and shop south of there. Do you know if they survived the walking sticks and the snow?”

Gabriel said, “The walking sticks never appeared on their fields, from what I hear. And, the snow is just normal for them at this time of year”—December.

“Yes, of course. Well then. Carry on,” Efran said, turning out. The men in the room saluted, including Truro and Stourt.

From there, Efran begin walking back to the chapel. He murmured, “All right, now I have a reason. Now it’s personal.”

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Chapter 10

Efran did his best to wait patiently for Hartshough to make inquiries among the group or groups who practiced their arts at Paraskevi, but because he was impatient, he and Minka made daily visits to the chapel. Today, December 13th, they had brought Joshua, Isreal, and Kraken. (Toby, Noah, and Ivy, also adopted, had their friends and established routines hilltop, so usually didn’t come down for these spontaneous visits unless all the children came.)

As were most days on the Lands, this mid-December day was balmy, with sunshine and gentle breezes. So the boys and the horse were in the backyard of the chapel playing in the water fountain, of course. Watching them from the patio, Efran began, “Marguerite, I can’t let them—”

“Oh, yes, you can, Efran! I want them to enjoy themselves here, and they’re not doing any harm!” Marguerite insisted.

Not used to being overruled, Efran went sullenly quiet. Minka worked hard to not laugh. He perked up considerably at the appearance of Hartshough, who bowed. “Pardon, Lord Efran, but I’ve not yet received a response to my queries.”

“No rush, Hartshough,” he said, lapsing back into sullenness.

“Nonetheless, may I offer you a bracer, Lord Efran?” Hartshough said by way of consolation.

Efran glanced up. “Need you even ask?”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said.

Minka raised her brows at her husband, who dropped his head to say, “Yes, Hartshough, that would be most welcome. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Lord Efran,” he replied, withdrawing to the kitchen.

Minka leaned over to cuddle Efran in consolation, and he kissed her head. She suddenly raised up. “Oh, look, there’s Jian! He just showed up to play with them in the fountain!” she laughed.

Efran exhaled in mild displeasure. “Is he not working?”

Marguerite pursed her lips at him. “Yes, Efran, he’s running errands for Froggatt’s and Twombly’s behind us here, and enjoys it very much. It gives him time to stop by and see us, which we enjoy.”

Efran closed his eyes in surrender. “Very good.”

At that time, Verlice descended the stairs; seeing them, he stopped by their table. “Hello, all,” he said, sounding like Justinian. “Well, Efran, if you’ll go get dressed, I’ll take you around to meet some people. You need a trim, by the way. The cut loses its shape if you let it grow out.” He said this with a sweep of his hand over his own hair, cut in a similar fashion. But the curl refused to cooperate, generally, so required a strong application of pomade to subdue it.

Efran raised glassy eyes to him, but Marguerite said, “Sit a moment, Verlice.”

He paused. “I’d love to, Mother, but—”

“Sit,” she said.

He did, with his back to the yard. Efran watched around him as Jian and Isreal got into a splashing war at the fountain. Joshua egged them on by clapping, but the water faeries sprayed both boys so that they fell down, laughing. Kraken watched all this while lying down on his side, lipping the grass.

Hartshough then brought out a tray of large wine glasses filled with a pinkish-yellow drink. “May I offer all a virgin Sangria?” he asked, setting the tray on a side table.

“That sounds wonderful, Hartshough!” Minka said. The bodyguards Goss and Finn looked over in agreement. So, beginning with Efran and Minka, Hartshough delicately placed a large glass before each person.

“Thank you, Hartshough,” Marguerite said. “Now, Verlice, I want to—”

“Wait a moment, Mother,” he said with a look of intense concentration as he sipped his drink. “This Sangria contains, ah,—”

“Apple, peach, lemon juice and cinnamon,” Efran said blankly.

Hartshough inclined his head. “That is correct, Lord Efran.” The bodyguards toasted him before they drank, and Minka held his arm in admiration. He smiled privately down at her. Verlice studied him in disfavor.

Efran began to stand. “Thank you, Hartshough, Marguerite. I think we should—”

Hartshough suddenly looked to the front door. “If you will kindly wait a moment, Lord Efran.” He sat back down, alert, as Hartshough went to the front doors.

Marguerite said, “Verlice, it’s been over a month since you and Faciane remarried. But you’re living here and she’s at Averno’s. What’s wrong with this picture?”

He began, “Mother, I don’t care to discuss it in front of—” Efran suddenly rose from his chair to go to the front doors. Minka followed him at once, and the bodyguards jumped up to accompany her.

That left the children and the horse in the backyard, and Marguerite with Verlice at the patio table. “Yes?” she said.

But he looked to the front as well. “That’s Lady Elvey! Excuse me.” He got up to join the others at the doors. Sighing, Marguerite followed.

Elvey was telling Efran, “We have to get to Westford! We have a whole line of dresses for Lady Cocci to view! And that doesn’t even take into account the Elvey’s outlet we’re building up there!”

Efran replied, “Our men were poisoned in Westford because they are Landers. We were barely able to save their lives—”

“We’re not soldiers! We’re there to sell dresses!” she cried.

There was a seconds-long standoff, then Efran said, “We will not come rescue you. You may not take any off-duty men or our skilled labor. Elvey, there’s a poisoner at work who is targeting us *in Westford*.”

“I’m willing to take that risk. We’ll be under the protection of Lady Cocci,” she said.

He looked off in exasperation, then sighed, “Take an antidote of lemon juice and vinegar.” Victorious, she walked off. Efran turned to Goss. “Get a bottle of antidote from Coghill for her. Let the gatesmen know that she and her people may go, but no laborers who don’t know the risk, nor army at all.”

“Yes, Captain.” Goss took off at a run.

Efran then raised his eyes to Verlice. “You will stay here.”

“Oh, well, yes,” Verlice said, flustered. “In fact, I’m not representing Elvey’s anymore, ah, rather, I have—”

“I don’t care. Just don’t go to Westford,” Efran uttered. Seeing several bodies dripping at the back door, he said, “I’d better collect our children.”

So Efran loaded two wet boys on a large black horse which he and Minka walked up the switchback to the fortress. Since Jian ran off to resume running errands (which helped him dry quickly) that left Verlice to face his mother, alone.

The following day, December 14th, Efran took himself up to the workroom, which he had been neglecting in his anxiety to hear from Hartshough’s cave groups. Slumping in his usual chair, Efran looked to DeWitt, who had temporarily abandoned his worksheets. Estes, also, was momentarily idle, as the twins De Luca and Dal Occhio had been successfully adopted into a family with twin baby boys.

“Well, Efran,” DeWitt said, and Efran sat up at his tone. “We’re in a quandary as to what to do about the current buildings in the far east Lands, almost all of which were unapproved. It would involve a great deal of labor and waste of materials to tear them all down, but to leave them up would encourage more illegal building—besides which, they’re ugly and unstable.”

“Can any of them be used?” Efran asked.

“A few, yes, we’ve designated as storage sheds for grain and field equipment. As habitations, no. We don’t get many storms, but those that do blow in from the Sea would flatten them,” DeWitt said. “Also, a few are as high as some two- and three-story buildings on the Lands, but they’re not divided into floors and have no stairways.”

Efran looked perplexed. “Then what were they building them for?”

“No one seems to know,” DeWitt said wryly. “Apparently, the only one who knew the answers to the hard

questions—such as who paid for them and with what—was Wolverson, and you know what happened to him.”

“Have you talked to Lemmerz? Oxenham?” Efran asked.

“Lemmerz pulled out his building records to show us that he’s had nothing to do with them. He is working on the newest inn west of the barricade, but that was approved all down the line, and is not in Choules’ area. Since The Lands’ Best Inn is finished but for detail work, Oxenham is directing some of the construction in Westford. So, no, we haven’t talked to him, but his involvement is unlikely. He does higher-end work,” DeWitt said.

“Right,” Efran agreed.

They all thought about this a minute, then Efran asked, “Who on the Lands is wanting to build?”

DeWitt reached out to thump a pile of parchments. “We have a waiting list for lumber from Venegas.” He opened his hands at the futility of it, after the devastation from the walking sticks and the fires to control the walking sticks.

Efran asked, “Can you offer them free lumber if they dismantle the worst buildings?”

DeWitt considered that. “Yes, but—it’s dangerous work; I’d hate to invite people who don’t know what they’re doing to hurt themselves.”

Glancing aside in thought, Efran asked, “Can we pay Lemmerz or someone with building experience to supervise?”

DeWitt glanced at Estes, who shrugged and nodded. DeWitt admitted, “That’s the best solution I’ve heard yet.”

“Good,” Efran said, patting his thighs impatiently. *C’mon, Hartshough.*

The next morning, December 15th, Marguerite sent a message up to Efran: Hartshough had asked to speak with him. When the messenger, Salk, arrived in the fortress, he discovered that the Captain was in Law class. Unwilling to interrupt the class for a message from the butler, Salk waited the few minutes necessary for them to finish before delivering his message.

The Captain received it almost in relief, patting his shoulder. “Tell him I’ll be right down.”

“Yes, Captain.” Salk turned to run back down the switchback with his message.

Minka looked at Efran warily. “This must be about the caves.”

“Must be,” he said, smiling. Seeing that she was working up to a good, hard worry, he asked, “If you don’t trust me, do you trust Hartshough?”

Although she looked deeply conflicted and almost offended, she said, “Of course.”

“All right, then.” He bent to kiss her, then walked out with a light heart.

At the chapel, Abbey men opened the front doors to the Captain before Hartshough could even get there. So Efran waited in the foyer for Hartshough to approach and bow. “Lord Efran.”

“You summoned me?” Efran asked with a faint smile.

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Chapter 11

Hartshough looked troubled. “I had not intended to convey a summons, Lord Efran—”

“—but you know how important this is to me,” Efran finished. “What do we do?”

“We walk, Lord Efran. We may be gone for most of the day,” Hartshough said.

“Excellent. Did you tell Marguerite?” Efran asked.

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said.

“Then let’s go,” Efran said. Hartshough nodded, and the guards opened the doors for them again.

“Let us take a shortcut to Main, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said. Efran agreed, so they turned to cut between the chapel and Ryal’s shop to skirt the new park that an anonymous donor had created between the notary shop and the community well (probably to obscure the sight of Minogue’s meat processing from Main Street, some thought).

Running footsteps behind Efran and Hartshough drew them around, and Seagrave stopped to salute. “Permission to accompany you, Captain.” He was out of uniform, which meant that he was off duty.

Efran looked at Hartshough, whose face assumed the sadness of denial. “You will not be permitted into the caves.”

Seagrave said, “Even so, I request to stand watch at the entrance. Not doubting you at all, Hartshough, but should you both be trapped there, someone must know where you are.”

“That’s prudent, which a serious philosopher should appreciate,” Efran agreed wryly. So Hartshough consented. Seagrave came abreast to walk with them, and Efran filled him in on everything he knew so far about the Tinkerer, his daughter, and the Aqua Tofana.

They exited the Lands out of the main gates to walk over the old stone bridge, past the intersection of the Coastal Highway North, to the ridge and the abandoned campsite (which was to their right somewhere). Continuing north on the main road, they entered a rather dark woods. Hartshough indicated that their destination was ahead, so they progressed watchfully while he studied the terrain to their left.

A few miles past the intersection of New North Road with the Main Road, he found faint signs of a path which had been obscured over the years. They followed this slowly for Hartshough to scan the trees around them. Efran asked, “What are you looking for, Hartshough?”

“There,” he said, pointing. “The Araucaria tree, Lord Efran.” They were now about 5 miles south of Westford.

Efran and Seagrave squinted at the tree he singled out, which looked like something from a primordial forest. It was huge, with crooked branches on which sprouted strange, triangular leaves. "I've never seen anything like it," Efran said, while Seagrave shook his head.

"It is the only one of its species within a hundred miles of here," Hartshough said. "We will walk toward it. If we are accepted into the caves below, we will drop down through the earth. That is the only way to enter them. I anticipate that you will be left here above, Seagrave. But I have sworn a vow to return Lord Efran safely above ground, whatever happens below. Of this my kinsmen are aware."

"I understand, sir," Seagrave said.

While Efran and Hartshough slowly walked forward, Seagrave backed away, watching. Efran was scanning the ground while Hartshough's native mountain troll eyes were roaming everywhere. Efran and Seagrave both noticed that he was transforming into his true appearance, which looked very much like the mountain trolls who had cleaned up the frozen walking sticks.

They heard a female voice faintly screaming, "Stay away!" Efran looked quickly at Hartshough, who nodded to advance. So they did.

All at once, Efran and Hartshough were sucked down into the earth, it appeared. Seagrave drew in a quick breath at the suddenness of it. As he advanced cautiously, he also dropped with a stomach-turning quickness. He landed on a soft, sandy floor in a crouch, bracing himself with his hands alongside his knees.

He looked up to see that he had landed apart from where the Captain and Hartshough were picking themselves up. Seagrave was crouched in something of a cubbyhole behind a rocky deposit. The cave appeared to be natural, with no water in sight. But there were at least a dozen pillars of light in front of the two men, apparently attending their arrival.

Seagrave did not notice at first the images of faces in the lights, until he saw once such pillar a few feet in front of his landing place. The pillar rotated slightly, and he caught the outline of a young woman's face glancing toward him, with something of a sad smile, it seemed. But he stood to watch and listen to the Captain.

Seeing the faces as well, Efran was looking around at the pillars. "Who are you?"

One pillar in the middle of the group replied, "We are the Sages of Solon. We have heard your troll's prayers to be permitted to make supplication to us."

With a half-smile, Efran said, "Thank you very much, but, there may be a misunderstanding. I am looking for the daughter of the Tinkerer. If she is among you, or you know where she is, I would be grateful to hear it."

"You will remove your vegetable weaving," one pillar said.

Efran's brows arched. "Excuse me?"

Several pillars converged, and another said, "The threads upon your body. Your cloths."

"You want me to take my clothes off?" Efran asked, now smiling.

"Clothes. Yes," a pillar said.

“No,” Efran replied. “If you can’t tell me what I asked, I’ll leave you in peace, but I’m not here to entertain you.”

“You are only a mortal man,” one observed.

“Yes, indeed, and not a sage,” Efran said. “But I am Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. The Tinkerer has taken a dislike to us and almost killed two of my men. I want to give him a reason to leave us alone. I want to speak to his daughter.”

The pillars seemed to merge to confer together, as Efran heard faint voices from their circle. He glanced over to Hartshough, who was standing with his lumpy head bowed. Scanning the cave that was almost brightly illuminated, Efran caught sight of the one pillar standing off, perhaps fifteen feet away. And he saw Seagrave partially hidden behind it—her. It was a woman.

Seeing that she had been noticed, she told Efran, “I cannot do anything to help you with my father.”

He walked over to ask, “What is your name?”

“Paraskevi,” she said. “But this cave is a trap. Any who fall into it remain forever. Some have been here for hundreds of years. I have only been here for ten years.”

Efran saw no natural light in the cave. “How can you tell the passing of years?”

“By the growth of the tree roots above us,” she said.

He looked up to the spreading roots on the underside of the cave roof. “Was that you screaming at us to stay away?”

“Yes,” she said. “You did not listen.”

“How could you hear us coming?” he asked.

“I did not hear; I felt your steps approaching above. Few come this way, but I warn off any who come too close,” she said.

“Even when you’re asleep?” he asked.

“I would cherish the release of sleep, but we are not given it,” she said dismally.

“Well—who set this trap?” he demanded.

“In the beginning, I do not know. But the tree is the gatekeeper,” she replied.

“We’ll see,” he said, looking over to the other pillars. As they were still in conference, he asked her, “Why is the cave named after you?”

“I am the newest here. Now, it will be named after one of you three,” she replied.

“Can they not hear us?” he asked, glancing back to the others.

She said, "Yes, but they do not care. All is for naught."

Seagrave asked her, "May I walk over to stand with my Captain?"

"Yes," she said.

So Seagrave came out of the corner to stand beside Efran, and she also came closer. Efran could see the movement of her legs, whereas he had discerned nothing of the others' bodies but their faces, dimly.

Scanning the ceiling of the cave, Seagrave said, "It appears that I just dropped down where I was standing. How far is the tree's reach to capture someone?" he asked Paraskevi.

"As far as its roots extend. The cave grows with its roots," she said.

"How many of you are here, then?" Seagrave asked.

"I cannot know. You see the brightness all around you; the lights encompass the last of those trapped many years ago," Paraskevi replied.

Efran said, "Yes, I can see your form. Are you still alive?"

"Yes," she said sadly. "The lights sustain us to live in hopelessness until our physical bodies decay for old age."

"When will I start glowing?" Seagrave asked, half facetiously.

She replied, "When you get hungry, so that the lights have to feed you. The more they sustain you, the more they light you."

Growing restless, Efran glanced over to Hartshough, who was standing still with his head lowered. So Efran walked around the cave to examine the walls and floor. It was not large, only about forty by sixty feet, and the ceiling only eight feet high. The ground through which the men had fallen had closed up again before they even stood.

Surveying the ceiling, Efran said, "Boost me up, Seagrave." He came over to cradle Efran's foot in his hands and lift.

Efran got high enough to scrape at the dirt and try to dig around the roots, finding no weak spot anywhere. Hartshough may have glanced up at this, but lowered his head again. Seagrave finally had to let the Captain down. Efran gestured, "Let's see if we can stack some of these rocks."

"Yes, Captain," Seagrave assented. They went over to the piles of rocks, only to find that they were melded together, none in such a way as to permit access to the dirt ceiling above them. After scraping around for an hour or so, they gave up.

"There is no escape," Paraskevi said softly.

So Efran sat on the sandy floor, and Seagrave did the same. "Can you sit?" Efran asked her.

"I think so, even though the lights try to keep us upright all the time." But she made the effort to fold her legs

under her so that she could sit on the cave floor with them. The lights around her diminished slightly.

Observing that, Efran murmured, “Interesting.” Hartshough remained standing.

When Paraskevi had gotten somewhat comfortable, Efran asked her, “Are any besides you still alive?” He looked from pillar to pillar, all brightly glowing.

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Chapter 12

Paraskevi replied to Efran, “No, their bodies are long dead, which is why they wanted to see yours. We all yearn to see life again.”

“They didn’t ask me to strip,” Seagrave noted, peeved.

Looking at the cluster of lights, she said, “They’re back to discussing their philosophical questions. At present their question is, ‘What is knowledge?’ Your troll friend heard an earlier discussion, and they invited him to join them. I tried to warn him, but my voice is not strong enough to be heard among the others.”

Hartshough raised his lumpy, hairless head. “I heard you, Paraskevi, and I have called for assistance. We must wait.”

“So it will take most of the day, will it?” Efran asked.

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said, bowing.

“That’s good, then,” Efran said in unconcern.

“There is no way out,” Paraskevi insisted.

Efran requested, “Tell me about your father.”

She hung her head, sighing. “A frustrated craftsman. He liked to make things. He made clothes and hats for a good long while, until he got interested in mechanical toys. He made some very clever things, but no one could see any use for them. So he just made more. All he wanted to do was tinker, but he couldn’t make a living at it. Then this lady offered to help him, and, he started making the most amazing things. In fact, I was taking one of his toys to show a man who said he was interested in selling them, but I got distracted by the voices I heard, and followed them here,” she said.

Efran glanced around the cave. “Is the toy still here, then?”

“Yes, it’s here somewhere,” Paraskevi seemed to shrug. “But it will be rusted useless by now.”

“Seagrave, see if you can find it,” Efran directed him.

“Yes, Captain.” Seagrave got up to begin looking among all the rocks and crevices of the cave.

“Where were you coming from, and where were you going with the toy?” Efran asked.

“Father worked in our house—it was on the outskirts of Westford, behind the palace. Not in the ratholes, but close. I was trying to get to Quant’s house in the country, but got lost. I was fifteen,” she explained.

Studying her, Efran thought that she looked fifteen now, with the angular face of a young adolescent. Perhaps no one actually aged here. Regardless, he knew the area near the palace that she was talking about. It was very close to where he had found Pia locked in a box. “What is your father’s name?”

“Pelagatti. ‘Cheater,’” she translated in sad irony. “People made fun of his name—because everyone believed his toys were useless, he was accused of cheating anyone who bought them. It ate up his soul to hear it.”

Efran was quiet for a while, watching Seagrave search. Meanwhile, Efran dimly heard one of the pillars say, “If you cannot test knowledge, then you cannot know whether it is real.” And his companion wraiths argued that point. Hartshough was still standing with his head down, and it occurred to Efran that he was communicating with someone.

Efran looked back to Paraskevi to ask, “What about your mother? Siblings?”

She shook her head. “I don’t even remember her. It was always just me and Father.”

Efran leaned his head back, thinking, *No wonder he wanted to kill everyone once she went missing.*

He raised up as Seagrave came trotting back from the far end of the cave. “Is this it?” He was holding a rusted, jointed metal dog about ten inches long.

“Yes,” Paraskevi said, raising up in mild surprise. “I can hardly believe it’s still intact.”

Efran took it to turn it over, revealing a panel with a ring. Pulling gently, he was able to raise the reluctant panel enough to see the inner workings, now melded in a mass of rust. Closing it again, he said, “We’ll take this with us.” He tossed it back to Seagrave.

Paraskevi leaned back against the rock beside him. “Don’t make me hope. That makes the lights go down, and it hurts.” The more her aura faded, the more clearly he saw her—and the weaker she looked. But her large brown eyes grew clearer.

“I don’t want you to hurt,” Efran said. He looked up to the ceiling, with the massive roots extending the length and breadth of the cave. For the first time since they had dropped down here, he felt a little queasy. How could Hartshough summon help who wouldn’t likewise fall down to be trapped?

Studying the roof of rock, dirt, clay and roots, Efran began praying, *God of heaven*—as he had always prayed. But now he remembered something—something he had always forgotten. Saying “God of heaven” was easy, as that was far removed, exalted, too high for him to touch or see. But that is only half of His demesne, which is “God of heaven and God of earth.” [Gen. 24:3]

“We have to wait,” he said, reaching for her hand. But on touching the light around her, he whistled and quickly withdrew his hand. Seagrave looked over as Efran regarded the light burns on his fingers and palm.

“The lights don’t permit us to touch each other. It’s hopeless,” she said, turning her head away. The lights sprang

up around her again. Efran looked warily to Hartshough, who hadn't moved.

Over the next several hours, they waited. Efran and Seagrave were half dozing for the tedium, but Hartshough stood unmoved. At one point, Efran looked over to say something to Seagrave, but stopped dead on seeing the faint aura around him. Noting his stare, Seagrave looked down at himself. He nodded, gesturing to Efran, who saw the light creeping around his own skin as well. "Are you getting hungry?" he asked Seagrave.

"I must be, though I don't feel it," Seagrave said.

"You'll never feel hungry again," Paraskevi said quietly.

"No, because Hartshough fixes the most amazing dishes you ever ate," Efran said, smiling. Hartshough raised his head to look at him with a light in his skewed eyes. Then he lifted his lumpy head to their prison ceiling.

Paraskevi stood abruptly, the lights flaming around her. "Stay away!" she cried. Standing as well, Efran and Seagrave could neither feel nor see anything. But then her face grew bewildered. "They are not on the ground. They are in the tree!" Tense, she held still. The other pillars hardly noticed, for their argument was heated.

She looked up again. "Now they're on the roots. They're standing on the roots, and—"

There was a sudden rumble, a shaking of the ground above. Gaping holes opened among the roots over their heads, sending showers of dirt down on them. Without thinking, Efran grabbed Paraskevi's arm to pull her away, and the lights around her subsided. Seagrave was right beside them, but Hartshough had not moved.

The pillars around the cave shrieked as more holes opened up among the roots, but no one fell through them. There was only light, genuine light, afternoon sunlight piercing the ceiling to strike the cave floor and walls—

And the pillars. The sunlight extinguished them like candle flames in a thunderstorm. Paraskevi collapsed onto Efran, and he lifted her frail frame. "Hartshough, I don't know that she'll make it," he said, alarmed. The vanishing lights exposed just how emaciated she was.

"Here, Lord Efran." Hartshough tossed him a stoppered bladder that had been dropped to him through one of those holes. Catching it in one hand, Efran removed the stopper with his teeth to smell something rich and frothy. He held Paraskevi on his arm to place the spout at her mouth.

At first she gagged at the unexpected flow. He removed the spout to let her breathe before putting it to her lips again. Looking up at him with wondering eyes, she slowly sipped the nutrient-rich concoction.

Loud whackings resounded from above, and Efran ducked for the wood chips that rained down on his head. He carried Paraskevi to a more sheltered place along the cave wall. Then he, Seagrave, and Hartshough watched the mountain trolls hack off the roots of the Araucaria tree while standing on them.

The jagged hole in the ground around the roots widened and the great, ancient tree began sagging down into the cave. The four of them below it stood clear, Paraskevi held up by Efran, as it finally crashed down in its tomb, rootless.

When the wood chips, soil, and detritus settled, Hartshough bowed to Efran. "We may leave now, Lord Efran. Shall I follow while you carry out the captive?"

Blinking back tears, Efran said, "You carry her, Hartshough"—for he had earned the honor.

“As you wish, Lord Efran.” Hartshough the mountain troll took the fragile girl tenderly in his arms to walk up the slanting trunk to freedom. She was looking all around in stunned disbelief.

Behind, Efran asked Seagrave, “You have the toy?” Seagrave held it up, then they two scrambled up the rough-barked trunk.

Stepping carefully around the jagged edges of earth, Efran looked at the mountain trolls, four of them, winding up their ropes and replacing their axes on their belts. “Hartshough, introduce me to your kin,” Efran said.

“Lord Efran, these are members of my clan, the Guppenbergers. The leader of this group is Fazakerley, with Elsher, Sai, and Ruckelshaus. My friends, this is Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

They inclined their heads, but Efran bowed formally to them. “Your member Toogood is already a treasure to us, but now you have proved the great friendship of your clan with the Lands. However I may serve you in future, call on me.”

Fazakerley murmured in a rumbling voice, “Lord Efran honors us. We are your servants.” With bows, they turned to pad quietly away.

Watching them, Efran asked Hartshough, “So they decided not to trek back to their ancestral home in the Fastnesses?”

“Pardon, Lord Efran, but that was the Lekkerkerker clan, which have indeed left for their homeland,” Hartshough replied.

“Ah. I see,” Efran said. The Landers looked at the deadly tree in its grave, then he exhaled, “We’re done here. Hartshough, lead us home.”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” he said. He had resumed his appearance as a butler, now with a fragile woman in his arms. She lifted her head from his suit jacket to gaze in shock at the woods, the birds, the grass, and the honest, life-giving light.

Efran glanced at Seagrave. “You still have the toy?”

“Still have it, Captain.” Seagrave said, brandishing it.

Efran said, “We’re going to take it to Pelagatti, after his daughter’s had a little while to recuperate.” And she started crying.

A few hours later, they were walking up the steps to the open doors of the chapel through a cluster of soldiers. Upon hearing of their success, messengers rode up to the fortress, to Ryal’s, and to Barracks A. After a quick consultation with Marguerite, Hartshough laid Paraskevi on the divan so that he and Eryk could set up a comfortable sleeping couch on the patio. Day and night, she wanted to see the sky. Then Marguerite sent Eryk for Coghill to examine their guest and advise them on a restorative diet for her.

In the tumult of the chapel hall, it took a little while for Minka to find Efran, after waiting for him all day. Spotting him with his Commander, she went over for him to hold her. Then he had to let go of her again to give his report, which a number of men were wanting to hear.

So she slipped back to the patio to sit beside the sleeping couch. Studying the skinny girl with the great brown eyes, she took her hand to tell her, “You’re going to be all better. I’m Minka.”

Paraskevi looked over, feeling something she hadn’t felt for a long time. “I’m hungry,” she whispered in disbelief.

“I’ll tell Hartshough,” Minka grinned. “You’re in for a treat.”

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Chapter 13

Under the care of Hartshough and Marguerite, the remaining survivor of the Araucaria’s prison improved greatly. So by December 18th, Efran felt it was time to contact the Tinkerer again—Pelagatti. That morning, he saddled Kraken, taking with him Seagrave, Connor, Youshock, Truro and Stourt. The latter two were fully recovered from their poisoning, and all wore their red Abbey uniforms. Just in case, they brought a spare horse, saddled and ready to ride. Truro and Stourt carried bottles of antidote. Also, Efran carried in his saddlebag a rusty mechanical dog.

All were alert as they entered Westford. There was a light coating of snow on the ground, but the men were comfortable in their woolen uniforms. (Long ago, Elvey’s had supplemented their gray-green winter uniforms with the red, which all the men preferred.) The riders were watchful for anyone looking dazed, disoriented or antagonistic to their presence. They saw none of that. Everything looked suspiciously normal.

Pulling up to Wigglesworth, Efran glanced at his men to instruct, “Connor, you come in and stand just at the door. I’ll be going directly to the basement stairs. The rest of you wait here; we don’t want to alarm the ladies in their shopping. Connor will alert you if it appears that you’re needed.” They acknowledged these instructions as he and Connor dismounted. Efran took a rusty toy inside with him.

Entering the shop, Connor stopped at the door while Efran walked toward the counter. Quant, with a customer, glanced up warily at his approach. But his eyes followed in alarm as Efran bypassed him to go directly to the stairway door.

Opening it, he found the basement much as it had been when he was first here ten days ago. He stopped on the stairs three steps up from the trip wire at the bottom to shout, “Pelagatti!”

From amid the shelves behind the worktable, the Tinkerer shuffled to the table, his gaze piercing through the lenses. Before he could speak—if he were going to—Efran tossed the dog onto his table. It clattered when it hit, and a piece broke off. Efran asked, “Do you want to see your daughter?”

Pelagatti blinked at the dog, caressing it with sensitive fingers. “Is she alive?” he asked.

“Yes, though weak. She had been imprisoned. Associates of mine freed her,” Efran said. The power he had felt from the Tinkerer was still there, though subdued.

Pelagatti looked around his table, then decided, “I must bring her a new toy.” He disappeared among the shelves again.

Bemused, Efran waited for a few minutes, then went back up to stand at the top of the stairs with the door open. Connor looked over inquiringly, and Efran nodded. Quant, at the counter, was watching him as well.

It was almost a quarter hour later that Pelagatti came back out from among the shelves with a new mechanical dog. This one was larger—over a foot in length from his nose to his rump. As he began to ascend the stairs with the toy in one hand and his cane in the other, Efran descended to take the dog. “Can you ride?” he asked.

“Yes,” Pelagatti said quietly. “I want to give her the new toy.”

“I’ll carry it. You don’t have saddlebags on your horse,” Efran said. He trotted back up the stairs to hold the door open again. When Pelagatti emerged, Efran glanced at Quant, who was merely watchful. Then Efran walked beside the Tinkerer to exit the door that Connor held open.

“Take his cane to help him mount,” Efran told Connor.

“Yes, Captain. This way, sir.” Connor did not touch him until they stood beside his horse. Then Connor lifted him to the saddle, placing his feet in the stirrups. Connor took the cane to carry on his own horse. Keeping an eye on them, Efran stashed the new toy in one saddlebag on Kraken. His flanks twitched under it.

“We’ll ride easy back home, gentlemen. Connor, you lead,” Efran said. He wanted to watch from behind.

“Yes, Captain,” Connor said, kicking his horse to a gentle lope. The other men instinctively surrounded the Tinkerer for the ride back. He rode uneasily, clutching the pommel with both hands.

It was an uneventful ride, although Kraken kept kicking out a back leg every now and then. “What’s wrong with you?” Efran hissed.

I don’t like it, Kraken said.

“Don’t like what? The toy?” Efran asked. Kraken didn’t specify.

Meanwhile, Efran was plagued by the sense of something that he couldn’t identify. First, there was the incongruity of the toy: Paraskevi had said that she was delivering it to an interested buyer, Quant. But her father acted as though it were hers. Also, there was a persistent sound that seemed to follow them. He, Seagrave, and Youshock—who were riding at the rear of the group—kept looking behind and around them, trying to isolate the source of the sound. It was an insect-like noise.

Finally, as they were approaching the old stone bridge, Youshock veered his horse toward Kraken to hiss, “Captain, it’s your saddlebag that’s clicking.”

Efran glanced at him quickly. Without stopping, he reached back to unlatch the bag and put it to his ear. Seagrave, on his other side, leaned over to listen. Efran’s brows sprang up in astonishment. Then, as they were crossing the old stone bridge, Efran sidearmed the saddlebag about fifty yards to the right. It landed in the dry gully over which the old stone bridge passed. As Efran, Youshock and Seagrave entered the gates—the last of their party to do so—Efran told the gatesmen, Jehan and Coish, “Leave the saddlebag there until I send someone to look at it.”

“Yes, sir,” Jehan said.

The group dismounted in front of Barracks A, where Efran sent the door guard inside to inform the Commander of their arrival. Connor helped Pelagatti down and returned to him his cane. While he was getting his legs back underneath him, Efran sent Truro ahead to tell Marguerite that he was on his way. Stourt was dispatched to the fortress with the same message.

Then Efran instructed Connor and Seagrave to walk the Tinkerer to the chapel. To Youshock, Efran nodded with, "We follow." So the men spread around Pelagatti before and behind as he shuffled up the sidewalk.

At the chapel, Efran watched them all enter before coming in himself. Wendt and DeWitt were just now arriving to quietly observe. From the foyer, Pelagatti looked around the elegant chapel with the slender faerie trees dropping down from the high ceiling here and there. Then he looked back to Efran to say, "I need the toy."

"In a moment. Let's have you just talk to her, first," Efran said. He was distracted and disturbed by the resurgent power emanating from him.

Hartshough bowed to Pelagatti to say, "Paraskevi is on the back patio. Follow me, if you will, sir." Hartshough turned to lead him in his stately butler's walk. Glancing all around, the Tinkerer followed. Minka came over to grasp Efran's arm. He crinkled his eyes at her in reassurance.

Hartshough preceded the Tinkerer out onto the patio. His daughter, reclining on the daybed with its upper part raised, lifted her eyes. Efran, Minka, and Marguerite were the only ones to follow him out; the others watched from the kitchen doorway, a window, or the stables in the back, where Kraken had been taken.

Several people were disconcerted to see that father and daughter merely looked at each other at first. There were no cries, nor hugging, nor tears, just—initial evaluation. Although Paraskevi said nothing about it, she was surprised that her father looked unchanged after ten years. Almost unseen, Justinian came up behind Wendt to listen. "Where did you go?" Pelagatti finally asked her.

"Where you told me to," she replied. Minka gripped Efran's arm to stop his swaying. He leaned down to whisper in her ear, and she looked at him in horror.

"I would never send you anywhere near that tree," he shot back. Efran looked at Wendt in the doorway to briefly shake his head. Wendt relayed the information in a whisper to DeWitt: Efran had not told Pelagatti about the Araucaria.

"It doesn't matter. I am free," she sighed.

Pelagatti turned back to Efran. "I will take her home now." The power washed over Efran without swaying him.

He looked down on the Tinkerer with a vaguely questioning smile. "Why don't you just sit and talk to her for a while?" He nodded for Hartshough to bring up a chair. Reluctantly, Pelagatti set his cane aside and sat.

At this time, Jehan and Coish were being relieved on gate duty by Enon and Fiacco. Before leaving, however, they looked out to the gully where the Captain had tossed his saddlebag. "No one has come to look at it yet, have they?" Jehan asked.

"No, and it sounded like something he wanted to know about right away," Coish said.

"Well, let's go look," Jehan suggested. Coish agreed, so Enon and Fiacco opened the gates for them to slip out and run to the area of the gully where the saddlebag had landed.

The current gate guards watched idly as Jehan and Coish looked around in the meadowgrass for the saddlebag. Although the Captain had relented to permit travel to Westford again, there was not much on the road right now. It was close to noon, when the Southern Continent as a whole stopped working to eat, relax, and socialize. So the guards watched the eateries along Main fill up. Lilou at Firmin's came out to look hopefully for the Captain and his party, but they were all at the chapel right now.

"Looks like they found it," Fiacco noted, lazily nodding toward the gully. Coish had picked something up, only to drop it again with all haste. Then he and Jehan were dancing all over the area, it looked like.

"What are they doing?" Enon asked, squinting.

"Isn't that a Polonti war dance?" Fiacco asked, then nudged his partner to their duty as the woodworker Chetwode drove up in his cart.

"Polonti don't know any other kind of dance," Enon muttered, running to help his partner open the gates.

Some minutes later, Jehan and Coish came running back to Fiacco and Enon. While Coish carried an empty saddlebag and a metal sculpture, Jehan had his uniform hat bunched up. "Look what we found!" he said as Fiacco opened one gate enough for them to slip in again. "There were scores of 'em!"

"What?" Enon bent to look as Jehan barely opened his hat. "Yeow!" Enon jumped back so abruptly that he fell down.

Fiacco leaned over to grimace at something struggling to get out of the felt. "What is that?"

Coish asked, "Where did the Captain go?"

"The chapel house," Fiacco said with a jerk of his head. Enon got back to his feet to demand, "Take care; don't let it get out there!"

"No fear," Jehan grinned, then he and Coish headed for the shortcut to the chapel.

At this time, Hartshough had just brought a nutritious refresher for Paraskevi, which he set down on a small table beside her daybed. She took up the glass with a quick sigh to begin drinking with closed eyes. Hartshough asked, "Shall you care for a refresher, Pelagatti?"

"No. You will refer to me as Tinkerer," he instructed.

"Yes, sir," Hartshough said, withdrawing. The rest of the onlookers, on the patio and in the house, were silent. But Efran looked back to where two grinning Polonti were summoning him to the foyer. So he walked over. Minka watched him.

In a few minutes, he returned to place the metal dog on the small table beside the empty glass. Pelagatti stood to edge away from the daybed. "You may give it to her now. Isn't that what you made for her?" Efran asked.

"No, I just took it off the shelves. You never know what may be inside them," the Tinkerer said.

"No gears? No moving parts?" Efran asked, picking up the dog again to look for the panel that opened. Pelagatti backed away, watching. He had no objections to the Polonti's opening it; he just took care to stand clear of it.

Rising above that wash of power, Efran paused to study his spectacles. Not only were they abnormally thick, but there was a faint rippling that moved along the lenses. This was not normal in eyeglasses. Handing the metal dog to him, Efran said, “You open it, then.”

The Tinkerer took the dog, unlatched the panel, then tossed the whole thing out into the yard without looking to see where it would land—which was on Kraken. He scrambled up from the grass to sniff the metal, poking it with a hoof. Then he stepped on it to flatten it.

Seeing that, Paraskevi laughed to her father, “What did you put inside it?”

“Show her, Jehan,” Efran said, still studying those eyeglasses.

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Chapter 14

Jehan trotted up with his hat scrunched in his hands, then opened it and almost wailed, “I broke it!” Desolate, he held out the wrinkled hat with the remains of a red scorpion—one of the most deadly in the world, and not native to the Southern Continent.

“So I escape again,” Paraskevi exhaled, leaning back on the daybed.

The Tinkerer turned to Efran. “I will go back to Westford now.”

“Yes, in just a moment,” Efran said. He turned to place a hand on Henris’ shoulder and whisper to him. Saluting, Henris ran out to commandeer a horse and ride up the switchback.

Turning to the Tinkerer, Efran brought him back into the hall to ask, “When was the last time you ate? No one matches Hartshough’s fare.”

“If you will not give me my daughter, then I need nothing from you,” the Tinkerer said.

“She’s not fit to travel, even to Westford,” Efran said. “You may leave in just a moment.” He turned as DeWitt directed a comment to him. They two had a quiet conversation to which the Commander added something in a low voice. Meanwhile, the Tinkerer stood fidgeting as though looking for a way of escape. Wendt and DeWitt, about to leave themselves, stood by as Henris returned, winded.

He handed a case to Efran. This he opened for the Tinkerer’s inspection. “Everyone needs a spare pair of spectacles, in case something happens to the ones you usually wear. Take any pair you like,” Efran invited him. These were the sample eyeglasses that Alberon, disguised as the seller of spectacles Duckstein, had left at the fortress. While not imbued with any faerie magic, they still had an appeal to which Pelagatti was vulnerable. With a wary glance at Efran, he sifted through the eyeglasses arranged neatly on velvet. Then he picked up a pair.

“Very good. You want to try those on?” Efran asked, lowering the case.

The Tinkerer glanced at him suspiciously, but actually holding the glasses served to override his caution. So he

removed his thick glasses to place the new pair on his nose, hardly noticing when Efran slipped the old glasses out of his fingers. His weak eyes looked truly as they were through these lenses, with little enlargement. “Eh,” Pelagatti said noncommittally. They had no power, which he needed.

As he began to take them off, the Tinkerer startled at his empty hands. “Wha—? Where are my—? Give those back to me!”

“Uh oh,” Efran said. “I seem to have broken the earhook here.” He regarded the twisted piece of metal in regret. “We’ll have to get our jeweler Whately to fix it for you. So it’s a good thing you have another pair to wear, there.”

“I can fix them myself!” the Tinkerer cried, trembling as he reached out for them.

But Efran had turned to hand the mangled eyeglasses to Hartshough. “Take care of those for me.”

“Yes, Lord Efran.” Hartshough took the glasses back into the house. Marguerite came over to look at them, whereupon she and he had a short conversation. He went to the oven and she came back to the patio door.

Efran was telling the Tinkerer, “Yes, I’m sure you can fix them. But they’ve helped you do a lot of damage. I want you to see, but not well enough to make any more fake headpieces or toys stuffed with scorpions. Connor, you and Conte take him back to Wigglesworth.”

Those two soldiers presented themselves while the Tinkerer stood as though stripped naked. Bending to look him in the eye, Efran noted that that surge of power had not presented with these glasses. “You may go,” Efran said, and the Abbey soldiers took his arms to lead him out.

Then Efran looked down on Paraskevi, who raised pensive eyes to him. He said, “I’ll give you a chance to rest up, and then we’re going to talk.” He knew that she had not been completely forthright with him, either.

Turning to the door to the kitchen, he raised an arm to Minka. “Shall we see which children want to go to Firmin’s? Their midday rush should be just about over.”

“That’s good,” she said, grinning.

With the chapel cleared of everyone but the residents and their recuperating guest, Marguerite paused beside her daybed. Brushing back her dark hair, Marguerite murmured, “You must be honest with him, dear. Otherwise, he can’t protect you.” Paraskevi exhaled, looking away.

Hartshough came to the door to say, “The fire is ready, Lady Marguerite.”

When she stood from beside the daybed, Paraskevi grabbed at her hand. “Fire? What fire?”

Marguerite smiled down on her. “To cook up something good, of course. And burn up something bad. You rest; Eryk is here if you need anything in the next few minutes.” Paraskevi sank back warily as her hostess reentered the house.

Marguerite then went into the kitchen where Hartshough stood over a blazing fire in the oven. She stepped aside while he used tongs to place the glasses in the midst of the fire. And they watched the spectacles sit imperiously on the flames without any change in its structure—except that it began to straighten out its frame.

Raising in dissatisfaction, Marguerite and Hartshough eyed each other a moment, then she said, "I'm afraid you'll need to make a trip to Elvey's. Quickly."

His bristly eyebrows lifted in comprehension. "Yes, Lady Marguerite." Marching to the front door, he paused to put on his coat and hat. Then he left around the two soldiers standing guard, who were watching men congregate around the Captain and the Lady.

Hartshough walked past Ryal's, crossed Main, and approached the awning-covered front entrance to Elvey's. The doorman opened the doors to him with a bow. Proceeding inside, Hartshough passed the front desk, where two stylists were arguing over papers spread out on it. He also passed through the next room, the consultation room, to open a door to the side. In this room were long work tables and a rack of hanging dresses covered with pins and notes.

Hartshough flipped through the hangers on this rack until finding a dress which carried the correct name. This he draped over his arm to walk out again through the consultation room, the reception area, and down the street to the chapel.

On the front walk, he passed the Captain, who was instructing Verrin and Elrod to take Kraken hilltop and bring him more money, also, any of the children who wanted to join them at Firmin's. (Often, they were too engrossed in their play to suffer interruptions.) As those two men chased Kraken up the switchback, Efran glanced at the rest of the men around him and Minka. "Fall in," he said, and they did, grinning.

Draping an arm around her shoulders, Efran walked her up Main toward Firmin's. She whispered, "What did you do with the Tinkerer's glasses?"—obviously not having seen.

Efran smiled. "Gave them to Hartshough. He and Auntie will know what to do with them."

"Of course," Minka murmured. She really would like to go back to watch, but would just have to hear about it from Auntie later. Lilou was waiting for them.

In the chapel kitchen, Hartshough handed the brightly colored dress to Lady Marguerite, who inspected it a moment. "Yes, I can feel her aura," she murmured, handing it back to him. He removed the pins, but left the papers to wad the whole into a compact bundle and place it atop the glasses in the fire. When it roared up in fury, they both had to step back. As the dress was consumed, they watched the lenses and frames begin to melt, exuding the odor of rotten eggs.

"Oh, dear," Hartshough murmured. "I shall have to clean the oven before I cook anything else."

"Well worth the effort, my dear," she replied, seeing the glasses grimace in death. When they and the dress had been burned up completely, she went to the front doors to give a message to the soldier stationed there.

On the sidewalk along Main, Efran paused to note Conte and Connor departing the gates with the Tinkerer, all on horseback. Then, with Minka and a growing entourage, Efran crossed properly, in a crosswalk, to the largely empty outdoor dining area of Firmin's, that near the pond—which was actually on Averde's side of the low fence.

While men swarmed the tables around them, Lilou came bounding out. "Efran! We have fresh pork on a stick that's frying now!"

"Oh, you'd better bring all you've got, then," Efran said, seating Minka. "She'll have tea, and pie—better make that two pieces—bring us mild ale before the pork comes out."

“Yes, Efran!” she cried, wheeling, and he raised his chin to Ionadi in the back, sitting to fold napkins around the utensils. She waved her crooked fingers to him.

As he began to sit, he noted Windry taking a table at Averno’s by the pond. Because she was with a gentleman, she made a point to ignore Efran. But he went to the fence to call, “Windry!”

Wearing one of her new dresses that had been selling very well, she looked over with indifferent, arched brows. “Yes, Efran?” Half the traffic on the street stopped to monitor this exchange.

“Have you heard anything more about Surley?” he asked.

She deflated. “No,” she said, and her gentleman friend patted her hand.

Efran went back to his seat, disturbed. He picked up the ale that Lilou set before him, but didn’t open it. Scanning the men, he summoned, “Cudmore.”

“Captain?” He pushed forward, saluting.

“Go check in at Elvey’s; see if she’s come back from Lady Cocci’s in Westford,” Efran told him. It was five days ago that she had argued with him about letting her go, which he did.

“Yes, Captain.” Cudmore took off to run south on Main to her spreading complex.

“The children must be really busy. At least we got two to come,” Minka said. Efran looked toward the old switchback where Kraken was being led down by Verrin with Elrod walking beside him and two boys on his back. Isreal was bouncing behind Joshua, trying to make Kraken go faster, but Verrin restrained him.

Kraken, however, obeyed the imperative from his back and began loping, jerking the reins free so that Verrin stumbled and fell. Elrod made a leap for the bridle and almost got trampled. Coming off the switchback, Joshua kept his balance, holding onto the pommel. Isreal, choosing not to hold on to Joshua, fell from the great horse to roll on the road. Efran sprang up from his chair to begin running toward them. Minka followed.

Perceiving his error, Kraken slowed to look back; Joshua looked down at Isreal picking himself up. Limping toward Efran, he exhaled, “You think I am dead, Isreal said, but—I fall.” He merely looked resigned.

Efran skidded to a stop to lift him. Bouncing him lightly, Efran marveled, “You’re making a joke of it.” Minka arrived to place a hand on Joshua, securely balanced on the too-large saddle. Verrin arrived, sick to his stomach. Elrod was on his way, limping. As Isreal held his father’s neck, Efran told him, “Tell her what you told me.”

Isreal looked at Minka, his lip bleeding a little from the stitches. “I am not dead.”

Minka cried, “You are very brave!” She saw his torn pants and scraped knee, but refrained from making a fuss over it.

Noting Verrin, Efran patted his shoulder. “No fear; I won’t have *you* made into a rug. Dismissed.” Verrin saluted in relief. Before limping back up the switchback, Elrod handed the Captain the pouch of royals. “Ah. Good.” Efran stuffed it into his back pocket, where it barely fit.

Carrying Isreal, he returned to Firmin’s with Minka walking beside Joshua on Kraken. The men congratulated

Isreal, patting him on the back: “Nice roll, son!” “Good form.” “Nice landing!” Their praise caught Joshua’s attention, so that he let go of the pommel to begin sliding off the saddle. Minka cried out and Efran caught him on his free arm.

“As you were,” Efran said generally, and the men went quiet. One man took Kraken to the stables while Efran sat his family at their table—Joshua on Minka’s lap and Isreal beside her—for them to have pork on a stick and pie. Isreal was happy and Joshua satisfied.

Cudmore ran over to salute. “Captain, Lady Elvey is still at Lady Cocci’s in Westford, but she’s been sending messages back to her staff, and they are not worried about her.”

“Good. Dismissed,” Efran said. The soldier had turned away when Efran recalled him: “Cudmore.”

“Captain?” Cudmore turned back.

With sudden doubts, Efran asked, “The messengers Elvey sends back—are they her own people or Cocci’s?”

Cudmore paused, then said, “Let me find out, Captain.” Efran nodded, and Cudmore ran back toward Elvey’s.

While his men ate and talked, Efran was thinking. A tinkerer, a dark altior, and an ancient trap just south of Westford . . . Surley and the Notary Shaffer—was there a connection? Coincidences happened, but not anything this extensive.

At that time, Hollis ran up. He was one of the chapel door guards remaining when everyone else left. Saluting, he said, “Captain, Lady Marguerite wishes you to know that the Tinkerer’s glasses have been destroyed.”

“Good,” Efran said. “What . . . could she tell about them? Where did they come from?”

“I’ll ask, Captain,” Hollis said, turning to trot back to the chapel.

Then Cudmore returned to Efran to salute: “Captain, Ghislain says that it’s Lady Cocci’s messengers who are coming. No one from Westford went with Lady Elvey except her carriage driver and footman.”

Efran eyed him for a moment, then asked, “What are these messengers telling Elvey’s people?” Cudmore straightened slightly before turning to run back to Elvey’s.

Efran’s eye was drawn down Main toward the gates, where Conte and Connor were entering. He saw Connor point to him, so they both rode over. Minka looked up from Joshua as they saluted. “Captain, Lady Minka,” Conte said. “We took the Tinkerer back to Wigglesworth, and he stood outside as though he didn’t know where he was, till someone came out and got him.”

After taking this in, Efran asked, “What did you observe about the people? Working, or shopping—?”

“It was all—strange, Captain,” Connor said with a look of confused disdain. “It was as if they were sleepwalking. We saw one man trapped in a doorway—that is, he was standing against a closed door. I went over to pull him away, asked him what was the matter, and, he just walked off.”

While Efran was thinking about that, Hollis came running back. “Captain, Lady Marguerite said that the glasses showed so much resistance to the fire, she believes they could only have been made by a dark—alterer. Alterior?” He stumbled over a word that he didn’t understand.

“Altior, yes,” Efran said. “But she and Hartshough destroyed them?”

“Yes, Captain,” Hollis affirmed.

“Good. Dismissed,” Efran said, folding his arms across his chest. There was only one dark altior left that he knew about.

Cudmore came running up, panting. “Captain,” he saluted between breaths. “Ghislain said that Elvey asked for a lot of money and clothes. They sent up money on the first two requests, but now they’re wondering, especially with your questions. They want you to send someone to check on her.”

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Chapter 15

Efran mulled over Ghislain’s request. *Of course I have to go check on Elvey, since I told her not to go, and that I wouldn’t come rescue her.* Standing, he told Cudmore, “Go tell them I’ll see what I can do.”

“Captain.” Cudmore darted off once more toward Elvey’s complex. Seeing the Captain about to leave with his family, the soldiers around them saluted and dispersed. Most of them.

Absently, Efran handed the pouch of royals to Ley. “Give that to Lilou and fetch Kraken.”

“Yes, Captain.” Ley took the pouch to locate their server while Efran lifted his chin at another man, Lambdin.

When he pushed forward among the departing soldiers, Efran told him, “Take Joshua; walk the Lady and Isreal up to the fortress.”

“Aye, Captain.” Lambdin lifted Joshua from Minka’s lap.

Having heard everything, she stood, eyeing her husband through her white angel hair. It was now beginning to curl again, and darken a little at the roots—*better and better*, he thought. He told her, “I’ll be back by nightfall.”

“If you’re not, I’ll send an army by torchlight,” she promised, taking Isreal’s hand. He looked up to his father in perfect confidence. Smiling at him, Efran leaned over to nuzzle her and stroke Joshua’s head.

Efran watched Lambdin walk them up Main toward the old switchback. Then he glanced over as Ley brought Kraken to him, ready to ride. Efran dismissed the soldier, who saluted and left for his duty. Stroking Kraken’s nose, Efran looked across the street where Youshock, in civilian clothes, was watching him.

When Efran led Kraken across the street to him, Hawk walked up in work clothes, saluting. Then both men watched the Captain silently, waiting. He said, “Youshock, go get you and Hawk horses, meet us at the gates.”

“Captain,” Youshock briefly saluted before turning to run behind Barracks A toward the stables.

Efran jerked his head to Hawk: “Come.” Leading Kraken to the water trough in front of the barracks, Efran left him there while he and Hawk entered.

The Second Gabriel looked up; Viglian looked over. Efran said, “Please tell the Commander that I’m taking two men to fetch Elvey from LeVisay. I don’t anticipate any difficulties, but Minka has promised to send an army with torches if I’m not back by nightfall.”

“We’ll take care of that,” Gabriel said, smiling vaguely. “But it’s cold in Westford, Captain. And—are you sure you want to go in uniform?”

“Oh,” Efran said, glancing down at the conspicuous red. “You’ve got workman’s clothes back there, don’t you?”

“Yes, Captain,” Gabriel said, then told Viglian, “Go get the Captain a change of clothes, and the three of ’em laborers’ coats and hats.”

“Yes, sir,” Viglian said, going to a back storage room. He came out again with the requisite apparel, saluting.

Efran changed clothes in the conference room, then he and Hawk dressed themselves in the coats and hats as they exited to the street. Shortly, Youshock came from behind the barracks leading a pair of horses. Handing him his outerwear, Efran suddenly remembered, “Your other sisters. Have they come yet?”

“Yes, Captain, and all are married. Don’t ask me who to; I can’t keep ’em straight,” Youshock said in despair. Hawk laughed at him. Efran shook his head, and they mounted to ride out.

It was a quick ride. Approaching Westford, they were glad to see no snow coming down. But as Gabriel had promised, it was cold. Riding up the streets, they glanced around at the general lack of activity. “Not good,” Efran muttered.

But when they topped the hill to look into the nobles’ district, they saw the problem at once. Hawk said, “Look at that! All the workmen are swarming around that one house like—like—”

“—like bees around the Queen,” Efran finished for him. “That’s Lady Cocci’s carriage down there.”

“So that must be her new house they’re building,” Youshock proposed. His companions agreed.

It was not so close to LeVisay that they feared being interrupted in their rescue of Lady Elvey—if she were there. Scanning all around, the three rode down one street and up another to dismount at the front door. Efran raised the knocker, but after three blows, it fell apart again. When no one answered, he opened the unlocked door.

Not seeing anyone, he directed Youshock, “Take our horses around back; see if Elvey’s carriage and horses are still here.”

“Captain,” Youshock acknowledged, gathering the reins.

When Kraken balked, Efran whacked his haunches: “Go on; you know I have to ride you back.” So Kraken allowed himself to be led away.

While Youshock took the horses, Efran and Hawk entered the foyer, glancing around. No one came into view. Going down the main corridor, they opened every door as they came to them, Efran on the left hand of the

corridor and Hawk on the right. He paused at one open door to look back at him with, “Captain.” Efran came alongside him to look into the room.

It was Lord Baroffio’s study. Baroffio himself looked up from his desk. “Hello there! I was wondering where everyone was. Where is everyone? Who knows? But you’re here, so come in and sit down! I’d offer you a drink, but I seem to be out, ha ha! Where’s the steward? But sit, sit! Tell me all about yourself and what’s going on. Have we met?”

“I don’t think so. Carry on,” Efran said, closing the door again. He paused, wincing, “Why did I lie when it wasn’t necessary?”

“Did you really want to stand there for an hour explaining everything to him when he wouldn’t remember it?” Hawk asked.

Efran shook his head in faint despair. “No, but he was the only one of their set who liked me.”

They continued down the corridor, finding no one else. Finally, Efran opened a door at the rear of the house which led into the main gathering room. It was a large room, nicely appointed. Sitting around it were Elvey, Surley, Shaffer (the notary) and another man whom Efran did not know. They were in the midst of a heated discussion.

“You can’t do it that way,” Surley said with the exasperation of a man who was repeating himself. “You’ll exhaust your men and your materials. Besides which, shipments only come with regularity if you’ve prepaid—”

Elvey interrupted him: “Prepaying is the surest way to get cheated I’ve ever found. Once they have your money, they have no reason to send you anything.”

“Neither of you know what you’re talking about,” Shaffer observed. “The Notary Rules spells out clearly and concisely the terms for all exchanges and contracts.”

And the fourth said, “What use are the Notary Rules when you’re not a notary? The only thing you can ever rely upon is—is—that—schedule they put up once a week in the office, the schedule of—of—” And the other three interrupted him.

Efran went cold, feeling as though he were revisiting the Sages of Solon in the cave. Then he grimaced. “What is that smell?”

“It’s this scented candle.” Hawk went over to blow it out and look at the label. “Ha. It’s called ‘Oblivion.’”

“Gah. My head hurts already. Everyone out,” Efran ordered, going over to unlock and open the back door. The cold, fresh air brought immediate relief. The four paused in their argument to look blankly at each other.

“C’mon. Up. Out,” Hawk said, lifting Elvey and Shaffer by their arms. Glancing back at the other two, he said, “You have a job waiting.” Somewhat disoriented, they got up.

Going out the back door, Efran saw two men in rumpled uniforms harnessing a pair of horses to Elvey’s carriage (which was explicit for the name “Elvey’s” emblazoned across the side). Youshock came over, gesturing. “They were asleep in the stalls, men and horses. They’re all roused up now, complaining of headaches.”

“She drugged them with something,” Efran muttered. Then he ordered, “All right, everyone, pile in.”

Elvey protested, “Efran, I haven’t had a chance to talk with Lady Cocci about our new store!”

“Five days is long enough. Your people are asking after you,” Efran said.

“Five days . . . ?” she breathed.

“Get in,” he repeated, which the four of them did.

While this was happening in Westford, Marguerite was doing some hard thinking, especially after having destroyed the Tinkerer’s glasses. Alarmed by the power they possessed, she decided there was more she needed to do.

When Paraskevi fell asleep on her patio daybed, Marguerite went to the kitchen where Hartshough was cleaning up after having disposed of the harmless but stinking ashes in the lake. Leaning on the counter, she said, “Hartshough, tell me again just how you discovered this cave under the Araucaria tree.”

“Yes, Lady Marguerite,” he said, putting away his dishtowel and removing his apron. “My kin, the Guppenbergers, live in caves in the area, and they told me some time ago about a cave of philosophers whom they often heard arguing when they passed by. They told me the name of the cave was Paraskevi. I thought they were—what is the expression—pulling my leg, but since the Guppenbergers must have their fun, I thought no more about it until I heard Lord Efran mention the name he had remembered Thurlow saying.

“So I asked Elsher to tell me more about the cave, and how one gained entrance. Thus I led Lord Efran and Seagrave according to Elsher’s instructions. It was only after we fell into it that I discovered my kin were in error on one or two points. When I communicated this to them, and told them we were trapped, they hastened to free us,” Hartshough said.

“For which we’re extremely grateful,” Marguerite said pensively. “But now, Hartshough, I need you to take me to see what’s left of this cave. I’m afraid there may be one or two more points which we need to clear up.”

“Indeed, Lady Marguerite? Oh, dear,” Hartshough said.

“Now, nothing is your fault, dear man—it’s mine for not paying attention. Finish up here; I’ll ask Eryk to keep an eye on our guest, then you and I will walk out to see the cave. That will tell me what I need to know,” she said.

“I’m afraid it’s quite the distance on foot, Lady Marguerite—almost to Westford,” he said—which was a good 5-mile walk from the old stone bridge.

“Then we’ll trot,” she said, patting his arm before going to the patio.

“My trot is bumpy. I may have to simply walk long,” he fretted.

It was indeed a long but pleasant trot/walk to the cave, with the air growing cooler the closer they got to Westford. Past the intersection of New North Road with Main, Hartshough led Marguerite west into a sparsely traveled woods. The gaping hole with the wilted crown of the Araucaria protruding from it was evident at once. The two approached the edge to look down.

Then she stepped onto the trunk to begin descending. “Lady Marguerite, do wait to let me go before you!” he said anxiously.

“There’s no danger, Hartshough, but I need to look closer,” she said. So he followed, fretting—especially when he saw the skeletons littering the cave floor.

Stepping off the trunk, he said, “Then—these shades were not hundreds of years old.”

“No,” she said thoughtfully, looking around at them. Some skeletons were almost fresh; others were years older. Marguerite bent to touch one of the newer skeletons, then another. “This is—was—Lord Lundeen. And this was Lord Callisto.”

“Whose strawmen replicas were found in the Lands,” Hartshough said.

“Yes,” she said, turning to another skeleton nearby.

“Then Paraskevi could not have been down here for ten years, as their strawmen were in Westford but a month ago. So the real men had been recently alive,” Hartshough said.

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Chapter 16

Marguerite said, “You’re correct, dear man. But Paraskevi knew only what she was told, or what she thought she observed from the growth of the tree roots.” Laying a hand on another skeleton, she said, “This was the builder Rivera.”

“The Rivera of Eurus?” Hartshough asked in astonishment.

Marguerite sat back on her heels. “He had many projects in Eurus, but was so difficult to work with, as you remember. He wanted to build things only his way. He did superior work, but his inflexibility drove off so many clients that he finally relocated to Westford. That was only weeks before you and I came down to the Lands”—almost seven months ago.

She reached over to another skeleton. “And this is Lord Poverly.”

“I fear I was not acquainted with that gentleman,” Hartshough admitted.

“The Westford banker who was found to have embezzled from several rebuilding funds. He disappeared weeks ago,” Marguerite said.

Hartshough began, “Then . . . this cave is a . . .”

“Repository for enemies that’s as sure as death but more entertaining,” Marguerite said. “The only questions that concern me now are, how did a young girl come to deserve it? And why didn’t she die as well?”

Hartshough lowered his head in thought while Marguerite glanced around the cave, not recognizing any of the other remains. She peered at something, then said, "There is water!"

Going to a shadowed corner, she put her hand to a stream of water, hardly more than a trickle, flowing down the rock. "And mushrooms!" she cried. Peering up into the dim recesses of the cave roof, she said, "There! A root of the Araucaria broke through the rock to provide a path for the water." Standing back, she said in satisfaction, "And there it is."

Having gleaned all they could from the cave, Marguerite and Hartshough climbed back up the tree trunk. Stepping off it, she sighed, "What a terrible waste, that such a beautiful old tree should be made servant of an evil mind, and destroyed for it."

"But there is hope," Hartshough said, pointing. Marguerite looked to an Araucaria seedling that had sprouted just 20 feet from the fallen patriarch.

"Oh!" she said in delight. "Perhaps our lovely forest faeries will tend it, and see that it grows tall and strong." There was an answering glimmer around the seedling, which grew six inches while they were looking on.

"The daughter of Queene Everleigh holds sway yet," he said. She smiled, taking his hand.

There was some considerable interest at the wall gates when Efran, Youshock and Hawk returned to the Lands escorting Elvey's carriage. After preceding it in, the three soldiers turned their horses to watch the driver stop upon the banging from the inside. And then the passengers began debarking.

Without waiting for the footman, Surley opened the door to hop down and wave at someone still inside. "Come on, Grosvenor; my wife will put you up. She's got plenty of room in her house here. No, I'm sure it'll be fine. She'll be happy to see you."

As they two walked toward a side street, Efran murmured, "Grosvenor. . . ."

"Westford Construction Overseer," Hawk clarified.

"Oh. But—" Efran looked around, issuing a light whistle, and Mohr ran up, saluting. Efran told him, "Go tell Lord Ryal that Surley is not dead, and neither is Westford Construction Overseer Grosvenor, if anyone thought he was."

Mohr began to move off, but Efran said, "Wait. Here comes another." They all looked as Lord Shaffer descended the steps, looking lost. So Efran added, "Also, take that one to Ryal."

"Yes, Captain." Mohr ran over to take Shaffer's arm and compel him toward Ryal's shop. With Elvey's carriage emptied of everyone but Elvey, she directed the driver on down Main to her complex. So Efran, Youshock, and Hawk turned their horses toward Barracks A.

Everyone in the vicinity of north Main stopped in their tracks to hear a woman screaming and a man shouting from a side street somewhere to the east of them (in fact, all the way past New North Road): "Surley! You're dead! What are you doing here?" she screamed.

"Who's that who just ran out? Why—you've got my best fireside chair here! And my hutch with the tea set! Why did you clean out my house?" he bellowed.

“Who is this with you? No, I don’t care who you are! Get out!” she cried.

As the racket continued without abating, Efran paused on Kraken. “Oh. Sounds like there may be a problem with the sleeping arrangements in Windry’s house, after all. So, Hawk, I’m leaving you and Youshock to report to the Commander. I’m done for the day.”

“Yes, Captain,” Hawk said. He and Youshock saluted as Efran rode placidly in the opposite direction of the screaming. But he had to pause for Viglian to run his folded uniform to him.

In bed before dinner, Efran told Minka all about their visit to LeVisay, and what—rather, whom—they had found. Then at dinner, he received two messages: one was from Ryal, who said that Lord Shaffer appeared to be incapacitated, and remembered nothing of Minka’s hearing. So Soames had escorted him to Coghill’s house for observation tonight.

The second message was from Marguerite, asking them to come down to the chapel at their convenience tomorrow.

The following morning, December 19th, Efran made Minka go to Law class, and went with her, before going down to the chapel. The reasons were, first, he was discovering a great deal about the Law that he didn’t know, and should know. Second, the men flocked to class when he was there, which he wanted to encourage. However, it created such an overflow in the library that not all of the men who wanted to listen could get in.

So someone suggested moving class to the dining hall, which was acceptable to everyone except Minka—she could not bear the thought of the Librarian’s being excluded when he enjoyed it so much and frequently contributed to the discussion. (Appointed Librarian from the fortress’ beginning thousands of years ago, he was confined to the library.) There followed a grudging standoff until the Librarian himself discovered the solution in one of his favorite books, *The Rôle of the Librarian*.

This solution (which he was ashamed to admit having overlooked on his first six readings because he thought it impossible) was simply to erect a shelf of books in a corner of the dining hall, thus designating it as an “adjunct library.” This would permit him to cross the corridor and enter the dining hall at will. Everyone embraced this solution, and Law classes were henceforth held there (to Nibor’s great relief, who could work on her history of the Abbey Fortress without people bumping her partition or looking over it to say, “Hello, there! How’s it going?”).

Efran alone was unhappy with the move for a little while, because it meant that he had to sit beside Minka instead of at her knees. He liked sitting at her knees for class because she often played with his hair, which helped them both listen. When Minka discovered that this was an issue, she simply sat on the first bench facing the tutor, Soames, so that Efran could sit on the floor at her knees as usual. The men who were distracted by her playing with his hair simply had to deal with it.

A second complication from the new arrangement was that books kept disappearing from the dining hall shelves, because those were predominantly easy reading about conquests—in war or love—which were popular among the Polonti. After thinking about this, Efran decided to do nothing but buy more books for those shelves. He considered it an important investment in his men, and he remembered too well being a poor soldier who loved books but couldn’t afford them.

At any rate, following Law class that morning, Efran left Kraken hilltop with the children and walked Minka

down the new switchback to the chapel. Hartshough greeted them at the door as usual, but Minka, taking one look at his face, cried, "Hartshough, what's wrong?"

"Nothing of import, Lady Minka, only, Lady Marguerite wished no distractions from the matter at hand, so prohibited me from producing refreshers until the main points were addressed," he said sadly.

Efran looked appalled. "Why, that's unfair."

Glancing a mild reproof at him, Minka said, "Never fear, Hartshough, we'll stay until you're allowed to bring refreshers so that you and Efran can have your fun."

"Thank you, Lady Minka," he said gratefully. Efran eyed her, but didn't provoke anything.

Marguerite wished them to come out to the patio where her guest was reclining. For today, she had only Efran and Minka here, with Hartshough to add commentary as needed. Meeting them in the kitchen, Marguerite explained, "I'm going to try to draw some difficult admissions from Paraskevi, which will be easier with fewer people here. But we'll need to inform Wendt, Ryal, and DeWitt of anything important we find out."

"I see," Efran said. "Should I sit out, then?"

"No, Efran; you were in the cave with her. We might even call in Seagrave, if it seems necessary," she said.

They were mildly startled by the doorbell, and waited while Hartshough answered it, returning with the very one mentioned. Seagrave saluted the Captain and bowed to the ladies. "Pardon me," he began uneasily, "but I heard the Captain say something to the Administrator about coming here this morning, and—"

Marguerite interrupted, "I'm glad you're here, Seagrave. Let's go out to the patio, then."

"Thank you, Lady Marguerite," he said. Efran nodded and Minka smiled.

Before they could make it to the patio, however, Heus entered to salute Efran. "Captain, the doctor Coghill wished to tell you that the Westford Notary, Lord Shaffer, insists he is fine and demands to be taken back to Westford. He doesn't know why he's here."

Efran nodded. "Yes, ask Gabriel to send him back up in a carriage."

"Yes, Captain." Heus departed, and they all turned back to the patio, where Paraskevi was sitting up in the daybed.

Seagrave nodded to her, noticing how much healthier she looked. As he, Minka and Efran sat at the glass table, Marguerite began, "Paraskevi,—"

"Oh!" the girl exhaled. "Please call me 'Skevi' so I don't feel like I belong in a history book."

"Of course, dear," Marguerite said smoothly. "I asked these friends to come down so we could work through some questions regarding the cave. It's important for us to figure out who set it up."

"We can't; it's hundreds of years old," Skevi said. Efran was appraising her glances at Seagrave. Minka was sensing her reluctance to talk.

“The tree and the cave may be, but, their combination as a trap is rather recent. Hartshough and I went out there yesterday, and determined that some of the men who died were people we had known,” Marguerite said in her soft way.

“Who?” Efran asked quickly.

She told him, “Rivera the builder, Lords Lundeen and Callisto, and Lord Poverly the banker.” Efran did not know two of those, but chose not to chase rabbits. Marguerite continued to Skevi, “So, you weren’t there for ten years; at the most, it could only have been a few months. Do you remember what day it was that you got lost?”

“Um,” Skevi said, thinking. “It was the first day of Advent.”

“What year?” Marguerite asked quietly.

“The year eighty-one fifty-five from the creation of the world,” Skevi said sadly, as if it were long past.

Marguerite looked at Efran. “It was—what?—four days ago that you found her?”

“Yes,” Efran said. So, his first impression was correct: she was a young teenager.

Marguerite told Skevi, “That means you were actually in the cave for eighteen days.” Seagrave nodded, as this confirmed what he had been thinking.

Skevi stared at her. “It seemed like years,” she breathed.

Marguerite asked, “How did you find the water and the mushrooms?”

Efran’s brows lowered, as he hadn’t found either in the cave. But he waited for Skevi to answer hesitantly, “I . . . heard the water singing. It was in the very corner of the cave, where there were no lights. But I heard the water sing, *Drink me*, and when I went over to put my hand into it, I felt the mushrooms as well. They were singing in a lower voice, *Eat me, eat me*. So, even though I didn’t feel like it, I did.”

Marguerite looked up. “Who—?” Then she sat back contemplatively. “I don’t know whether it was the tree or the rock or an angel, but it saved your life.”

“What do you mean?” Skevi asked, trembling.

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Chapter 17

Marguerite explained, “The light that encompassed you could not feed you. There is no magic light that can do that. But what it can do is suppress your feelings, your senses—of time, of fear, of thirst, of hunger. The men with you died of thirst or hunger without knowing it, because they were never thirsty or hungry. Neither were you, but there was a—benevolent power in the cave with you to make you eat and drink, to sustain you for almost three weeks until Lord Efran, Seagrave and Hartshough could come for you.”

Efran asked, “But, how could they be dead when we saw their faces and heard them talking?”

Marguerite turned to him. “Because they had someone to talk to, their minds—their souls—remained until their safe haven collapsed around them.”

Skevi looked suddenly at Seagrave. “You must think I’m an idiot for lecturing you the way I did.”

He shook his head slightly. “The whole thing was a very powerful, devious illusion. It was truly an act of grace that you survived.”

She seemed about to cry, so Efran asked her, “How did you come to be in the cave?”

Skevi glanced off in further humiliation. “I was in—I liked a boy who sent me a message to meet him at the tree. So I took the mechanical dog and told Father I was taking it to Quant to see if he wanted to resell it. Father knew I was lying, but let me go. I got to the tree and fell through. The boy was not in the cave or anywhere around the tree.”

“Then he knew about the trap,” Efran suggested. “Who is the boy?”

“He didn’t know anything about it,” she said quickly. But he waited with his patient eyes until she said, “Lovedahl’s nephew.”

Efran paused. “Lovedahl has a nephew?”

She nodded. “Jian. He’s cute. But he doesn’t know I exist. I was surprised to get the note, but didn’t question it,” she said dully. She didn’t look at Seagrave, but he had lowered his head. Minka also kept her mouth shut.

Marguerite said, “Jian didn’t send it, dear; you’re right about that. It was sent by someone who knew you liked him.”

Skevi looked sad and frightened, then. “No one knew but Father.”

Everyone was quiet for a moment, then Minka asked, “Skevi, how did he get those glasses?”

Skevi glanced at her self-consciously, but said, “Lady Cocci gave them to him, maybe—two months ago. It changed him utterly. I hate them—I told him I hated them, and I hated Lady Cocci. I even tried to take them off his face, but he slapped me down. He’d never hit me before, but now—they own him.” She was crying bitterly.

“Efran got him to take them off for a new pair,” Minka said with a tight grin.

Skevi looked at her quickly. “Where are they?”

Marguerite replied, “Hartshough and I burned them with a, er, special fire.”

She looked disinclined to elaborate until Minka demanded, “Auntie, what fire?”

Marguerite and Hartshough exchanged guilty glances. She said, “I’m afraid I directed this good man to burglarize Elvey’s—”

“Of my own free will,” Hartshough interrupted. “I stole a dress of Lady Cocci’s that was being altered—”

“—which, when set ablaze, completely melted down the glasses and expunged the power,” Marguerite ended.

“Well done,” Efran smiled. Minka grinned at them.

They were all quiet again, thinking. No one noticed Hartshough slipping back into the kitchen. Efran broke the silence with, “Cocci gave Skevi’s father the glasses, and Cocci set up the cave for her enemies, and . . . Thurlow?”

Skevi wiped her face and inhaled, thinking. “Father was really angry at him for stealing his mechanical walking stick—which was a stupid thing to do. But Thurlow had known him before he’d gotten the glasses, and didn’t believe that Father made it. I think he was trying to find out where it really came from. But he . . . was nice to me.”

Efran told her, “Before he died, he told me your name, and that led to our finding you.”

She looked confused and sad. “I don’t see how he could have. Once Father looked at him, he was helpless. Father controlled him with the glasses . . . and Cocci controlled Father.”

There was a long silence, then Efran asked Marguerite, “How do I kill a dark altior?”

“I don’t think you can,” she whispered.

Hartshough appeared at the door from the kitchen with a tray. “If this is not a good time, I shall withdraw. But I have a new recipe for Christmas Punch—”

“Bring it,” Efran said, stretching out a hand. Everyone sat up in relief.

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said, handing him the first cup. As Hartshough passed around cups to the others, everyone watched Efran sip once slowly, then again, his face frozen in concentration. Minka was the only one who dared drink her own during that period of intense evaluation. But she did, and sighed, “Hartshough, this is the most heavenly thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“Thank you, Lady Minka,” he said with almost as much gratitude as he had shown Efran for taking a cup. Then they all watched Efran take a third drink to hold it on his tongue. Skevi could hardly look away from the drama.

He drained the cup and set it down. “Excellent punch, Hartshough.”

While Hartshough was trying to thank him, again, Minka and Marguerite were demanding that Efran tell them the ingredients. So he sighed, “Cherry juice, obviously, lime, orange, ginger beer, and—something else that I don’t know. I can’t tell what it is.” He looked so despondent that Minka wanted to hug him, but she couldn’t for fear of rubbing it in.

Hartshough bowed his head to say, “Hibiscus tea, Lord Efran.”

Efran looked as though he’d been slapped. “Hibiscus tea,” he repeated carefully.

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Hartshough acknowledged.

Efran glanced off, stunned, then said, “Do you mind—would you brew me a cup of this tea?”

“I would be delighted, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said, turning.

“I’ll just have another cup of that punch, when you’re able,” Minka said.

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Hartshough said from the kitchen.

They all waited quietly until Hartshough brought a steaming cup to Efran. “It is not sweetened, Lord Efran. Would you care for—?”

“No. Thank you,” Efran said. The rest of them were mesmerized as he sipped carefully, analyzing every facet of the flavor.

Watching him, Minka couldn’t resist. “Can I have a taste?”

“No. Get your own cup,” Efran said. She started laughing at the blunt refusal, but he went on, “The flavors from your mouth, which are exquisite, will interfere with my getting the taste of this down.” That provoked more laughter, besides causing Skevi to blush, especially when Seagrave looked at her.

Having taken Efran’s statement as a command, Hartshough brought Minka another cup. “Hibiscus tea sweetened with honey, Lady Minka.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking her own evaluative sip. She narrowed her eyes in concentration like Efran, then said, “Meh. The punch is better,” and drained the cup anyway.

The group broke up shortly thereafter. After kissing Auntie and congratulating Hartshough, Minka and Efran left to go back up hilltop. Seagrave paused over Skevi’s daybed. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to come back from time to time to see how you’re doing—”

“You probably should get up and try to walk around a little, dear,” Marguerite said idly.

With this opening, Seagrave asked, “May I help you up?” He offered his hand. Skevi took it, smiling despite her efforts to look casual, and he walked her around the back grounds of the chapel for the next half hour.

When Efran and Minka arrived at the fortress, she discovered that Tess had sent a message saying that she believed Cloud was ready for her to ride. In great excitement, Minka changed into sturdy work pants and boots to run out to the training pens.

Efran stopped by the workroom to give Estes and DeWitt a rundown of what they had learned from Marguerite and Skevi, then told them, “I’ll be on the courtyard balcony, if anyone needs me.”

“Good, Efran,” Estes said, knowing why he would be there.

Efran went back down to the foyer, then up the stairs to the small balcony. He preferred praying here, now, rather than in the keep, which was getting too crowded with Earnshaw’s Scripture readings. That was a good thing, of course, but Efran needed the seclusion, which he rarely had anymore. Also, he could look over almost all the Lands from here, which gave him a renewed sense of his inadequacy. That, he also needed.

He remembered standing here less than a month ago to watch the Lands being devoured by half a million

walking sticks that ate every living green thing in their path. He had poured out his anger and heartbreak at God for allowing it. Only days afterward, Efran had realized that it was all set up in order to bring an abandoned Polonti child to the fortress. And while the Lands had suffered a loss of produce, Landers were taking care of each other, and no one was hurting badly.

“So there’s a reason in this as well,” he murmured. Still, while Lissa’s revenge was bad, Cocci’s could very well be worse. And he had certainly provoked her by taking her playthings out of LeVisay, Skevi out of the cave, and Pelagatti’s glasses off his face. Therefore, she would respond with something he couldn’t hope to predict, much less counter.

“We’re still under Your protection,” he whispered. “Whatever You allow to happen, it’s going to be for a reason, so, we’re just looking to You to see us through it—”

He broke off, looking down at a rider, Willis, who had just entered the courtyard gates. Seeing Efran on the balcony, he called up, “Captain, Lady Marguerite requests your presence at the chapel house.”

Again? After he and Minka had just been there? He said, “I’m coming.” And he turned to trot down the stairs and through the foyer to the front doors.

He saw Willis standing at the open gates holding the bridle of his horse. “Here, Captain, take this one.”

“All right,” Efran said. So it was somehow urgent. He leapt easily into the saddle to turn the horse’s head and begin logging down the new switchback. There were delivery carts coming up the old one.

Behind him, he heard shouting and rapid hoofbeats. Someone cried, “Leave it open!” Efran twisted in the saddle to see Minka on Cloud riding out of the gates at a wild gallop. Minka was white with fear, not in control of the horse at all. Cloud had begun down the switchback at such a reckless pace that she was in immediate danger of toppling over the edge of the highest level.

Seeing that there was something provoking her, he held up a hand, whispering, “You’re intruding on my Lands. Let go of her.” The horse slowed to a quivering trot, then. Minka, still a little shaky, took up the reins again to guide her down to him.

Drawing abreast of him, she exhaled, “I don’t know what happened! I was riding her around the pen at a walk, and she broke into a run straight out of the gate! She knocked Lorient down, for heaven’s sake!”

“Well, she’s calmed down now,” Efran said, watching her sporadically quiver. “But I’m glad you joined me; Marguerite just now sent for us.” He turned his horse to begin walking down the switchback, and Cloud followed alongside. The men in the courtyard above were looking on.

“Why? What happened?” Minka asked.

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Chapter 18

Efran replied, “I don’t know yet, but we’re about to find out.” He glanced down at Marguerite and Hartshough watching from the front steps of the chapel. The door guards had run halfway up the front walk to Chapel Road, and were now monitoring the progress of the two down the switchback.

When he and she had pulled up to the chapel steps to dismount, Marguerite came over to hug Minka and chastise her mildly, “What were you doing up there?”

“I don’t know! I have no idea what I did to upset her!” Minka said, half laughing, half crying.

“Oh, really?” Marguerite refrained from glancing at Efran. Instead, she asked Minka, “Would you like to lie down for a moment?”

Minka lowered her brows at her auntie. “No, I’m fine. It’s not me you need to talk to, is it?”

Marguerite hesitated, but Efran asked, “Is Skevi still on the back patio?”

“Yes,” Marguerite said. “And, she asked to talk to you.”

“Then let’s go do that,” he said. “Just hold on to the horses here,” he told Willis and Beardall, who saluted. As Efran entered the hall to head for the patio, Minka followed, eyeing Marguerite with a question. She returned a wary look to her great-granddaughter.

Red-eyed and anxious, Skevi looked up at Efran from the daybed. “Cocci’s mad at you for—interfering. She wants to—talk to you.”

Smiling, Efran pulled up a chair to sit beside her. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped. “Well, good, because I have something to tell Cocci. As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I forbid her touching anyone or anything on my Lands. However, since she wants to talk, I will meet her tomorrow right around noon in front of the new Porterhouse.”

Cocci’s voice said, “Done and done, Efran.” Her hearers looked up, startled.

Faint, Skevi sank back onto the bed. Efran watched her a moment just to make sure that she was all right. As he got up to move off, reaching for Minka, Marguerite asked, “Efran, do you know what you’re doing?”

With a hand on Minka’s arm, he turned in surprise. “Since when was that necessary?” She looked pained, and he added, “But I agree that preparation *is*.” He glanced down at Paraskevi.

Walking back with Minka to exit the chapel doors and trot down the steps, he paused. He peered at her, then looked around. “Do you hear—chortling? Chuckling?”

Minka glanced around in confusion, but Marguerite, on the steps behind them, said, “Yes.” She and Hartshough were looking back at the greenery on the chapel roof. So Efran and Minka looked. And they stared at five little men in tweed suits lounging on the roof. They were indeed chuckling, chortling, sniggering, and grinning at him with thumbs up, bobbing their heads. Then they vanished.

After a moment, Marguerite asked, “How did you get the sprites to like you, Efran?”

“I have no idea,” he said. “But they were cheering me on while I held the door shut on Lissa’s cremation.”

“Really,” Marguerite murmured.

Hartshough asked, “Did they happen to collect her ashes, Lord Efran?”

“I don’t think so. They just blew away,” he shrugged. Then he asked Minka, “Do you think you can ride Cloud back up, or do you want to ride with me?”

Suspiciously eyeing his smile, she said, “I’ll ride Cloud. I’ve got to return her, anyway. She wasn’t supposed to leave the pen.”

Minka hugged her auntie and patted Hartshough, then everyone watched her remount Cloud. Even though the horse was perfectly docile, Efran left Willis’ horse at the chapel for him, and began walking up the old switchback beside Minka on Cloud.

Hearing a commotion down Main at the wall gates, they looked back to see a large flatbed cart being hauled by a pair of draft horses toward the hill. Tied down on it was a great big fir tree. Squinting, Efran said, “Already? What is today?”

“It’s the nineteenth! Only six days till Christmas!” Minka cried. “Oh, our third Christmas at the Abbey, Efran! And all the new children we have this year! Oh, I can’t wait to watch the tree go up!” She bounced in the saddle like Isreal on Kraken.

“All right; be still so you don’t fall,” Efran said grumpily.

“Oh, we’d better hurry, to stay ahead of them,” she cautioned, looking back. And she started to kick Cloud to go faster.

He held her back by her bridle, muttering, “No, we don’t have to hurry.”

“Why do you not like Christmas?” she demanded.

“I do like Christmas, especially when it was simple and less—” he glanced around cautiously—“decorated,” he almost whispered.

“But of course the faeries can decorate for Christmas; you’ve always let them do that,” she protested.

Dressed in green velvet robes and a Christmas crown decorated with cranberries, Queene Kele appeared on Cloud’s poll between her ears. “Oh, thank you, dearest Minka! You’re always so sensitive to our needs. And it has been a great many months since we’ve done any decorating at all! So may we *please* do just a tiny bit?” Kele asked reproachfully of Lord Efran, who was now trotting up the switchback beside Cloud to stay ahead of the oncoming tree.

“Certainly, Kele,” he panted.

“Thank you, dearest Efran,” she said, blowing him a kiss. Then she disappeared.

Almost immediately, the black iron fortress fence and gates were awash in red and green faerie lights portraying

Christmas roses, poinsettias, holly leaves with berries, and striped candy sticks (which required white lights as well). Efran glanced up with a groan, and a few men who hadn't been at the fortress the previous Christmas fell back in surprise.

"Hurry, Efran! They're gaining on you!" Minka warned.

He quickly looked back. "No, they're not! Why do you say that?"

"I'm anxious to get in and get a good seat for the decorating!" she said. He muttered something under his breath, but stopped to pull her down far enough to kiss her, which she allowed.

They arrived in the courtyard a full minute before the cart. Efran sent Bennard with Cloud back to the training pen before depositing Minka in the foyer, well out of the path of the incoming tree. He borrowed chairs out of the small receiving room for them both to sit against the foyer wall to watch the decorating festivities. Once again, DeWitt had drafted his assistant Pieta and her sister-in-law Bethune to organize Christmas at the Fortress.

So when the great fir was brought in, the children rushed in to see it with cries of delight. They had to stay out of the way while the tree was positioned in the very center of the foyer, its tip almost touching the ceiling. That way, it was visible almost to the wall gates when the doors were wide open. Then, while three men held it steady, a fourth used long screws to secure it in its base, which was covered with a red velvet skirt.

Finally, it was ready for decorating. Bethune gave the children their ornaments to hang on the lower branches. Many of those ornaments had been made by the children themselves during class last year and this year. Men on ladders covered the high branches with ornaments that Bethune and Pieta had bought.

The children chattered happily as they hung their favorite decorations (which included a few wooden walking sticks), and the older ones—Noah, Toby, Hassie, Alcmund, and Elwell—were allowed to climb a little ways up the ladders. Rondi came in to help the little ones, Joshua among them, to hang their ornaments. And faerie lights began glittering from deep in the branches.

Isreal wandered in from the corridor to watch the excitement around the tree. Seeing Efran seated and watching, he came over to pat his knee, and Efran took him on his lap. Hazily pointing at the tree, Isreal asked, "Wha?"

"It's the Christmas tree, Isreal," Efran said while Minka glowed at him. Isreal studied him, and he repeated, "Christmas."

"Kissmus," Isreal said in wonder, then he leaned back on Efran's neck to watch the decorations go up. "Kissmus," he sighed.

More decorations went up around the foyer: wreaths on the fortress doors, garlands of greenery and apples along the walls, and bunches of cinnamon sticks hanging in doorways. However, the workers respected Minka's painting of the flower lady. She also sent Ayling to her and Efran's quarters to bring out the crèche for the table in the small dining room.

In the midst of all this, Loghry wheeled out a large cart from the kitchen with snacks for workers and children. This he placed within comfortable reach of Efran and Minka, but the children swarmed it first. Minka and Rondi made sure that the little ones, like Joshua and Calo (slightly older at 2 1/2) got their share of twisty cinnamon rolls, stuffed figs, mini pies, dried apple rings and cheese sticks.

Content on Efran's leg, Isreal watched the other children pillage the table without trying to take anything for

himself. So Efran reached over to get him a twisty roll. Taking a bite around his stitches, Isreal looked back at Efran with wide eyes. “Kissmus,” he said reverently, and Efran grinned at him.

Then another kitchen worker, Asti, wheeled over a cart with a large bowl and cups. She began ladling out cups of fruit punch for the children first, and then the workmen. Upon receiving their cups, the men toasted her and began singing a rollicking Christmas song. This involved clapping and stomping which the children rushed to join with much laughter. Isreal clapped along with them, but didn’t move off Efran’s knee.

All this while, Efran was conscious of the need to prepare; he needed to get someplace alone so that he could think and pray about how to meet Cocci. But never knowing Christmas until he came as a 10-year-old to the poor parish in Eledith that supported Sister Therese’s work, he never received anything like presents even there. So, watching the Abbey children enjoy something he never had as a child, he couldn’t make himself get up and leave. (Including those that he and Minka had adopted, there were now 20 children at the Abbey, two of them babies.)

Besides which, Efran had the persistent feeling that he had already done all the preparation necessary for his meeting with Cocci. He didn’t entirely trust this feeling, but he still couldn’t make himself leave—especially when the children gathered to sing the carol they’d just learned in class:

“Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the Feast of Stephen
When the snow lay round about
Deep and crisp and even—”

Which song they sang very nicely and almost correctly, even though Noah kept poking Hassie, trying to make her screech. She didn’t, but she did chase him around the tree with clenched fist when they were done singing.

With that distraction, Efran wasn’t aware of anyone special entering the fortress until Minka gasped, “Pia!” She never came inside; whenever Efran wanted to see her, he always had to go out to the woods to look for her.

He turned in his chair when she entered the fortress doors with her Polonti bodyguard. Kissing Minka’s cheek, she handed her a plant in a pot made of bark. “Oh, Pia, this is beautiful! Is it for me? What is this, Efran?” Minka cried.

He looked over, smelling the feathery branchlets. “That’s a lemon cypress. Wherever did you find that, Pia?”

“On hilltop,” she said indifferently, looking at Isreal.

“Pia, this is Isreal, our new child,” Efran told her.

The other children paused to watch as Pia studied the new boy. Then she leaned over and kissed his stitched lip gently. He put his fingers tentatively to his mouth. Pia had turned away to start back toward the doors when Hassie asked, “Why doesn’t she like us? She never plays with us.”

Toby said, “She just has her own friends in the woods—animals and trees. Some bugs, too.”

While he was explaining this, Pia returned to walk over to Hassie. And everyone watched Pia kiss Hassie on the cheek before going out again. Rubbing her cheek, Hassie screwed up her face. “Why did she kiss me?”

Chapter 19

Efran told Hassie, “For Polonti, a kiss isn’t just something between a boy and girl; it’s a way of saying, ‘You are my friend, and I trust you.’ Toby’s right; Pia just doesn’t make friends with people easily. It doesn’t mean that she doesn’t like you.”

Tilting her head in consideration, Hassie said, “I can see that.”

There were more friends to talk to at dinner, then Efran turned around to find Minka yawning, so he had to take her to bed.

And then all at once, it was the next day—December 20th. With his noon appointment looming, Efran went to Law class with Minka. It never occurred to him to skip it. After Soames had covered a rather mundane topic at length, one soldier vented, “Why do we have to learn all this to get promoted?”

Other soldiers looked interested in the answer, so Soames said, “Learning the Law isn’t a matter of just storing up facts in your head; it’s a mindset. It’s an attitude of service to your fellow man, to the principles of fairness and justice, and to God. This preparation for leadership can’t be crammed overnight or in a few weeks; the Law has to become so ingrained in you over time that you respond in any situation according to its principles without thinking—because in a crisis, there is no time to think.”

The men murmured in appreciation, and Efran raised his head. *That’s it. I can’t prepare sufficiently in one day to meet an enemy; I have to rely on what I’ve learned since first coming here, and on God when I don’t know what to do.*

Shortly thereafter, he put on a coat and hat, kissed Minka goodbye, and went out to the courtyard to leap up on Kraken and ride out. She watched from the courtyard balcony, praying, as he departed the wall gates and disappeared up the northbound road. He was unarmed, and no one was with him. No one had asked to go with him, knowing what he would say. But there were already a score of Abbey men in the vicinity of the new Porterhouse in Westford. Some were working; some appeared to be working, and some were obviously loitering. But no one was in Abbey red.

Efran was not wearing a uniform, either. But since it was cold in Westford, he had on a long riding coat with a high collar that could be turned up against the wind. Also, for possibly the first time in his life, he was wearing a flat cap. It just seemed appropriate: it was good for keeping his head warm while conveying his disdain of protection. And although his rakish haircut had mostly grown out in the past 12 days, it also signaled a casual attitude toward this meeting.

“And unless You help me, she’ll chew me up and spit me out,” he told God on his way to Westford. But offering to meet her just seemed the right thing to do—better than letting her go on trapping people to play with. Or kill.

He loped up the street into Westford, turning left to ride down to the Porterhouse. He scanned everywhere without seeing her yet, as he didn’t expect to. A man might wait to meet him; a woman liked to make an entrance. Dismounting at the Porterhouse, he noted several of his men trying to blend in, which was fine. He also noted the weapons they carried under their coats, which was touching but useless. After seeing what Lissa could do, he knew that nothing but a cyclone would slow her mother down.

He draped the reins over the post, pausing to stroke Kraken’s neck. “I want you to be able to move if you need

to, but, stay out of her range of fire.” Kraken looked over, making no promises. Efran leaned against the post rail, crossing his arms to wait. A trio of other riders then approached from the south, but not close enough for him to notice them. They also wore heavy coats and hats pulled down over their eyes. One wore boy’s clothes that were a bit too large for her, but familiar.

Efran’s eyes darted to a flicker of light in the road before him, but nothing appeared. Still, he turned his head to listen to an excited buzz. “What . . . ? My cap? Was that something about my cap?” he muttered.

Then there was a flash of light and billowing smoke farther down the street, from which Cocci appeared. “Like an evil genie,” he murmured, getting up off the post. He walked to the middle of the street to face her about 15 feet away.

“Nice outfit,” he observed. She was wearing a bright yellow dress with an asymmetrical hemline, printed with an irregular pattern of black lines, circles and dots. Black lace peeked out at the higher elevations of the hem. The sleeves were long and tight, with large cuffs edged in black. And her boxy yellow hat featured a spray of black lace spewing ten inches high from the back brim. He suddenly noticed that her hat, minus the lace, was shaped much like the Abbey army hats. Well, of course: Elvey already had the blocks for those.

In response to his flippant compliment, Cocci said, “Your opinion means nothing to me, but I’m glad you noticed. Now I am going to allow you to approach me on your knees, licking the street as you come.”

Efran was thrown down to his knees as though five hundred pounds had suddenly landed on his shoulders. He didn’t immediately notice the thin sprinkling of white ash that appeared on the street directly under him. On his knees, he was flung face down to the ground, and as hard as he tried to keep his tongue in his mouth, he felt it being drawn out as by a pair of pincers. He was forced to lick the paved street, taking onto his tongue and into his mouth that light sprinkling of ash.

“Bleah!” He sat up on his knees. “What is that you’re making me lick up? Gah, that’s nasty!” He turned to spit forcibly and wipe his mouth on his coat sleeve. Finding a handkerchief in the pocket of his coat, he whipped it out to begin cleaning his tongue and mouth as best he could. He continued to rant around the cloth, “I’ve ’ad to eat some garbage in my life—an’ shanks that fell into ashes, but—this’s ten times ’orse [pausing to spit again]. It tastes like death. Gyuh!”

He finally looked up to see her peering at him as though he were doing something unexpected. But anyone who knew him also knew that he was particular about what he put in his mouth. As he raised a knee preparatory to standing, she slowly reached out a hand toward him, fingers extended. He stilled on one knee, watching her turn her hand palm up and curl her fingers as though crushing something in her hand. “Looks like you broke a nail,” he said vindictively, still offended.

There was a twitter somewhere in the air between them and she looked up sharply. “Sprites,” she said contemptuously, and Efran forgot about the nasty taste in his mouth. “Oh, dear, Efran!” she laughed richly. “How did you earn the affection of these wretched creatures?”

By holding the oven door closed, he thought.

“They think to protect you!” she cried. Her laughter was almost hysterical.

Hartshough asked if they collected Lissa’s ashes. I saw the pile, and then it was gone, he thought. He looked down at the street again, where the faint remains of fine white ash glittered in the noonday winter sun. Why wasn’t he crawling on his knees toward her?

With a look of sweet, beckoning affection, Cocci gazed into the air, pleading, “Dear little sprites, sweet little men, will you come play with me? We will have such fun together. I promise!” Her red lips spread in a crocodile smile.

“I’ll play!” One little man appeared about ten feet to her right, grinning. It reminded Efran of Gotobed trying to entice people into The Game.

“Wonderful!” she cried. And she loosed a crackling bolt of light from her hand. It struck the sprite, covering him entirely with a blazing, blinding aura. He screamed pathetically, and the street cleared entirely of spectators who were not from the Abbey Lands.

As the blaze continued to engulf him, he shook and shuddered, wailing loudly. He threw his arms up over his head and opened his mouth shockingly wide. Then he fell down on his back to writhe and roll on the street like a snake in a trap.

When he landed on his side, his flailing feet propelled him in a circle on the ground with his shoulder at the center, and continued to spin him on the street until he had made several circuits, all on his side. All the while, he was crying, “Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!”—until it seemed that his cries were perfectly coordinated with the sweeps of his feet.

Meanwhile, the burning aura had dissipated around him. The spectators remaining in the street were watching in fascination. Finally, he jumped up to bow victoriously, and raucous cries of “Huzzah! Huzzah!” were heard from an unseen audience who applauded loudly. Cocci was scanning everywhere with slitted, newly alert eyes.

Efran got to his feet. She wheeled toward him. “I didn’t give you permission to stand!” She flashed that bolt of light at him. He could tell when it hit, but he felt as though he were covered in armor. He experienced nothing but a nudge that nearly knocked him off balance. Nearly. He remained standing and unhurt.

But Cocci didn’t notice, being diverted by something at her left. It was one of the sprites who seemed to have fallen into the street. He scrambled up, crying, “No! No! I don’t want to play!”

She relaxed, directing that sweetly evil smile at him. “There now, dear little man, you needn’t be afraid. You won’t feel a thing, hardly. Why would I hurt such a cute thing as you?”

Trembling, he looked at her uncertainly. “Y-you won’t h-hurt m-me?” he stuttered pathetically.

“Of course not. Come here to me,” she invited, curling her fingers.

As he stepped hesitantly toward her, a raging fire sprang up from the street between them. Seeing it, he screamed, but was unable to stop his feet from moving forward. As he was on the very fringes of the flames, so that his tweed suit was smoking, she said, “Release your protection of Efran, and I will put down the fire.”

His face screwed up in terror, and he cried pathetically, “I can’t! I’m not the one doing it!”

“What a shame,” she said, and he stepped into the blaze.

As his clothes, hair and skin began burning, he cried so loudly that some of the Abbey men turned their faces away. But Efran, watching intently, smiled. Cocci laughed as the poor little man writhed in agony, continuing to step forward as he was compelled to do.

Then he stepped to the side, his right arm spinning in an arc. His feet suddenly began bouncing up and down as though he were . . . dancing. His cries morphed into song: “Owwwwwhooo are youuuuuuu, to tell me what to doooooo?” From the midst of the flames, he pointed at her, and a finger of fire shot out from his hand to hit her in the chest, knocking her down on her rear. It also singed the bright yellow of her dress.

While Cocci sat stunned, the sprite swept his arms to extinguish the flames in which he stood. Then he raised his hands in acknowledgment of the cheers and applause from his invisible audience.

Efran began applauding, as well. His men on the street took it up. Then someone scrunched herself into Efran’s side, and he looked down at a devious faerie face under a boy’s flat cap. After the first moment of surprise, he gathered her up for a special kiss. This she accepted until he thrust his tongue deep into her mouth. She tried to pull away, but he held her to aggressively sweep her mouth.

When he finally let her go, Minka said, “Urgh! You got dirt in my mouth!” She spat to the side.

“No, cremation ashes,” he clarified.

She gagged. “What?”

“I’ll explain later,” he said, holding her close to his side. He looked back at Marguerite and Hartshough, both in workman’s coats and hats, sitting on their horses to watch. Wendt, dressed as a baker, had walked over to stand beside his wife’s horse. He was shaking his head in humorous disbelief.

Kraken left the post to amble over and sniff the street where the faint ashes remained. Efran and Minka watched him lick it a few times, then snort on the rest of it. “I hope no one else needs any,” Efran murmured.

“Needs what?” she asked. But they both looked at Cocci, who was getting to her feet.

Neither amused nor cowed, she turned cold, dark eyes to Efran. She whispered, “You will regret this.” The sprite had disappeared.

Cocci stood tall, spreading her hands as she looked down at the ground. “Friends of darkness, immortal altiors, those who live in death, come to my aid against the impudent sprites that have latched onto a minor power who seeks to destroy us. I bid you arise to show your authority over little Lord Efran.”

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Chapter 20

Forms began emerging around Cocci as though hatching from round, ice-encrusted eggs. Watching, Efran grew uneasy. He wasn’t sure that mere ashes were sufficient to protect him and his people from a host of dark altiors. On the Lands, yes, they’d be protected. But, here? After Efran had initiated this confrontation?

He suddenly looked over to the front porch of the new Porterhouse Inn. There was Nakham, dressed in bright summer beachwear, spread out in a lounge chair with his ankles crossed. He lifted his ale to Efran while eating from a plate of— “Fish bites? Those look like fish bites,” Efran said, squinting. Nakham glanced at the plate and nodded.

“All right, then,” Efran said pensively, turning to watch the emerging forms grow into giants with beards and ancient weapons. Glancing back at Nakham, Efran said, “You’re not trying to tell me that is Nothing again.” Chewing, Nakham grinned at him.

Looking over to Nakham as well, Minka murmured, “Are the fish bites good? I’ll have to try them.” Nakham gave her a thumbs-up.

By this time, the ring of ancient dark altiors was complete. Staring at them, Efran realized that he was looking at the Nephilim—one of whom Mounoussamy had claimed to be, whom Ryal had described as “the warriors, the Nephilim of old, who descended to Sheol with their weapons of war. They placed their swords beneath their heads and their shields upon their bones, for the terror of the warriors was upon the land of the living.” [Ezek. 32:27]

“The terror of the warriors” was exactly right. They were all men: no woman could achieve their physical stature. The shortest was about fifteen feet tall; the one in the center was at least twenty feet. Their faces were lined and implacable; their eyes had been devoid of emotion for so long, they were now empty sockets. The ancient warriors wore the dented, bloodied, mangled armor of armies separated by centuries and thousands of miles, sharing only their lust for conquest.

Except for Efran and Minka, the street emptied around them. She had buried herself in his side, hiding her face. Efran himself was trembling. But his feet seemed to be planted where he stood. He couldn’t move at all. Looking for Nakham, Efran turned his eyes toward the porch of the Porterhouse again.

Nakham was gone, both he and his lounge. But the front doors of the Porterhouse stood open. Only, they didn’t look like doors; they looked like an open rock tomb. And above them stood a mighty being who said, *He is not here, but is risen*. Efran stopped trembling.

He turned his eyes back to the giants, who made Cocci look like a doll, a child’s toy. The twelve of them came out of their ring to form a line down the street. One in the middle, the tallest, raised his hand to utter, “The rats shall appear.” Although low, his voice made the buildings around them quiver.

The five little men appeared in a line before them, clearly and genuinely terrified. The giants looked at them in laughing contempt, and the great one said, “Who are you to defy the powers above you, rats?” Cocci looked on with teeth bared.

Pullaway, in the center of the sprites, gathered himself to squeak, “Now!” He and the other four threw the remainder of the ashes toward the line of twelve. The pitiful little bit spread out almost to invisibility before reaching them.

The great one laughed, “The ashes of the dead have no effect on us. We have been dead for millennia, for untold ages.”

“Then you are nothing,” Efran said. Minka lifted her head to look at him, then at the great ones. Abbey men began edging back out into the street.

The line of twelve turned toward him. Released, the sprites vanished. But the giants came forward slowly to reform their line before the human. The great one told him, “You and that one who clings to you will know nothingness in Sheol with us.”

And a gaping hole opened up in the street beneath Efran and Minka. She cried out as she began falling.

Immediately, Efran remembered the rug at the shop of illusions, and he knew that this was one, as well. His feet remained planted on the street as he hoisted Minka back up. “No, I won’t, and neither will she. Your allotted time to terrorize is long over. Don’t you know? You are nothing but an echo. You exist only as words in the air.” The illusion of the hole vanished. Minka, weaving, looked down at the street as it had been.

The big one replied, “I am Killingghost, and I will here now fill this place with your blood.” He drew his great sword to begin advancing on Efran.

Several Abbey men ran toward Killingghost with their own swords drawn. Cocci looked over in amusement to watch the smaller Nephilim knock these men aside like rag dolls. They fell bloodied and still. A few more of Efran’s men threw their knives, which bounced harmlessly off the Nephilims’ armor. Efran himself spread his feet in his fighting stance and thrust Minka behind him as he watched Killingghost advance.

From that moment, Efran had about three seconds to think. And he realized that if he reacted in any way to fight, that would negate his assertion that these dark altiors were nothing. As he had just witnessed with his men, any attempt to defend himself—any acknowledgment of their physical presence—would endow the Nephilim with the real ability to kill him. And he didn’t even have the protection of the Lands.

But Nakham had shown him his protection: *Stand on what you know to be true*. Absorbing that, Efran just now saw that when Minka accepted the hole under her feet as real, she began falling. His rejection of it as illusion is what enabled him to haul her back up.

So Efran, still in his fighting stance, waited quietly for the ancient warrior to thunder toward him, sweeping his great sword at the human’s head. And it hit him.

Onlookers cried out or groaned at the sight and sound of his head shattering, the blood and brains and bones raining down on Minka, who had fallen to clutch him around his knees. Killingghost’s laughter echoed down the street as he raised his dripping sword high. Those Landers still on their feet gazed in wordless horror, waiting for the headless man to fall. The great Nephilim lowered his sword to watch.

But . . . Efran didn’t fall. He continued to stand quietly, only leaning down to raise Minka to her feet. Shaking, she looked up at him, and the others looked to see him ask her, “Are you all right?” Then it became apparent that he wasn’t hurt. His head was intact. There was no gore. Like he said, it was Nothing. Or . . . it was the ashes.

Efran looked over to Killingghost then—particularly, at his feet, which were slowly dissolving. Still gripping his sword, which was clean, the giant looked down at his feet. Efran’s men who had been struck down sat up in the street, looking around. Then everyone looked at the line of giants.

The giant next to Killingghost, who had received the bulk of ash particles too small to be seen, looked down at his chest, where tiny holes were opening up to merge into larger holes. He put a hand over one hole to watch his fingers begin melting away.

“We are eternal,” another giant said. He was in pretty good shape, comparatively speaking, as he had been on the farthest end away from the shaky ash toss.

“Look again,” Efran said. The giant raised his arms to flex in power, but—his left shoulder was being almost invisibly eaten away.

The sprites then appeared around Efran and Minka. Pullaway said, “Why, look here! Lord Efran is entirely correct, my goodfellows! They’re disappearing like wispy clouds on a hot summer day!”

“Like the bad dreams that undercooked turnips gave you!” Passthetime added.

“Like the money you won on a wager!” Benext said.

“Like the big trout you thought you had on your line!” Getaway said.

“Like a candle flame in a thunderstorm!” Carryon said.

“Oh, now, you stole that one,” Getaway rebuked him.

Carryon protested, “I only borrowed it! Besides, it’s true!”

Minka said, “We’ll allow it. I think that’s my favorite simile—although the ‘wispy clouds on a hot summer day’ was also very strong.”

“How generous of you, Lady Minka!” Pullaway said in adoration.

“Well, you’ve all done us a great service, and most courageously,” she said. The sprites, all puffed up in agreement, swept off their flat caps to her. Efran was thinking, *So, it didn’t matter what I thought or how I reacted. The ashes did it.*

Chewing on this, he continued to watch the ancient terrors dissolve into the past. His men, including the Commander, had joined him now. Marguerite and Hartshough had walked their horses (and Minka’s) over to him some time ago without being noticed. Kraken jealously butted Efran’s shoulder.

Nonetheless, they all watched the great terrors of the earth fade into ash indistinguishable from Lissa’s. And their combined ashes floated away to disappear on the lightest breeze.

The sun came out from behind heavy clouds, which began breaking up. The cold air began warming a little. Efran looked over to Cocci, then, as did those around him. He paused, then walked over to her. Minka stayed where she was, watching.

Looking at Cocci, Efran remembered the first time he had met Lissa, and the hope in her eyes that there could be something viable between them. He knew now that it was never to be, but it would have been far better to let it die a natural death. Unwilling to wait on that, Cocci cut it off swiftly and brutally. Efran told her, “You destroyed your own daughter. Your hatred of me killed her. And not even a dark altior can survive killing her own.”

She turned her eyes to him, although he was not sure she was really seeing him. Her face was blank, like Alberon’s projection of Minka with which he had tried to break Efran. There was no reaction, no anger, no awareness—no evidence of consciousness at all on Cocci’s face.

Then the color began to fade from it—her artificially red lips drained to light red, then pink, then off-white; her deep black hair faded through numerous shades of black to gray to parchment until reaching that identical off white. At the same time, her vivid black and yellow hat faded to blend in with her hair and her face.

At an accelerating pace, her shoulders, arms, dress, legs and feet settled into a monochrome. By that time, she looked almost immobile, so that Efran couldn’t tell if she were still alive. But then, was a dark altior ever alive?

When her color was completely drained and her form utterly still, the onlookers watched her disintegrate as her dark forebears had done. The lines of her form softened to a blur, then an indefinable shape. She resembled nothing so much as a pillar of salt.

As traffic resumed on the Porterhouse road, the pillar crumbled and everyone had to get out of the middle of the street. Sixty seconds after life in Westford had resumed, the pillar was spread in a fine layer over the road. Five minutes later, it had been mixed to invisibility with the rest of the dirt, waste, and particles from untold eons preceding them.

“Well,” Efran exhaled. “As long as we’re all here, should we stop in the Porterhouse to eat?”

Minka almost retched. “ACK! No! Hartshough, save us,” she pleaded.

Efran studied her. “It’s almost as though you’ve seen their kitchen.” She looked at him darkly, but he gestured to the horses. “There’s too many of us to burden Hartshough—”

“But Lord Efran, I’ve had a pork shoulder, leg and belly in the pit oven overnight,” Hartshough implored.

Efran stared at him. “Overnight? Why?”

“For the inevitable celebration today, of course, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said.

Minka grinned as Efran lowered his head, then glanced around at his men. Then he asked, “Commander, may we invade your house?”

“I think that’s a solid plan, Captain,” Wendt said dryly.

“Thank you, sir.” Efran reached for Kraken’s reins, then paused to say, “Sprites are allowed to come as well.”

The five little men immediately reappeared. “Lord Efran, do you mean it?” Pullaway demanded.

“Yes, you saved my bacon,” Efran said.

The five huddled in confusion, then Pullaway confessed, “We have no bacon, Lord Efran.”

Briefly closing his eyes, Efran said, “That’s all right. You may come anyway. We’re done here.” He walked Minka over to her horse to help her up, and she let him just for today.

When they arrived back at the Lands, Efran sent his coat up to the fortress along with a message to DeWitt and Estes to come to the chapel. He also sent a pair of men to bring down Joshua, Isreal, and any of the Abbey children who wanted to come. Skevi was in the kitchen, making an effort to help with preparations, but mostly listening to everything.

The administrators came quickly, and they all sat around the long dining table. While waiting for the children to arrive and the pork to be pulled, Efran told those around the table, including Justinian, everything that had led up to his confrontation with Cocci. Events that centered around Lissa were catalysts for that, as well.

Shaking his head, Efran said, “I couldn’t understand how she could lie to her own daughter until Marguerite told

me about dark altiors—who have no soul nor conscience—and even then I could hardly believe it.” He was playing with the flat cap as he talked.

Justinian observed, “Cocci made a point to hide her nature at first. Then after Lissa died, she threw caution to the wind. I believe it affected her more than she let on.” Efran studied him, thinking about that.

DeWitt asked Efran, “How did you know that all you had to do was talk abusively to these shades to make them fall apart?”

“Nakham came to help me again!” Efran laughed. “He pulled the same stunt of—pretending to not care, as he did when I was struggling with Ingannamorte, Gotobed’s imagination. It took me a lot less time today to figure out what he was trying to tell me: that these dark altiors—the Nephilim from the earliest ages of the earth—are nothing, just like Ingannamorte was nothing.”

Minka said, “But how did you know that the ashes would help?”

“Oh!” Efran leaned back to shout, “Hartshough!”

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Chapter 21

In his sauce-stained apron, Hartshough came promptly at the summons. “Yes, Lord Efran?”

“You asked me if the sprites had gathered Lissa’s ashes. I didn’t realize until today why that was important. What do you know about it?” Efran demanded.

“Yes, Lord Efran. The legend is that the death of a dark altior is so rare, and a cremation even rarer, that the ashes would imbue the bearer with great power over any dark altior,” Hartshough said. “Since sprites are a particular nuisance to them, the opportunity to gather one’s ashes would be irresistible for any sprite.”

“Ah. I see,” Efran said, then turned back to the table. “When Cocci ordered me to my knees, the sprites somehow sprinkled ashes in front of me. So when she ordered me to lick the street, I got them in my mouth. They tasted terrible. But they must have enabled me to resist Cocci and her ghosts. I didn’t even realize it at the time. But I would not have survived otherwise,” he said.

Efran didn’t notice, but Minka looked at Marguerite, who had a sudden guarded expression.

At that time, the men brought a wagonload of children down to them. Practically all of them wanted to go out back to play in and around the fountain. Three men attended them, while other men set up tables of finger foods and drinks in the yard for them. After playing a while, however, they followed Toby and Alcmund back into the hall to hang around the table and listen. They were cordially welcomed.

Auntie captured Joshua to sit on her lap, while Isreal went straight to Efran’s knee. Estes glanced at DeWitt to tell Efran, “We were discussing the need to get some agreement, some cooperation with the nobles of Westford. Without Cocci’s interference, do you think Colquhoun and McElfresh will come back to the table?”

“We should ask,” Efran replied, putting the flat cap on Isreal’s head. He uttered his trollish laugh, lifting the too-large cap off his eyes. Then Efran said, “Commander, I’d like to request a change in the uniforms.”

Those at the table stilled in surprise. Efran hadn’t paid any attention to the uniforms since he, Estes and DeWitt had commissioned their new seamstress Elvey to make them for the newly established Abbey Lands army. Wendt said, “I’m sure we can work with you on that. What would like to see changed, Captain?”

Efran twirled the cap on his finger, then placed it in the center of the table. “I want this to be our new uniform hat. In Abbey red, of course.”

“Flat caps with the uniforms?” DeWitt asked.

“Yes. As a tribute to the sprites who saved my life,” Efran said, still toying with the hat. “I invited them to come today. I don’t know why they didn’t.”

Giggling voices from above called, “Yoo-hoo!” “Halloo, Lord Efran!” “And all great persons of the Abbey Lands!” Everyone at the table turned to look up at the five sprites who were sitting on the loft railing, waving around the faerie trees. Rethinking the attention they attracted, however, they vanished again.

Calix cried, “They went outside!” So all the children ran out back again to look for the sprites.

With light laughter, the guests turned in their chairs to watch. Wendt said, “I think we can budget for new hats. You think so, Administrator DeWitt?”

“Yes, Commander, I do,” DeWitt replied, smiling at Efran, who flicked smiling eyes back to him. Marguerite looked pensive.

Shortly, numerous Abbey soldiers were taking commands from Hartshough to transport platters of pork in various forms to the table, as well as vegetables and bread (which they also carried outside to the children. The pork and bread disappeared while the vegetables remained unmolested.)

When Minka threatened to get up to go help with something, Youshock put a platter of cuts on the table and said, “Lady Minka, please do not provoke me to insubordination by ordering you to remain in your seat even though I feel justified, and there are probably many around this table who would understand my desire to prevent your putting on one of these here aprons which we are wearing to protect our clothing when we snatch bites in the kitchen. Now, Lady Minka, may I ask what you were aching to run get?”

She listened, open-mouthed, as others around the table tightly shut their lips. Then she said, “I don’t remember!”

“Well, Lady Minka, when you do recall this item of importance, will you kindly just holler, ‘Youshock, bring me this?’” he asked.

“Yes, I will, Youshock,” she said penitently.

“Thank you very much, Lady Minka. Now, I understand that Mister Hartshough has some refreshers he’d like us to pass around. Oh, I see that my fellow laborer of the apron has the tray. So I will withdraw from the field in deference to Bennard, here,” Youshock said, and did step back.

Eyeing him, Bennard said, “Yes, ‘Mister’ Hartshough has fixed a nice Christmas punch for everyone.” He began passing around cups, and eyes flicked around the table. Efran had already been served the punch, and knew what

was in it—including the surprise ingredient—but Justinian was (presumably) new to it.

Leaning back, Wendt glanced between Efran and Justinian to say, “Well, I can’t wait to hear what the ingredients are.” Marguerite rolled her eyes, but returned her attention to Joshua. He puckered at her.

With Justinian and Efran both having been served the punch, they regarded each other warily. Justinian took a sip, so Efran did, too. Then they both put their cups down. Justinian said, “So, Efran, what do you think?”

Efran gestured. “Please tell us your opinion first.”

Justinian said contemplatively, “Hmmm. The first thing that comes to mind is that the hibiscus tea is a surprising but effective counterbalance to the cherry juice, orange juice, and ginger beer.”

Efran almost expired on the spot. But then his brows drew down and he took another sip to confirm something. Satisfied, he said, “And?”

“And?” Justinian queried with raised brows.

“Hibiscus tea, cherry juice, orange juice, ginger beer, and what else?” Efran asked.

Justinian cautiously took another taste. “I don’t detect anything else.”

“No?” Efran asked, happily surprised. “No lime juice?”

“Lime juice?” Justinian murmured. He tasted the punch again, then raised his hands. “Oh, well, of course. Lime juice. I don’t know how I missed that, but you’re entirely correct.”

Efran regarded him in dissatisfaction and Minka laughed, “Justinian, at least you could have the decency to argue with him about it.”

Efran glanced at Marguerite at the head of the table with Wendt. She kept her eyes on Joshua, but Efran read her right away. He sat back to accuse Justinian, “You already knew what was in it.”

Justinian smiled, admitting nothing. Efran exhaled, looking at Minka.

Hours later, as all were leaving, Marguerite carried Joshua, asleep on her shoulder, out to the wagon for him to ride up to the fortress with Isreal and the rest of the children. Of course, the moment Joshua was settled in with his buddies, he woke up. After seeing them off, Efran turned for Kraken while Minka mounted the dun mare by herself. Marguerite said, “Efran, may I talk to you for a moment?”

“Yes, of course,” he said, pausing by Kraken. Minka turned her horse to listen.

Marguerite glanced back at the chapel. “I didn’t want to embarrass Hartshough in front of everyone, but you and Minka must know the truth. The power of a dark altior’s ashes is an old wives’ tale. There’s no power in them at all.”

Minka quickly dismounted to come near as Efran stammered, “But—but—”

“The sprites’ *belief* that they were invincible is what protected them. But that was not sufficient to protect you,” Marguerite said.

“But—but—” Efran continued.

Marguerite said, “You were covered by another power, Efran. You were right about why Nakham came to you with the same message today: because the dark altiors and Ingannamorte were the same. As nothing, they had to rely on their victims’ belief in them. Your unbelief enabled you to stand against them. But what made them crumble was your calling them out for what they were: echoes from the past, words in the air, *nothing*. They were nothing without your fear. That reality destroyed them, not ashes.”

“But we all saw them dissolve. We saw the holes the ashes made in them,” Efran recalled, trying to think.

Marguerite laughed, “What ashes? There was just a little dust. Your holding the shadows to the light is what burned holes in them.”

And he remembered the open tomb. *Stand on what you know to be true*. “You’re right,” he whispered.

She patted his shoulder. “Thank you for a most entertaining day.” She went over to kiss Minka goodnight before returning to the chapel. Then he and Minka remounted quietly to turn up the switchback.

On their way up, Efran said, “Still, I did believe in the ashes. That’s why I rammed my tongue down your throat.”

“No, you did that because you wanted to,” she grumbled. He laughed, but she went on, “And that’s not what you told them. You didn’t say, ‘Ho, you’ve been hit with the ashes of a dark altior, which will kill you!’ You said, ‘Your time is over. You don’t rule anymore. *You no longer exist*.’”

“That’s true,” he murmured. What he believed and what he did were critical, after all.

She thought of something else, then. “Oh! As for the power of the ashes, what about Cocci? She wasn’t ever hit with them, was she?” Minka demanded.

“No,” he said quietly.

“But when you told her the truth as well, she shriveled up just like they did, except, more dramatically,” Minka thought out.

“Like a woman,” Efran muttered. She drew up on the mare’s reins, so he quickly admitted, “But you’re right.”

When they arrived hilltop, Minka went to check on the children while Efran bounded up the stairs to the workroom. He found Estes about to leave but DeWitt still seated, cleaning up a few matters. Glancing between them, Efran said, “I won’t keep you, but, I thought I’d better tell you what Marguerite told me.” And he explained that the power of a dark altior’s ashes was make-believe.

They talked about this for a few minutes, covering what he and Minka had discussed coming up the switchback. Then DeWitt asked, “In that case, do you still want to change the uniform hats to flat caps in honor of the sprites?”

“Yes,” Efran exhaled. “They really thought to help me. But—I also want to change them because Elvey is making her ladies’ hats off the same blocks,” he grumbled.

“Yikes,” Estes grimaced.

DeWitt agreed, “That’s sufficient reason.”

The following morning, December 21st, a messenger was waiting for Efran when he and Minka got out of Law class. Enon saluted, “Captain, Administrator DeWitt says that the nobles have arrived from Westford to look at the agreement.”

“Oh,” Efran said in surprise. “Then I had better go on up. Do you want to come?” he asked Minka, taking her around the waist.

She grimaced. “No, you don’t need me for that. I think I’ll go ride—” She broke off in sudden caution, then resumed, “—a safe horse. One that’s safe.”

He lowered his chin at her, knowing which horse she meant. “Be careful. She’ll still be skittish.”

“I know,” she said.

When he bent to kiss her, she looked wary, so he kissed her chastely with a closed mouth. Satisfied, she went on up the corridor to change into boots. Efran trotted up to the second-floor workroom.

Turning into the open door, he paused in surprise to see Baroffio seated at the head of the table with DeWitt and Estes on his left hand and Colquhoun and McElfresh on his right. Baroffio looked up. “Efran! It is you!” He stood to reach out his hand, which Efran shook in wonder.

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Chapter 22

Baroffio sat back down to say, “We don’t have long, so I asked DeWitt to let me see this agreement right away. I don’t know what happened over the last three weeks, but I feel as though I’m just waking up. Now, is this copy that I just read what everyone has approved so far?” he asked DeWitt.

“Yes, Lord Baroffio,” DeWitt said.

“It looks good to me, then.” Baroffio took up a quill to sign authoritatively on the last page, then flipped through the previous pages to initial them.

He was taking up the second copy to do the same when Efran asked, “Excuse me, but, does this copy include the provision for Westford to abide by Roman’s Law?”

DeWitt glanced at him to nod, but Baroffio, eyes down, said, “I don’t know what the need for that is; Westford’s always followed Roman’s Law. It’s part of our heritage and culture. But I’ll allow the inclusion just to humor you, Efran. Here. Sign it.” He thrust the document at Colquhoun, who reached for the quill and inkwell.

Efran was almost crying. “I appreciate that, sir.”

Baroffio looked up at him with piercing blue eyes from under tufts of white eyebrows. “I could hardly believe the development of this area. Last I saw, it was a vast meadow surrounding an empty fortress on a lonely hill. But now you have everything, it seems.” He took up both copies of the document to regard Colquhoun’s signature, then placed them in front of McElfresh. “Your turn.”

Somewhat pettishly, McElfresh said, “I think we should discuss the amount for payments to mitigate natural disasters—”

“Oh, shut up and sign, McElfresh,” Baroffio said. Wilting slightly, McElfresh did so.

While the Abbey Fortress administrators were adding their signatures, DeWitt said, “We’ll take these down to Ryal’s to get them notarized—”

“There’s no need. We all signed it and we all know we all signed it,” Baroffio said brusquely. Then he looked off, mildly disturbed. “I’m appalled by the disorder and missed work at the sites I’ve seen so far. We have a lot to catch up on, but when I get a chance, Efran, I want to come back to view your building projects in detail.”

“Thank you, sir. I hope you’ll have a look at our pig enclosures, as well,” Efran said, eyes moist.

Baroffio looked up sharply. “Then you are raising your own pigs?”

“Yes, sir. Right up here hilltop,” Efran said.

Baroffio squinted at him. “All right, I’m just going to take ten minutes to view this. Can you show them to me now?”

“Yes, sir. Come on out,” Efran grinned. Baroffio went out with him, patting him on the shoulder, while DeWitt sorted the signed copies of the new agreement.

“Here you are, gentlemen.” DeWitt handed Colquhoun a pouch with their copies.

Contemplating the pouch and then Colquhoun, McElfresh said, “You know, I think I want to see these pig pens.”

Estes cleared his throat. “Ah, they’re ‘enclosures,’ Lord McElfresh. Stone reinforced.”

Colquhoun hoisted the pouch. “I think we can catch Baroffio and Efran.”

DeWitt directed the door guard, “Corwyn, escort the lords to the pig enclosures in the woods. The Captain and Lord Baroffio are on their way there.”

“Yes, Administrator. Please follow me,” Corwyn said to the remaining nobles, who did so, quickly.

An hour later, Efran returned to the workroom in an elevated mood. Besides DeWitt and Estes, Pieta and Feyer were here helping with accounts. Smiling, Efran told them, “Baroffio took a pair of piglets back with him. It’s just—miraculous to see the change in him since Cocci left.”

“Yes, he’s back to his old form, which is good news for us. He was one of the major driving forces behind the rebuilding of Westford,” DeWitt noted.

“That’s good. And he still likes me,” Efran said hazily. He never realized how much Baroffio’s acceptance meant to him as a poor Polonti soldier. “Well—”

As he turned to go out, Martyn came to the door to salute. “I’m a failure, Captain.”

Efran paused. “Why?” he asked in a flat voice.

“I went to Elvey crinkling my eyes and everything to ask her to make our new flat caps, but she told me they don’t have time. All of her people are working on dresses,” Martyn said in resignation.

Efran looked off in exasperation. Then his face cleared. “Go ask one of the ladies at The Lands Clothing Shop.”

DeWitt looked up. “Tourse asked Racheal about it right away last night. She said she’d love to do them, but they don’t have anyone who knows how to make them.”

“All right, we’ll just have to find someone to train them. Don’t take it personally,” he told Martyn, who shrugged.

About that time, a rumped, forlorn man with gray-streaked black hair and good eyeglasses came up to the Lands’ wall gates. He was weary from having walked all the way from Westford, making heavy use of a cane. More than that, he looked lost and heartbroken. He put his hands on the closed gates to begin, “I . . . don’t have anywhere to go. . . .”

But the gate guards, Routh and Tiras, were studying his black flat cap. Routh said, “Now that’s a style I could live with.”

“Yes, and the black would be better than red, wouldn’t it?” Tiras asked.

“Oh, yes, black is much better. Then you could wear it anywhere, with anything,” Routh said.

Without further questions (except one), Tiras opened the gates for the man to step in. Routh asked, “Can I have a look at your cap, sir?”

Bemusedly, the man removed it and handed it to him. Routh flipped it over to the inside. “Oh, look at that stitching. That’s well made.” Tiras leaned over to see a detail that Routh pointed out.

Emerging from Barracks A, Skalbeck and Shane came over, Shane asking, “What’s well made? What’ve you got?”

“Flat cap,” Routh said, holding it up on his spread fingers.

“Ho, that’s nice,” Skalbeck said. “What’s it made of?”

The four of them looked at the stranger, who answered, “Wool.”

“That’s good for December, but we’ll die wearing it in August,” Tiras observed despondently.

“Cotton or linen for the summer,” the man said.

“There you go!” Routh said. “Where’d you get the hat, sir?”

“I made it,” he said. The men standing around looked at him, looked at each other, and then Shane escorted him into Barracks A.

Also at this time, Skevi was wandering around the backyard of the chapel. Lady Marguerite and her butler were inside talking about something—dinner, she assumed, but Skevi didn’t care. She was appreciative for their taking care of her, feeding her, and dressing her—right now she was wearing a very nice dress that the lady had just pulled out of a closet somewhere, but—Skevi was about to lose her mind.

She still couldn’t understand why Lady Cocci hated her so much as to lure her to that cave where she should have died, but now she didn’t know what to do. She was a little worried about Father—if this Lord Efran killed Cocci, he might decide to go after her father next. But above everything else, she felt that she would go insane just lying around when she didn’t understand anything that was happening.

Right then, she decided she wouldn’t stay here any longer. She was healthy enough now to walk up to Westford. If Father truly didn’t have those awful glasses anymore, then they might be able to have a home together again. Because, if she were in Westford, she might be able to walk by Lovedahl’s wearing this nice dress, and then maybe—

Determined not to wait another minute, she ran to the back gate and flung it open—to come face to face with Jian.

They stared at each other for about thirty seconds, then he said, “Oh. Excuse me. I know you! You’re Para—Para—”

“Just call me Skevi. What are you doing here, Jian?” she asked, all fluttery and nervous.

“I live here now!” he said, beaming. “Not here in the chapel, though I sometimes sleep in the yard here. But I live in the Lands now, and I run messages for *all these shops* around here.” He swept his hand to indicate half of Main. “They like me because I’m the fastest messenger of anyone.” He grinned in pride, then asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Wellll, just visiting friends,” she said cautiously.

“Are you going back to Westford?” he asked in mild alarm. She looked hesitant, so he pleaded, “Oh, *please* don’t tell my Aunt Lovedahl you saw me here! I don’t want to work in a beauty shop anymore—not hers or anyone’s.”

“I won’t tell on you,” she promised quickly.

“Paraskevi?” She and Jian both turned to see her father come out from the back patio. Marguerite and a man came out behind him.

“Father?” she asked hesitantly. He looked very different without Cocci’s glasses—tentative, and thoughtful. In fact, she remembered that this is how he looked before getting those awful glasses. The new spectacles looked very nice on him, as well.

“Paraskevi.” Assisted by his cane, he came a few steps toward her, and Jian dropped back. Skevi glanced at him to make sure that he didn’t leave the yard.

“Um, can you call me ‘Skevi’?” she asked, more concerned about Jian right now than anything else.

“Yes. Skevi,” her father said. He glanced back at the man, who was smiling, as was Lady Marguerite beside him. “Skevi, I’ve been offered work here. They’re going to give me a house near The Lands Clothing Shop if I will teach their people how to make flat caps.”

He issued a feeble braying laugh of disbelief, then resumed shakily, “I have so much to make up to you. I don’t know what has happened these last few weeks, or months, only, that I have not been a good father to you. But now, I have a chance to make a living doing something they need very much for some reason. I want you to come live with me and help me, if you will. They’re going to make the front part of the house into a shop. I think this would be a good place for us to start over, if you want.”

She was smiling in wonder. “I’d love to! That would be so much fun! Can I see the house?”

“Yes,” Pelagatti said. His belief in this strange turn of fortune was a little stronger now. “This man here, Administrator Tourse—his wife owns The Lands Clothing Shop, and, he’s brought down a cart to take you and me up to the shop to talk to her and her people. It’s a ways up.”

“Of course! Can Jian come see it?” she asked, flicking wide eyes to him slightly behind her.

“I—don’t know. It’s a small cart.” Pelagatti looked questioningly to Tourse.

Jian offered, “I can run alongside.”

But Tourse was walking through the yard to open the gate. “There’s a seat in the back. Come hop in; Racheal is very excited about this opportunity.” Skevi squealed, rushing to the gate. Her father and Jian followed a little awkwardly. Tourse raised a hand to Marguerite before closing the gate behind them all.

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Chapter 23

Watching the backyard gate close on a most successful ending, Marguerite sighed. Once back inside the chapel, she looked up to see Verlice emerging from his room on the loft. She gestured to the Abbey guards stationed at the front doors, who left their post to go to the kitchen according to a preset plan.

Marguerite waited as Verlice trotted down the stairs in another rakish suit, this one of lemon yellow. “Well, Mother, I’m going—”

“No, Verlice, you’re going to sit down and talk with me for a moment,” she said.

“I’d love to, dearest, but I have—” He broke off as Hartshough came out of the kitchen. But it wasn’t Hartshough the butler, it was Toogood, the mountain troll/faerie hybrid who had the lithe abilities of faerie but the gross appearance of troll.

Toogood said, “You will stay to talk to your mother.” The voice was that of dark waters echoing in a deep cavern.

Pale, Verlice sat right down on the divan in the seating area. He squeaked, “I’m right—” Clearing his throat, he finished, “—here. I’m happy to talk to you, Mother. What can I do for you?”

Glancing at Hartshough with a sigh of part gratitude, part irritation, Marguerite sat in an armchair across from Verlice. Hartshough melted back into his domain. She turned to ask her son, “Where did you get the suit?”

“Elvey’s, of course. She has a fantastic men’s line,” he said, regaining his composure.

“So you’re still working for her?” Marguerite asked.

Verlice paused on an indrawn breath. “In a manner of speaking, yes.”

Her brows drew down. “How?”

“Well, I’m—” He paused an instant to think. “Modeling her menswear, of course.”

“Are you getting paid for this?” Marguerite asked.

He leaned forward to convey a serious aspect. “Not in money, per se.”

“Then how?” she asked, just as seriously.

He inhaled deeply through his nose. “In . . . opportunities.”

“What? Opportunities for what?” she asked.

“To meet people who provide advantages,” he said slowly, as though composing on the spot.

Marguerite leaned an elbow on the arm of the chair. “What advantages?”

“To earn income,” Verlice said, as though it should have been obvious.

“How?” Marguerite asked, expressionless.

“Playing games!” He raised his shoulders at the wonder of it all.

Marguerite looked down, asking, “And where is Faciane in all this?”

“Oh, she wouldn’t want anything to do with this,” Verlice said in unguarded honesty, with a touch of disdain.

Eyes still downcast, she asked, “Are you still married?”

Verlice raised his shoulders in ignorance. “As far as I know.”

“How much have you earned gaming?” she asked, looking off.

“It varies from week to week. I’m up about—forty, fifty royals this week,” he said, calculating in his head.

“Where are the games held?” she asked softly.

“Oh, no, no,” he laughed, shaking a finger at her. “I can’t tell you that.” But as she leveled her violet-blue eyes on him, he said, “It changes from week to week. Right now it’s in the back room of Hassler’s Tool Sharpening Shop after hours. Hassler doesn’t know anything about it. It’s run by a fellow with a broken nose.” Then he looked around in confusion at the confidences he had just spilled.

Marguerite said thoughtfully, “You must not have known that organized games of chance which involve wagers are illegal here. If you’re caught, you could be thrown out of the Lands. Since someone might tell the Abbey administrators about these games, you had better stop going.”

“Yes, I see. You’re absolutely right, Mother,” Verlice said gravely.

“You’ll stop going? You promise?” she asked with lifted brows.

“Oh yes. Yes,” he said earnestly.

“All right, then. You may go,” she said.

He stood to shake out his jacket sleeves in satisfaction, knowing that she’d never rat on him. “Don’t wait up.” Placing his hat on his head and twirling his walking stick, he exited the front doors.

Marguerite looked back to the kitchen to ask, “Did you hear it all?”

The same pair of Abbey men emerged into the hall. “Yes, Lady Marguerite,” Melott said. Loseby nodded.

“Then both of you go inform Administrator Tourse,” she directed.

“Yes, Lady Marguerite,” Melott said again. He and Loseby left.

Hartshough came out of the kitchen carrying a tray with three tall glasses of a pink-orange liquid with cherries and a pitcher of the same. She said, “It looks like I need a bracer.”

“I’ll have one with you, Lady Marguerite,” he offered. After setting the tray on the small table, he handed her a glass and took one for himself.

“So will I,” Justinian said, coming down from the loft, where he had eavesdropped on her exchange with Verlice as well.

“And you’re welcome to, Justinian. Have a seat,” Marguerite said warmly. “Do you know anything about this floating game?”

“Not much,” Justinian said, sitting on the divan. He paused to take a tall glass. “Thank you, Hartshough. All I know is that Rowe—the one with the broken nose—has been very clever about moving the tables around. And he blackmails those who don’t pay up when they lose, threatening to expose them. I’m afraid Verlice is in debt for seventy-five royals, but Rowe hasn’t called him on it because he knows that if Verlice is exposed, the game’s up. Apparently, Verlice is counting on that, as well.”

Upon taking a sip, he said, “Oh, that’s excellent. At any rate, because Rowe has been in trouble before—ah, the last time for receiving a stolen horse—he was expelled with a death sentence on his head if he ever came back. That was over a year ago. So he must have thought we all forgot about him. Efran hasn’t, for sure. If they find

Rowe tonight, he'll probably be taken out of the gates in the early morning, and no one will see him again," Justinian finished.

"What will happen to Verlice?" Marguerite asked anxiously. She took a long swig waiting for the answer.

"If Tourse's men do catch them tonight, we'll probably find out tomorrow. But don't worry, dearest; neither Wendt nor Efran will let anything happen to him," Justinian assured her.

"I'm sure you're right," she said glumly. "How about seconds, Hartshough?"

"Certainly, Lady Marguerite."

"Here, too, if you will," Justinian said.

"There's enough for everyone," Hartshough said, pouring a second round for all three of them.

Late that evening, a group from Tourse's Enforcement Unit broke open the back door of Hassler's Tool Sharpening Shop. Inside, the gamblers over the dice tables scattered, most running to the front door, where more of Tourse's enforcers were waiting to meet them. Seven men and two women were then taken to the cells in Barracks C where they would wait to learn their fate, possibly as early as the next day.

As Verlice was being walked to the barracks, he said wearily, "You're making a terrible mistake. I am Verlice, son of Lady Marguerite. The one who's married to your Commander? That lady."

"And she'll be terribly disappointed to hear of her son's carelessness," the leader of these enforcers said.

"Not as careless as anyone who would lay hands on me," Verlice said coolly.

"Really?" a voice behind them asked. It being a familiar voice, Verlice looked back at his son Arturo, who was regarding him in shame and anger. Beside him walked Gastrell, who didn't look at his former employer at all.

Verlice glumly entered the cell to sit on the cot in the dim light of a lantern at the end of the row. The other gamblers were likewise locked up, one prisoner to each cell. Except, the two women were placed together. Before lying down, Verlice said, "I demand that you notify my mother Lady Marguerite and her husband Commander Wendt of this outrage."

One of the night guards glanced back to say, "No one's going to be woken tonight on your behalf, Your Lordship. You'll find out tomorrow with the others what's to be done with you."

So, bereft of his hat and walking stick, Verlice lay down on the canvas cot. Stewing over the accommodations, he was trying to get comfortable when he accidentally fell asleep.

Early the following morning, December 22nd, Verlice was awakened by a cell door nearby opening and closing. Since that's all he heard for a few minutes, he went back to sleep.

Some time later, he was awakened thoroughly by someone running a tin cup along the iron bars with, "Good morning, everyone! We have breakfast for you all this morning, so if you'll sit at your little tables there, we'll supply you ham and eggs, apple crumbly, and hot caova to get you started." The speaker, Tourse, backed up to

allow the barracks guards to unlock the cells and enter with the excellent meals.

Groggy but willing, the six men and two women sat at their tables to gulp down breakfast. One of the men asked, "When will we find out what you're going to do to us?"

Leaning back against the wall opposite the cells, Tourse crossed his arms and said, "That's already been determined, if you're interested."

Forks clattered down. "Yes, for pity's sake, tell us!" one woman demanded.

Tourse said, "Very well. The fines for illegal gambling are thirty royals for each man and twenty for each woman. You will work to pay off your fines. When your fines are paid, you will be free to go. But if you commit another offense, you're likely to be kicked off the Lands."

"Where am I supposed to work?" the same woman asked.

Tourse looked her way to reply, "The women will do washing at The Wash House on Main here behind Elvey's. You will board in the women's wing of Laborers' Hall. Your pay will depend on the amount of washing you get done. Out of what you earn, you must pay for your room and board at the Hall, which is minimal. You will pay down your fines to the Notary Lord Ryal. He will alert us when you have paid it all, at which time you will be free to work wherever you like.

"The situation is similar for the men. You will board at Laborers' Hall and dig on the new sewer lines," Tourse said. At the men's groaning, he said, "If you can find another job that is acceptable to the Notary Lord Ryal, you may do that instead. But you must begin work immediately, today, this morning. Looking for another job will have to wait for off hours. If you refuse to work, or work inadequately, you will be evicted from the Lands."

Verlice sat back, crossing his arms over his empty plate. "I demand to talk to Commander Wendt."

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Chapter 24

Tourse looked at Verlice blankly. "These directives came from Commander Wendt. You may request a meeting with him for after hours."

"Yes, do put in that request for me, my good man," Verlice said complacently. Tourse nodded to a subordinate, who saluted and walked quickly away.

Tourse told them all generally, "You may finish up breakfast and use your personal latrines. You will be escorted to your work stations within a quarter hour." Another man came in to talk to him at that time. While conferring with him, Tourse kept an eye on the progress of the detainees.

As he started to leave, one woman said, "Hey, where's Bujak? He was brought here with us last night."

Tourse scanned the cells, then said, "I don't know." When he began to leave again, the soldier he had sent with Verlice's request returned to whisper to Tourse and hand him a note.

Nodding, Tourse approached Verlice's cell, and the inmate sat up in expectation. Tourse said, "Commander Wendt has declined your request. But Lady Marguerite has sent this to you." And Tourse extended a small folded parchment through the bars.

Verlice took it to read silently: "I asked you not to go. You promised you wouldn't. There's nothing more we can do for you." Vacantly, he tore the note in shreds.

Shortly, the inmates were escorted to their work stations. The women were dropped off at The Wash House, and the men were taken to various points along the new sewer routes. When Verlice arrived at his station in his yellow suit, the other diggers looked over. Two trolls who were digging paused to admire him. One said, "Ah, nice digs! Da!"

But Verlice was staring at the brute nearby, the one who filled a wheelbarrow with four shovelfuls. And his hair wasn't pink anymore.

That evening, Efran was lying with Minka spread across his chest, almost asleep. By the wavering glow of the bedside candle, he stroked her hair, gauging its growth and reemerging curl since she had chopped most of it off about five weeks ago. "You're playing with my hair again," she murmured.

"I like to," he whispered.

"It's about time to get it cut again," she said.

His heart thumped in protest, but he only said, "If you like."

She lifted up to look at him, having heard his involuntary gasp. He made his face deliberately blank, but there was an intensity in his eyes that he couldn't hide. And she remembered talking to the twelve-year-old Efran at the faerie tree, and his being so taken with her hair. She didn't understand it; her hair was nowhere as beautiful as Leila's smooth, red-gold tresses, but, if it was that important to him. . . . "Eh, I think I'll let it grow. If I cut it, everyone will be staring at me again. I want them to forget about my hair."

"Whatever you want," he exhaled, and his relief was palpable.

She cuddled him. "You're not the great liar you think you are."

"To everyone but you, I certainly am," he countered. So she kissed him, and he gathered her up again.

The next day, December 23rd, Efran took Minka, Jehan and Coish to ride west to Nicarber. Efran, on Kraken, wore his standard work clothes; his men were in uniform, and Minka wore pants. Plus, they all wore black flat caps. Under Pelagatti's direction, the ladies at The Lands Clothing Shop had begun making them, and the Abbey fortress received the earliest sample hats. These were doled out first to Minka's favorites.

As for their destination, Nicarber was actually by far the closest town to the Abbey, but had been virtually wiped out by the hurricane that had likewise devastated Prie Mer in April of 8152—over three and a half years ago. That was before Efran and Minka had received the bequest of the Abbey.

The last time Efran had been to Nicarber was 19 months ago, when he, Estes, Barr and Goss had come looking

for Awfyn's stash of stolen gold. This they had found, but the town had been still nothing but rubble. Curious as to its current state, Efran decided to come have a look.

To get there, they couldn't simply take the coastal highway from the Abbey hill, as they could going east to Venegas. Westbound, they had to ride north up Main over the old stone bridge before turning west to cross the new bridge over the Passage.

Then they had to traverse about a mile of the five-mile stretch of woods belonging to the Abbey before turning south on a dirt road to Nicarber. It was an easy ride.

As they entered Nicarber on its main road, the men looked down around their horses' hooves. Minka did as well only after seeing them study the ground. "What is it?" she asked.

Coish asked, "Doesn't it look like the road's been smoothed and widened, Captain?"

"Yes, and deepened at the edges," Efran said.

Minka asked, "You mean, someone's been working on it?"

Jehan said, "Sure looks that way, Lady Minka."

So they rode on alertly, just looking. Jehan and Coish wore swords, as was standard for army travel; Efran wore a hunting knife just because it was useful. He observed, "Someone has been working here; a great deal of the rubbish that we saw last time has been cleared away." He noted that the community well, which had been buried in debris, had been uncovered and cleaned up.

"Oh, look on down this way," Coish said, pointing to a side road.

Efran turned Kraken to enter the road branching off at right angles from the main road. Scanning everywhere, he said, "This is new. There was no sign of it, or any other road, when we were last here."

Minka asked, "Could it be a road they cleared, that had been here before the hurricane?"

"It must be," Efran said. "But, I wasn't that familiar with Nicarber; usually just rode past it on my way to Prie Mer." Remembering something, he looked back north over the trees. Yes, there was that same plume of white smoke! How was that possible?

Jehan, riding ahead on the branching road a little ways, paused his horse. "Here's a foundation. Someone's building."

"Why aren't we seeing the workers? Or anyone?" Minka asked.

They looked all around, but didn't see any movement anywhere. So Efran said loudly, "I am Lord Efran, from the Abbey Fortress and Lands. My wife and I just wanted to see if Nicarber was being rebuilt. We're not here to take anything or hurt anyone. I'd like to see how we could help you."

They held still, listening, but there was not a sound anywhere. "I guess they're on holiday," Efran said. "I don't know that there's any more here to see." And they turned to begin riding up the main street again. Minka lagged behind, peering at something.

“Look!” she cried. The men pulled up abruptly, and Efran turned Kraken back to where she had stopped along the road. She said, “This signboard just appeared! And it looks freshly painted!”

They stared down at a large signboard, about eight feet long and three feet tall. On a field of light blue were bright red letters outlined in white. Dismounting, Jehan reached out to touch the signboard, leaving a streak in the still-wet red. Then he held up his finger, smudged with red paint.

When Efran and his men had come out here months ago, they had been guided to Awfyn’s hiding place by the fragment of a large welcome sign to Nicarber. But this sign was in a language that none of them knew. Efran said, “We need to find out what that sign says. Jehan, Coish—there’s a pile of burned wood over there. Get a chunk of charcoal and find a big enough piece of wood to copy those letters. Ryal or the Librarian should be able to translate it for us.”

“Yes, Captain,” Coish said. Jehan ran to scrounge around the burn pile while Coish found a flat, lightweight board to write on. Then Jehan held the board while Coish copied the strange letters as best he could.

Confused, Minka asked, “Why is anyone in Nicarber using a foreign language?”

The men looked at her and each other, but no one had an answer. When Coish was done copying, and they remounted, they all glanced around at the waning daylight. “When did we leave the Lands?” Minka breathed.

“Midmorning,” Efran said. “I didn’t realize we were gone that long. Guess we’d better get back.”

In rising apprehension, the four began loping up the main road, the way they had come. Efran glanced back. “Hold onto that board, Coish.”

“Got it, sir,” he said, holding it firmly under one arm as he held the reins in his other hand. But as they came to the intersection of the dirt road with the newly paved road into Nicarber, Coish grunted, striving to hold onto the board. Progressing onto the dirt road, he cried out as the board was ripped from his arm.

“Are you hurt?” Minka cried, turning back to him.

“No, Lady Minka. It just didn’t want to come with us, sir,” Coish said tightly, holding his arm to his side.

But now that they were on the dirt road, the four of them looked up in astonishment at the noonday sun bright above them. Jehan finally whispered, “Didn’t we just see the sun dropping behind the trees in the west?”

For few minutes, the four were speechless.

“There’s an explanation for everything, if you can just find it,” Efran said.

But Minka pulled up, crying, “My cap! I lost my flat cap!” She had a hand to to her uncovered head.

They all looked back to where the cap was plainly visible in the middle of Nicarber’s main street. Efran said uneasily, “All right, then, I’ll just trot back to get it.” But of course, when he nudged Kraken to turn around, Jehan and Coish followed. Minka immediately came with them, because it was her cap.

But the moment they were all on the main street of Nicarber, they were enveloped in the blackness of deep night. The moon had not risen, and the stars were hardly visible for the cloud cover. The cap was not discernible in the street, which was hardly visible itself.

“Come out,” Efran said tightly. Kraken obeyed to trot back to the intersecting road, and the other three horses followed skittishly.

On this dirt road, they were in bright sunlight again, which spilled over to Nicarber. They looked around in confusion at the daylight. Efran said tightly, “You three wait here. Don’t move.” Then he rode past the intersection onto Nicarber’s main road—which was now paved. Turning back toward them, he asked tensely, “Are you there?”

The three looked at each other in astonishment. He was but five feet away. Minka said, “Yes, can’t you see us?”

“No, everything is dark, utterly dark,” he said.

Immediately, he rode back past the intersection. Here, all was in light again. Silently, they studied their surroundings. Minka breathed, “They don’t follow our calendar.”

“How can they have a choice?” Jehan asked.

“Look!” Minka pointed down the main street. “There’s something new again!” Impulsively, she turned to ride back into Nicarber.

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Chapter 25

“Minka!” Efran grabbed for her. But since she was out of reach, he followed on Kraken. So Jehan and Coish followed him. Now they found themselves in early morning light.

Minka had pulled up to look at some kind of display on the side of the street. Behind it was a nearly complete building. While the men gaped at the building—and evidence of more construction all down the street—Minka was staring at a short wooden pillar, about four feet tall, painted white. On it was a clear glass display case. In the case was her flat cap. Mounted on the pillar below it was a plaque bearing more words in that strange language.

“They’ve made a display of my cap,” she said in wonder.

“Look!” Jehan pointed to the intersection of the main road with the dirt road. The large signboard that Jehan had touched now stood high over the entry to Nicarber, with more words painted on the side which faced them.

Efran lowered his head in deep apprehension. “I don’t know what is happening here, but we don’t belong. Come out now. I’ll get you another cap,” he directed to Minka.

So the four of them rode out to return to the Lands.

The day following was December 24th. As during the previous Christmas, the Abbey Lands was thronged with visitors coming to gaze at the decorations. Most of this decorating was done by faeries, who embraced every

season as an opportunity to express their creative impulses. But the Christmas season was special to the Abbey, first, due to the presence of children who had never known what it was like to receive gifts with their own names on them, something just for them—besides the food and treats and decorations and singing.

Second, and most deeply, it was a season of remembrance of the incomprehensible gift of the Incarnation, when God became man to save His creation through His own humiliation and suffering. Although no human could fully understand it, they could embrace it. Those who held onto it tightly could see the effects of it in their lives. So Efran determined to put aside the bizarre mystery of Nicarber to focus on what was important.

But the mystery wouldn't leave him alone. Evidently, Minka, Jehan and Coish were affected, as well. She hung around Efran all morning, wringing her hands, on the verge of saying something, then shutting her mouth to linger and wring her hands some more. Jehan and Coish had the day off, so were out of uniform. But they wore their flat caps proudly as they dogged Efran's side.

Midmorning, he asked her, "Shall we ride up to The Lands Clothing Shop to get you another cap?" He stroked back her hair affectionately.

"No," she said, distracted. "I don't want to lose another one in Nicarber."

Efran exhaled, looking back to Jehan and Coish, who were watching steadfastly for the word. Efran groaned, "Get us horses." This they ran off to do, and Minka inhaled in relief or resolve—maybe both. Efran sent word up to the workroom that they were going out to Nicarber one more time to look around. Estes sent back a reminder of the Christmas concert at the chapel tonight. There was no question that they'd be back for that; Minka would insist on it.

When the four set out today, none of the men wore their caps. They didn't want to lose theirs, either.

Arriving at the intersection of the dirt road with the main street of Nicarber, they all looked up at the signboard over the entryway. It was a little bit faded. "It's a welcome sign to visitors," Minka said.

"Apparently, yes," Efran said. His stomach was twisted in knots as they rode at a walk into the town.

Buildings all along this road were completed and in use. Strange vehicles sat along the sides of the road. They had wheels like carts, except that the wheels were large, covered with a hard black material. And the carts were enclosed with painted metal and glass. Also, there were no horses. In fact, again, the four saw no living beings anywhere—just the evidence of their presence.

They walked their horses down the street—not only paved, but repaired in places. Shopfronts along both sides of the street were filled with displays of their wares, and some front doors were standing open. Looking through glass windows at the displays, Efran saw mostly trinkets, decorative items made with seashells, undershirts with words painted on them, sunhats, and bathing attire. Staring at one such suit displayed on a female mannequin, Efran muttered, "I'd never let Minka out of our quarters wearing that."

He turned away with a feeling of restlessness, a mounting urgency. Then he rode over to where Minka had dismounted in front of the display case with her cap. The stand was a little battered and worn now. Also, it had a new shelf built into it. Minka reached in to withdraw something small and slender. "There are books! Little books made of paper." She began to flip through it.

Efran's head snapped to the south, toward the Sea. Something was coming—a sea change, a cataclysm, a—closure. "Minka, get on your horse," he breathed. Jehan and Coish were right beside them.

It became visible, then, almost—there was a billowing, a rippling in the air, the clouds, the sunshine—everything visible became convulsed with the awful something that was sweeping toward them. “Minka—!”

But her horse, with Jehan’s and Coish’s horses, began stampeding up the road to escape what was coming. Kraken would have, but obeyed Efran’s jerk of the reins to turn back to Minka so that he could sweep her up on one arm. Then Kraken began galloping toward the exit where the others were waiting.

But something was wrong; he was going too slowly; he could not run fast enough to escape. At the same time, Minka’s weight was dragging Efran down, so that he was close to falling himself. He glanced back at the billowing that was closing in on them, then looked ahead. He could barely see Jehan and Coish for the opaque mists gathering around him.

God of heaven! he cried inwardly, feeling Kraken falter beneath the weight. Then he saw the little book that Minka was still clutching—and remembered the board that Coish had attempted to take away. “Let go of it, Minka!” he shouted.

“I can’t!” she cried.

So Efran let go of the reins to reach out, groping for the book as the rippling progressed to within yards of Kraken’s haunches. Given the enormous weight on his right arm dragging him down, he was barely holding on to Kraken with his legs. His fingers found the book that Minka was convulsively grasping. Tearing it from her hand, he tossed it behind them.

It disappeared into the ripple, and Kraken lunged forward so abruptly that Jehan and Coish’s horses skittered back. When Kraken crossed the barrier of the welcome sign, he lost his footing and fell on the dirt road. Falling with him, Efran turned, crouching to hold Minka on top of him as he hit the road. She gasped at the *whomp* of their landing, and Efran winced at the pain from his right leg, pinned beneath Kraken’s side.

Jehan and Coish fell from their saddles to help them up while Kraken struggled up to stand, shaking himself. From where they were just beyond the signboard, the four of them watched the cataclysm close up on the whole of Nicarber. Then it withdrew in a mighty, silent wave. And what was left behind was Nicarber in ruins, as it had been ever since April of 8152. Minka’s cap was gone as well.

Efran’s knee popped when he stood on it, but he hardly felt it. There was no longer any signboard, nor display case, nor buildings nor shops nor street paving. Everything had reverted to what it had been.

Limping slightly, Efran walked onto the old main road of Nicarber, looking up to see the sun stay where it had been just beyond the intersection. Scanning the ruins around him, he even saw the fragment of signboard that he and Estes had removed to find the path to Awfyn’s hiding place. Whatever ripple of Time that had swallowed Nicarber was gone. But he and his people remained where they belonged.

He walked back to the group, shaking his knee out. Then he had to stroke Kraken, who was still trembling. Looking to Minka, he asked, “Are you all right?”

Pale, she held up a bit of paper. The boys came over to look as Efran spread out the paper that she clutched. It was a partial page from the book she had been holding, printed in small letters on both sides in that strange language. He contemplated that, then released her hand. “Hold on to it. We’ll have Ryal look at it. Are you all right?” he repeated.

“Yes,” she exhaled, falling onto him.

Minka wanted to ride behind him returning to the Lands. So after he had mounted, Coish lifted her to sit behind his saddle. She held his waist tightly, one hand gripping the paper. They walked the horses back to the Lands, with her horse following and his hand on her arms the whole way.

They stopped at Ryal’s shop, where Jehan and Coish didn’t even think to ask permission to enter with the Captain and Lady. There were no customers on Christmas Eve day, so the four went right up to the counter.

Ryal and Giardi regarded their pale, sweating faces, and Ryal said, “Hello, all. Why are you limping, Efran?”

“I fell off Kraken,” he said, working the fragment free of Minka’s fingers. This he placed on the counter, attempting to smooth it out. “Can you tell us what this says, or anything about it, Ryal?” He was so distracted that he forgot to try to make Giardi laugh.

She looked over Ryal’s shoulder as he studied the torn page in wonder. “Where did you get this?” he asked.

“It, uh, had, apparently washed up with other debris from the hurricane. In Nicarber,” Efran explained, somewhat.

“The hurricane of eighty-one fifty-two?” Ryal asked, glancing up through his spectacles.

Efran nodded. “That must be the one.”

Ryal looked at both sides of the page fragment, then said, “If you’re in a hurry, I can send you word of what I find. It may take a while.”

“All right,” Efran said. None of them moved, except that Minka nestled closer into his side.

“Very well,” Ryal said. After another minute, he observed, “The letters look something like those they use on the Isles. Dear, will you bring the *Universal Book of Languages*? Yes, it’s on the bottom shelf there in the back. No, further back. I haven’t used it since the Destroyer first visited us over a year ago. But then, I still keep books I haven’t opened in decades,” he half-apologized to his wife.

She glanced back, smiling, but Minka murmured, “How do you throw out friends who have helped you?”

“Exactly,” Giardi said, coming up to place the old book on the counter. Ryal turned pages in it carefully while Efran glanced around the shop, noting a holly wreath over a window and the mistletoe on the bell above the door. Belatedly, he kissed Minka’s forehead.

Ryal sighed, “I’m afraid there’s nothing in here that will help.”

The four stirred in disappointment, but Giardi said, “This reminded you of the Isles’ letters? What about that book Shardlow offered you last week?”

Ryal lifted up with a gasp. “I forgot about that! Where did I put that?”

On her way to the back room, she said, “You left it back here to look at when you had time.” Emerging to the counter again, she laid a book before him. As Ryal opened it, Efran leaned over to look at the title page upside down: *Translations of Common Words of the Danelagh*.

Ryal said, “Yes, Shardlow had it for years; despaired of ever selling it, but couldn’t bear to throw it away, so gave it to me, of course.”

They were all silent while Ryal looked through it, glancing frequently to the fragment. “The quill set, please,” Ryal said, which Giardi handed to him.

He began writing, and did so for several minutes until laying down the quill. “Very interesting. First, the paper and the quality of print are of a class I’ve never seen before. I can’t imagine how it survived in such legible form after a hurricane, but, that’s not the question before us. You want to know what it says,” Ryal summarized. Efran nodded.

Ryal took a moment to check something on both sides of the paper, then said, “This appears to recount the visit of a ghost in the year 2023.”

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Chapter 26

“Over—six thousand years ago?” Efran gasped.

“No, undoubtedly, it’s a different calendar system from what we use. I seriously doubt that I can find an equivalent in the *Book of Years*,” Ryal murmured, scanning the fragment. “As I said, it recounts the visit of a ghost during the reconstruction of Nicole’s Harbor twenty years previously. That was the original name of the harbor town, you know, established and named by Nicole’s husband, Surchatain Ares.”

“Yes,” Efran whispered.

Ryal continued, “If I’m reading this correctly, it says something to the effect that this ghost identified himself as Lord Farren of the Ancient Lands, and offered his help in the reconstruction. As proof of this, he left his distinctive black cap in the road. Thereafter, the work crews experienced almost supernatural ease of construction. No serious injuries or setbacks. There’s more here that I’m unsure of, but I’ll continue to look at it, if you care to leave it here.”

“Yes, thank you, Ryal,” Efran said.

Cautiously, Ryal asked, “Did you—speak to anyone in Nicarber while you were there?”

“Not that I know of,” Efran said. “We never saw anyone.”

“Well, then. I’ll let you know what else I find.” Glancing out the window, Ryal added, “But from the traffic I see out there, I believe there’s a Christmas concert about to begin in the chapel hall.”

Minka came alive, raising up. “Oh, let’s go.”

“Yes, let’s. Thank you, Ryal. Come with us now, so we can get you seats,” Efran said, still distracted.

Glancing at Giardi, who nodded readily, Ryal said, "I suppose we will, then."

While Ryal locked up the shop, Efran had Jehan and Coish take the horses to the stables in back of the chapel. Then he, Minka, Ryal and Giardi walked the short distance to the chapel entrance, where the Abbey children were just now climbing out of the wagon that had brought them down the switchback.

After greeting them all, Efran asked Arne, who had driven them down, "I thought that the Christmas concert was to be tonight. What happened?"

"Eh, last minute change in schedule when Arbaiza agreed to sing tonight. Lady Marguerite promised 'er the trees would be quiet," Arne sneered.

"Oh, I'll be happy to miss that," Efran said. Then he added, "Unless . . . we could get the trees to squeal along with her. Just as accompaniment, or whatever." Arne chuckled.

With most everyone waiting for Arbaiza's performance tonight, there was plenty of room for the children, the soldiers, laborers, and common folk to hear the performances by Xander's orchestra with the Ruddock Chorale, the Bidderscombe Bell Ringers, and, in a surprise performance, the Abbey children. This last group sang a very old Christmas hymn:

"O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel;
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel."

Efran held Joshua on his knee while he listened, watching Toby, Noah, Ivy, Hassie, Alcmund, Chorro, Elwell, Jera, Acy, Calix, and Isreal solemnly sing under Mistress Hazeldene's direction. As Minka held his arm, Efran lowered his head, dropping quiet tears in gratitude to be here to hear it. Plunkett was also here, and glowed in happiness to see Hassie sing loudly with her friends. But afterwards, he left without attempting to speak to her.

Following the performances, the children were released to play in the yard and the guests gathered to talk. Marguerite whispered to Minka, "What has happened? You look shaken."

"Oh, I'll tell you all about it. But it will have to be later," Minka said, looking toward the others.

Besides Marguerite, Minka, Efran, and Wendt, there were gathered DeWitt and Tera, Estes and Kelsey, Ryal, Giardi, Jehan, Coish, Gabriel, and various other soldiers and fortress workers who slipped in and out. Gabriel told Minka, "Geneve just had her baby, a boy. They're both doing fine, and she wants eggnog. A lot, from what I hear."

Minka cried, "Oh! When can I come see her?"

"Give her a few days; I'll be sure to let you know," Gabriel said.

"Was it a hard labor?" Efran asked warily.

Gabriel grimaced. “Not the easiest, I understand. Melchior said she swore she should have stuck with soldiering, which was easier.”

There was dubious laughter around the group, and Minka sighed, “She doesn’t mean it.”

They lapsed into sympathetic silence. Then Verlice, in a sober suit for a change, approached to say, “Thank you, Mother, and, Commander Wendt, for the reprieve from work to enjoy the festivities. I shall remember this day for weeks to come, possibly months.” He paraded his suffering like a hair shirt.

His mother said, “I’m very glad you could make it, Verlice. Oh! Here’s Hartshough with eggnog.”

As Hartshough set a large tray on the dining table to begin passing out cups for everyone, Efran took a cup in relief. “Thank you, Hartshough; I’m so happy to have a treat that I don’t have to analyze.”

“You’re welcome, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said, bowing.

Verlice echoed, “Yes, thank you, Hartshough.” As he and Efran drank their eggnog, Verlice squinted in the manner of a connoisseur. “Let me see. We have eggs, of course, ha ha, and ah, cream, and. . . .”

Face in his cup, Efran said, “Nutmeg, cloves, vanilla, and—caova?” He looked at Hartshough dubiously.

Bowing, Hartshough said, “You are both correct, gentlemen.”

“What? I matched the great Lord Efran in a taste test? How about that?” Verlice said in victory, raising his cup to Efran.

“Stranger things have happened,” Efran said, drawing Minka into his side. She closed her eyes, holding onto him. Jehan and Coish looked at each other to gently exhale.

Racheal came over with Skevi and her father, then. Seeing them, Racheal said, “Oh, here’s Lord Efran and Lady Minka! He’s the one who demanded flat caps for his men. Have you met him?” she asked the Tinkerer.

Skevi went pale as Efran turned toward them, but her father earnestly walked over on his cane to say, “I am Pelagatti, Lord Efran, and I do thank you for the opportunity to make these caps as you desired.”

Efran looked down at his clear, serious eyes. “We’re very glad to have you, sir. Welcome to the Abbey Lands.”

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on December 24th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

FUN AND NOT TEDIOUS NOTES:

“[Aqua Tofana](#) was a strong poison created in Sicily around 1630 that was reputedly widely used in Palermo, Naples, Perugia, and Rome, Italy. . . . The active ingredients of the mixture are basically known, but not how they were blended. Aqua Tofana contained mostly arsenic and lead, and possibly belladonna. It was a colorless, tasteless liquid and therefore easily mixed with water or wine to be served during meals. . . . It is slow acting,

with symptoms resembling those of a progressive disease or other natural causes. . . . The antidote often given was vinegar and lemon juice.”

“[Saint Paraskevi](#) was born in Rome (circa 130 A.D.) during the reign of the pagan Emperor Adrian. Her parents, Agathon and Politia, were devout Christians even though at the time, belief in Christ was a crime against the state punishable by death. . . . They were blessed late in life with a daughter, they named Paraskevi, because she was born on a Friday”—the day of Preparation. After a life of miraculous witness, “Paraskevi was beheaded in Rome on the 26th of July, in the year 180 A.D.”

Hartshough’s winter bracer:

“Archaeologists have discovered the earliest traces of [cacao](#) in pottery used by the ancient Mayo-Chinchipeculture 5,300 years ago in the upper Amazon region of Ecuador. Chocolate played an important political, spiritual and economic role in ancient Mesoamerican civilizations, which ground roasted cacao beans into a paste that they mixed with water, vanilla, chili peppers and other spices to brew a frothy chocolate drink.”

Regarding the [Nephilim](#): “Given the complex meaning of the *nefilim* which emerged from the three interconnected biblical passages (human–divine hybrids in Genesis 6, autochthonous people in Numbers 13 and ancient warriors trapped in the underworld in Ezekiel 32), the Greek translators recognized some similarities. First and foremost, both *nefilim* and *gigantes* were liminal beings resulting from the union of the opposite orders and as such retained the unclear status between the human and divine. . . . They appeared either in the prehistoric or early historical context, but in both cases they preceded the ordering of the cosmos. Lastly, both *gigantes* and *nefilim* were clearly connected with the underworld and were said to have originated from earth, and they both end up closed therein.”

Optical illusions by [Rob Gonsalves](#)

“Woman of Substance” by [Octavio Ocampo](#)

Regarding “[O Come, O Come, Emmanuel](#)”: “The hymn has its origins over 1,200 years ago in monastic life in the 8th or 9th century. Seven days before Christmas Eve monasteries would sing the ‘O antiphons’ in anticipation of Christmas Eve when the eighth antiphon, ‘O Virgo virginum’ (‘O Virgin of virgins’) would be sung before and after Mary’s canticle, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46b–55). The Latin metrical form of the hymn was composed as early as the 12th century. . . .

“[John Mason] Neale published the first documented English translation, beginning with ‘Draw nigh, draw nigh, Emmanuel,’ in *Mediaeval Hymns and Sequences*. He revised this version for *The Hymnal Noted*, followed by a further revision, in 1861, for *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. This version, now with the initial line reading ‘O come, O come, Emmanuel’ would attain hegemony in the English-speaking world.”

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Dark Altiors*
Book 30

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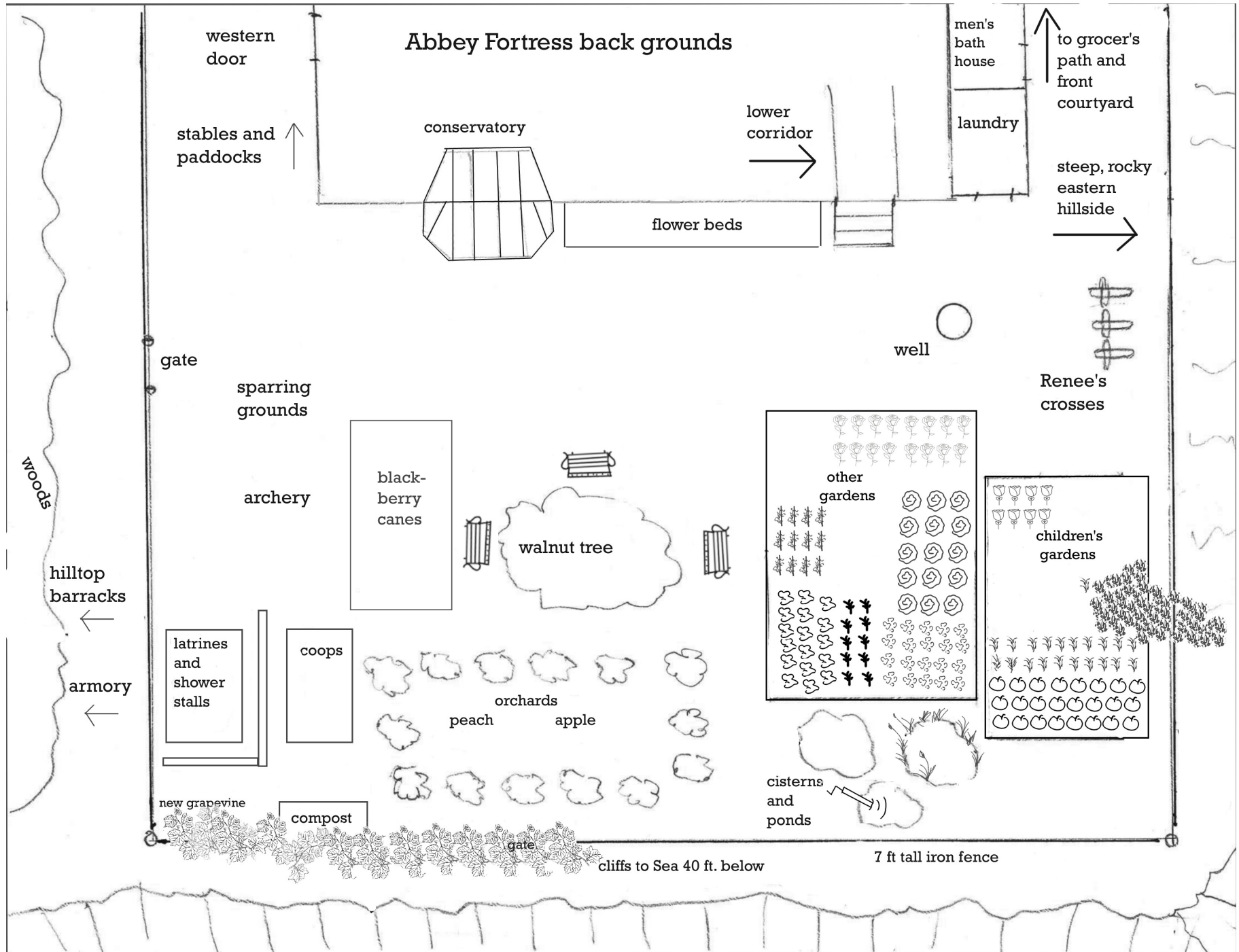
Alberon—AL ber on
altior—ALL tee or
Aqua Tofana—AWK wah toh FAH
nah Araucaria—air au CARE ee ah
Arbaiza—are BAZE ah
Ares—AIR eez
Arne—arn
Averne—ah VURN
Awfyn—AWE fin
Baroffio—bar OFF ee oh
Beardall—BARE duhl
Bennard—beh NARD
Bethune—beh THUNE
cacao—kah KAU (cocoa)
Calix—KAY lix
Calo—KAY low
Canis—CANE iss
caova—kay OH vah (coffee)
Cocci—COH chee
Colquhoun—CALL kwan
connoisseur—kah neh SUR
Conte—cahnt
crèche—kresh
Dal Occhio—dal OH kyo
Danelagh—DANE lawgh
Delano—deh LAN oh
Delio—DEE lee oh
De Luca—deh LOO kah
demesne—the same as *domain*
DiMaio—deh MAY oh
Doane—rhymes with *own*
Efran—EFF run
Eledith—ELL eh dith
Elvey—ELL vee
Enon—EE nun
Erastus—eh RAS tis
Estes—ESS tis
Eurus—YOUR us
Eurusian—your uh SEE un
Eustace—YOUS tis
Everleigh—EH ver lee
Eymor—EE more
Faciane—fah see ANN
Fazakerley—faz eh KAIR lee
Feyer—FAY er
Fiacco—fee AH koh
Folliott—FOH lee uht
Ghislain—gis LANE (hard g)
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)

Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
Goss—gahs
Graeme—GRAY em
Grosvenor—GROVE nuh
Hartshough—HART soh
Heus—rhymes with the noun *use*
Ingannamorte—IN gah nah mort
Ionadi—ee YON ah dee
Jehan—JAY han
Jian—JEE un
Justinian—jus TIN ee un
Kaas—kahs
Kele—kay lay
Kelsey—KELL see
Kraken—KRAY ken
Leila—LYE la
Lemmerz—leh MERZ
LeVisay—leh VEE say
Ley—lay
Lilou—LEE loo
Loghry—LOW gree
Loseby—LOWS bee
Marguerite—mar ger EET
Mathilde—muh TILL duh
McElfresh—mak EL frish
Melchior—MEL key or
Melott—meh LOT
Milo—ME low
Minka—MINK ah
Minogue—men OGE (hard g)
Mounoussamy—mawn AH sam ee
Mumme—mum
Nephilim—neh FILL em
Nibor—NEE bor
Nicarber—neh CAR bur
Nyarko—nuh YAR koh
Paraskevi—pair eh SKEH vee
Pelagatti—pell ah GOT ee
per se—pur say (Latin for “by or in itself”)
Pia—PEE ah
Pieta—pie ATE ah
Ploense—plonse
Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Prie Mer—pre MARE
primordial—pry MOR dee uhl (primeval)
Reinagle—REN ah gull
Rivera—reh VAIR ah
Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Dark Altiors*
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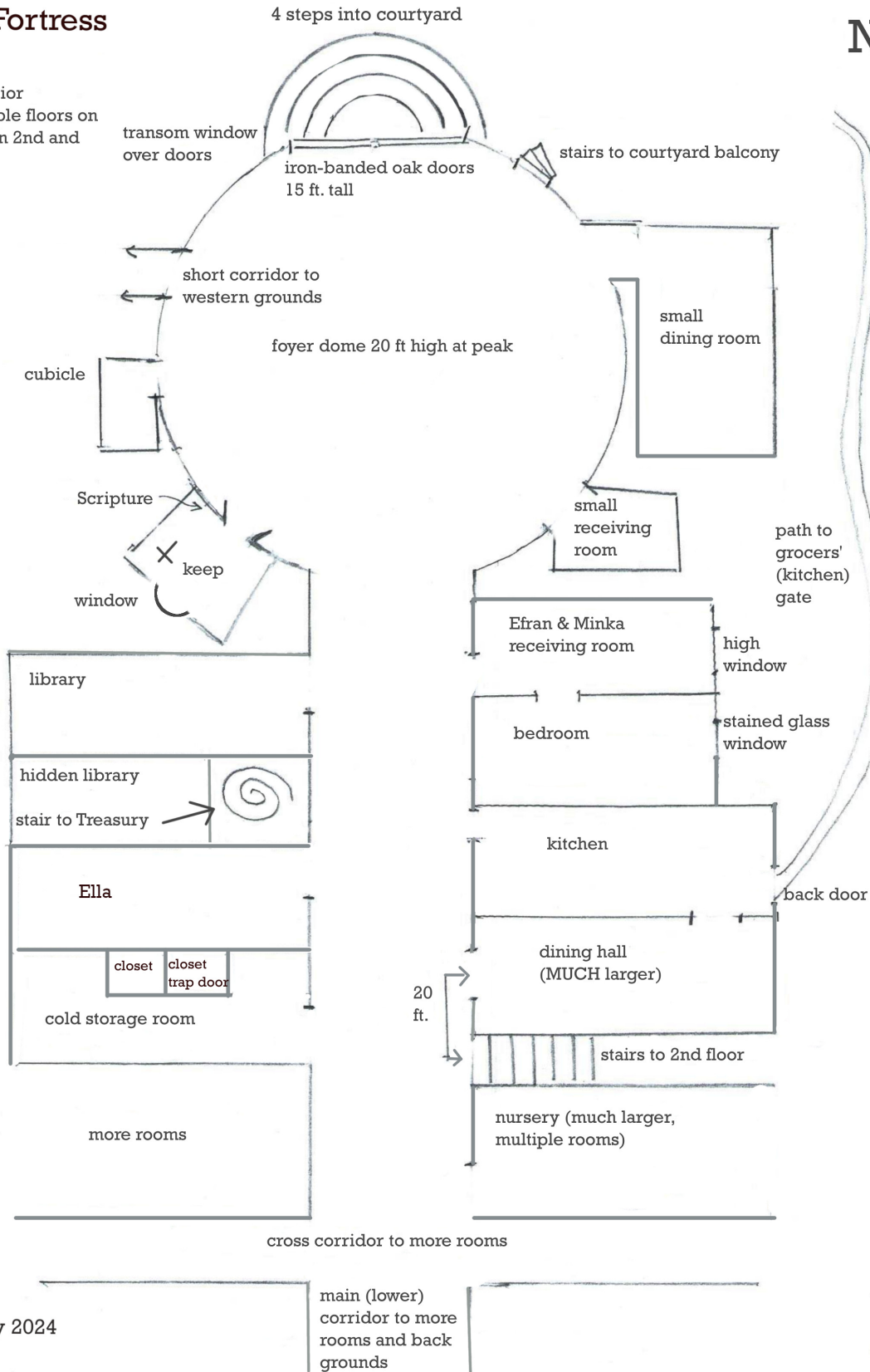
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Rossi—RAW see
Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
Rowe—rhymes with *how*
Ruckelshaus—RUCK ehl zhows
Sai—say
Sheol—SHE ohl
Stephanos—steh FAHN os
stipend—STY pend (a salary or allowance)
Stites—stights
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Telo—TEE low
Tera—TEE rah
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Tiras—TEER us
Tomer—TOH mur
Tourjee—TUR jee
trough—troff
Venegas—VEN eh gus
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
Verlice—ver LEESE
Verrin—VAIR en
Viglian—VIG lee en
Whately—WOT lee
Windry—WIN dree
Xander—ZAN der



Abbey Fortress Interior

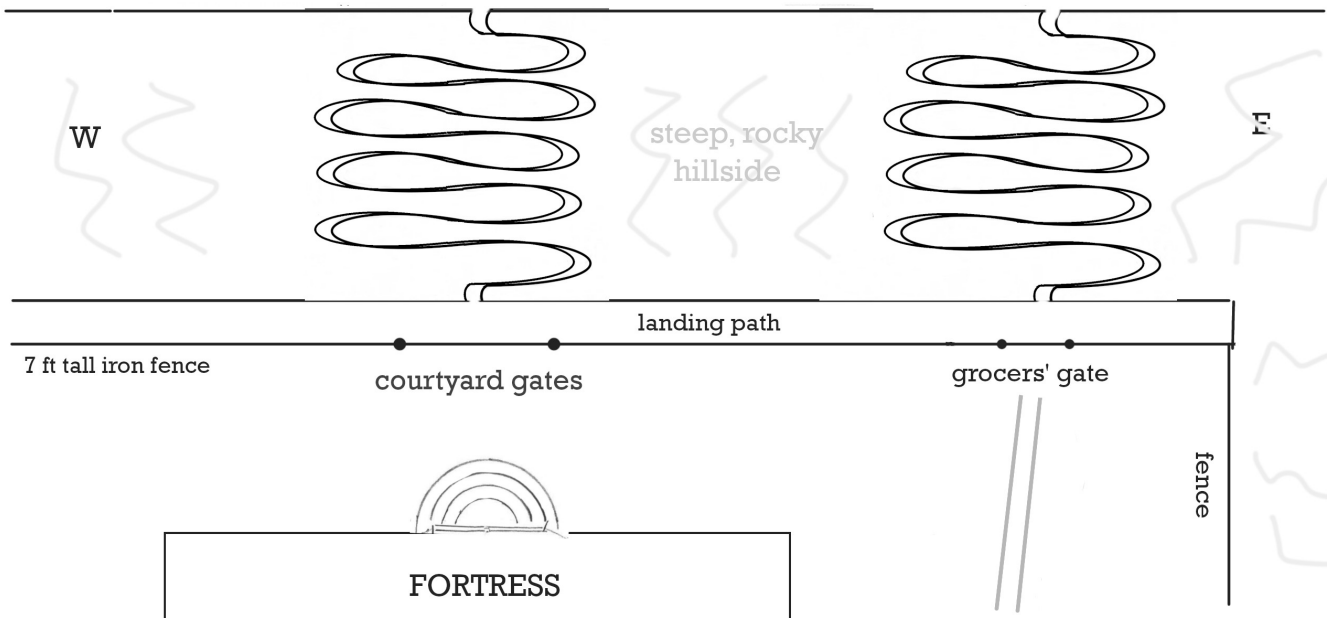
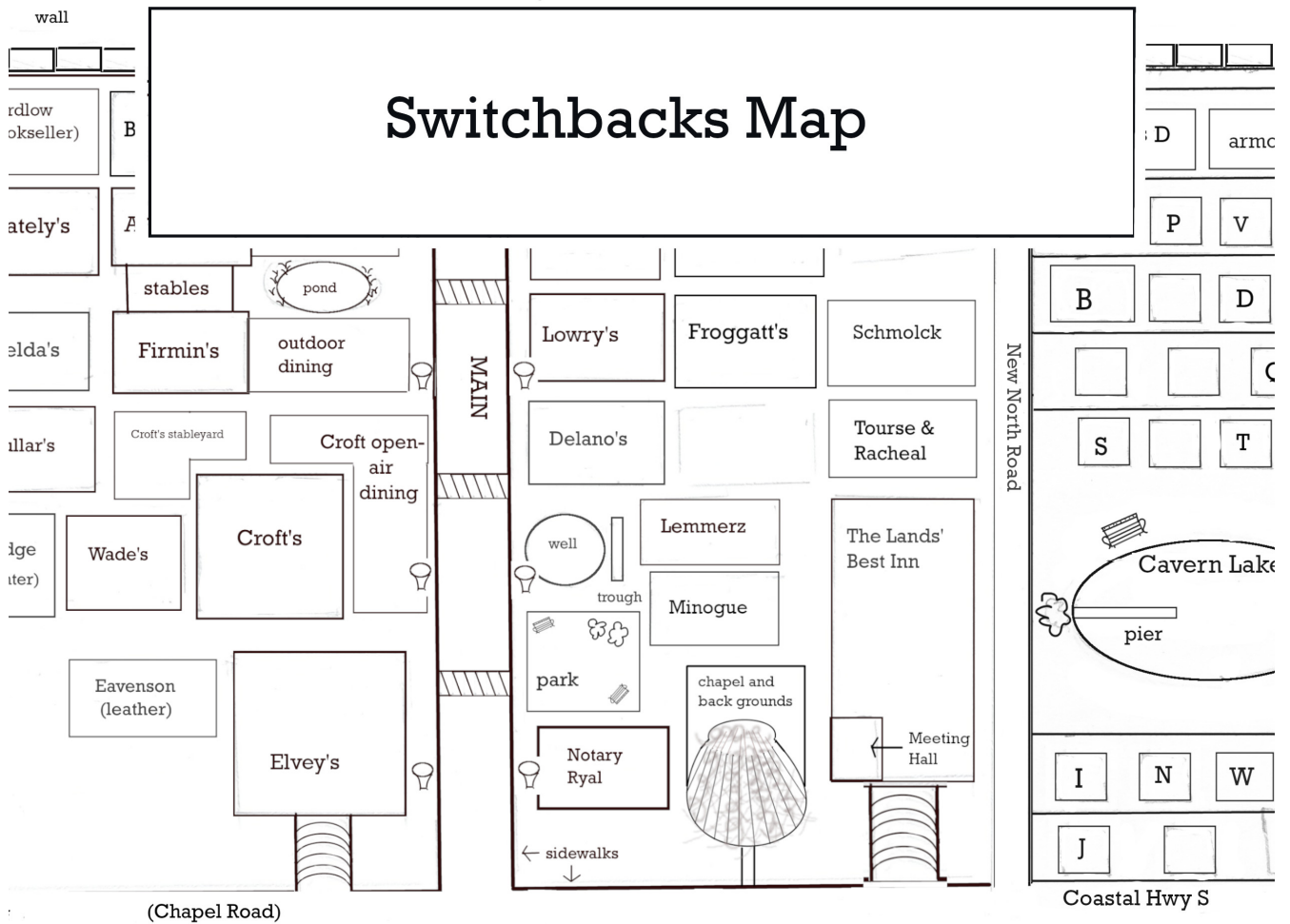
white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



NOT TO SCALE

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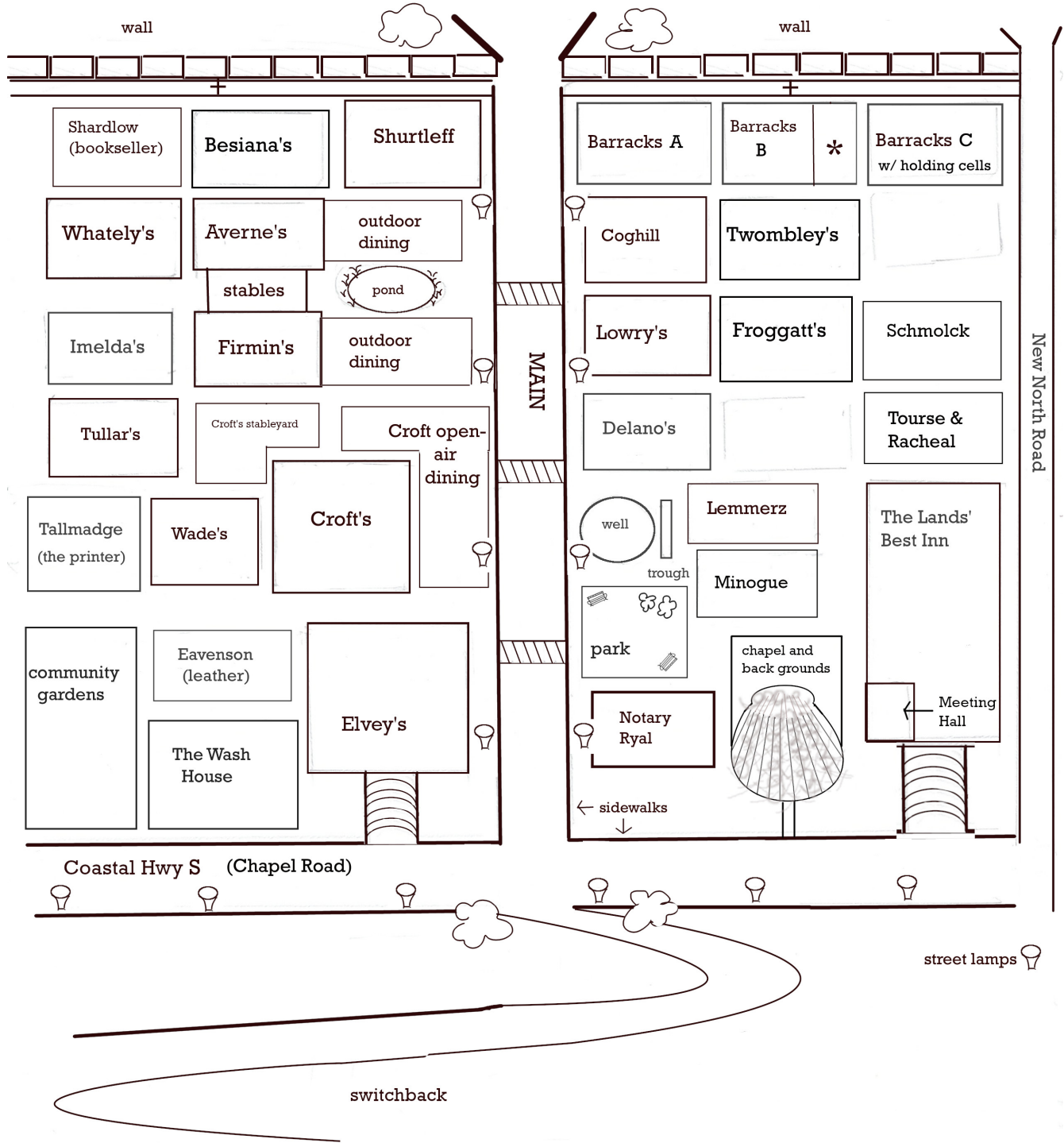
main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds



Abbey Lands Main Road

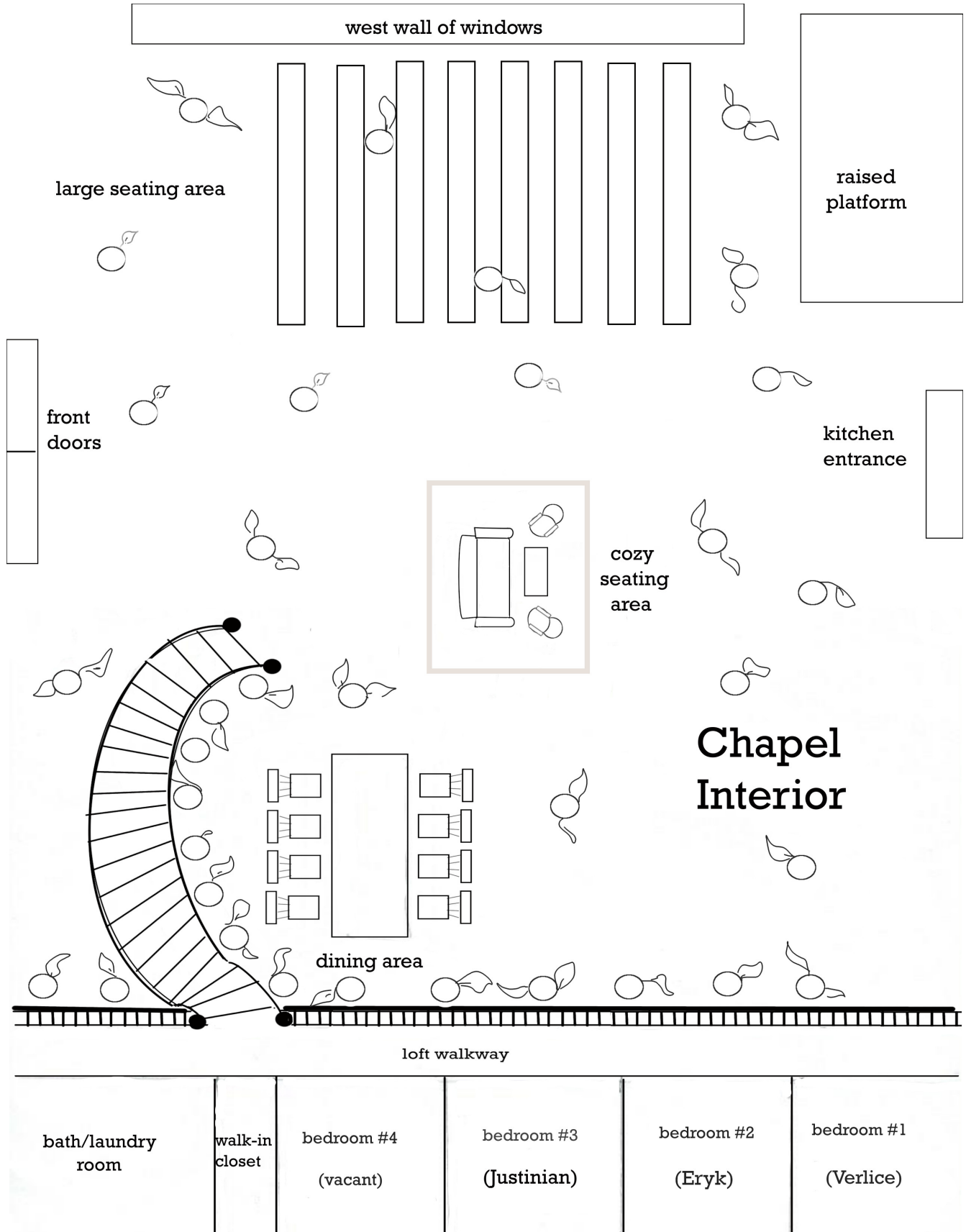
* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements

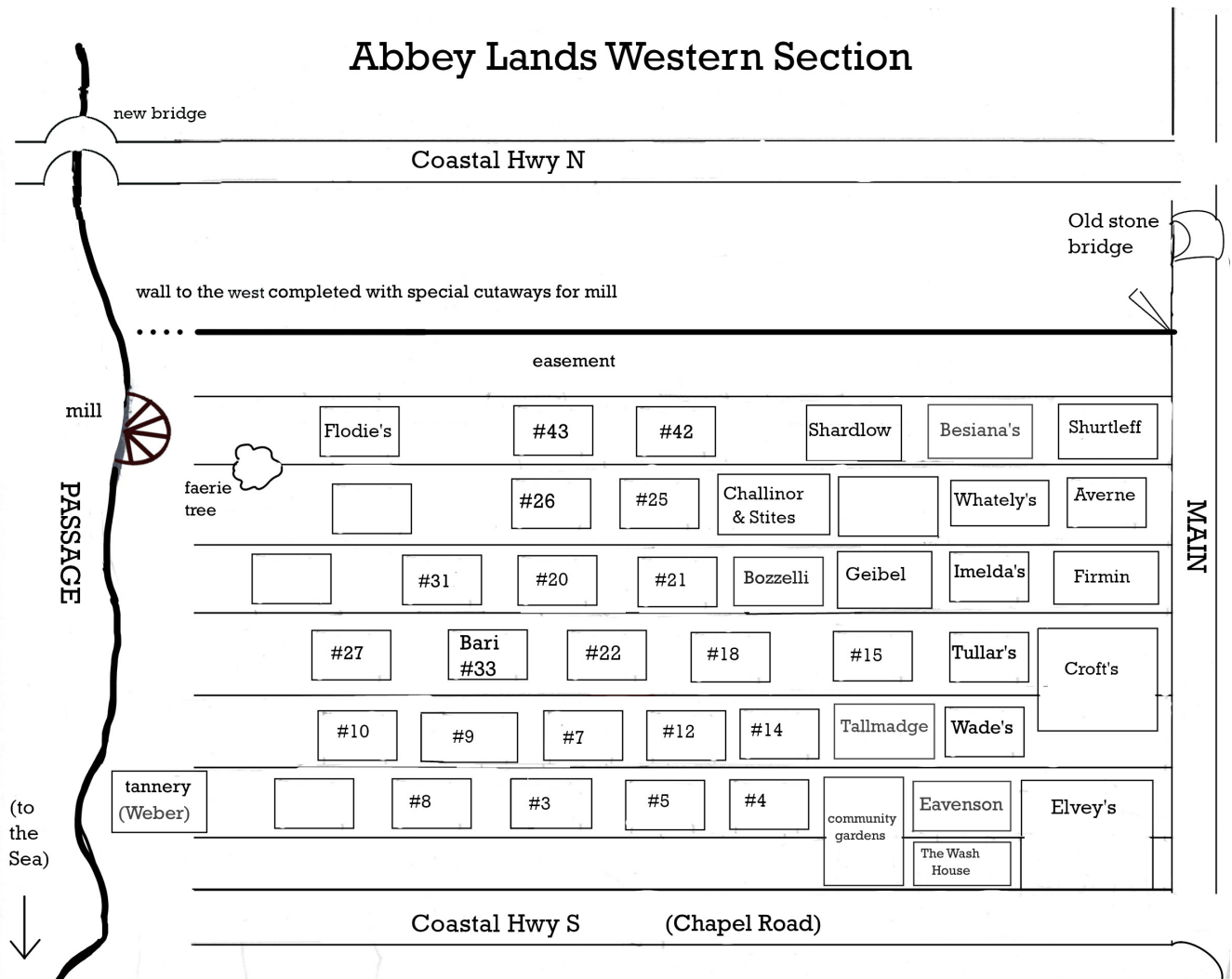


Map 5 Chapel Interior

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Abbey Lands Western Section



(to the Sea)
↓

PASSAGE

MAIN

rocky NW hillside

switchback--4 bends on west side, 5 on east

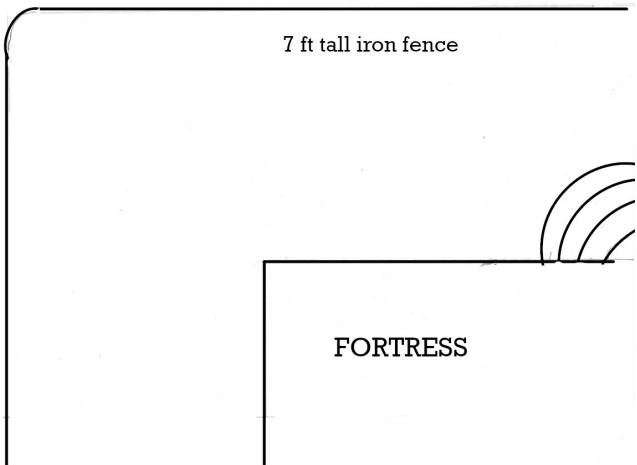
hydra nest & hole

KEY

- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
- 43 - Dallarosa & Enon



faerie tree

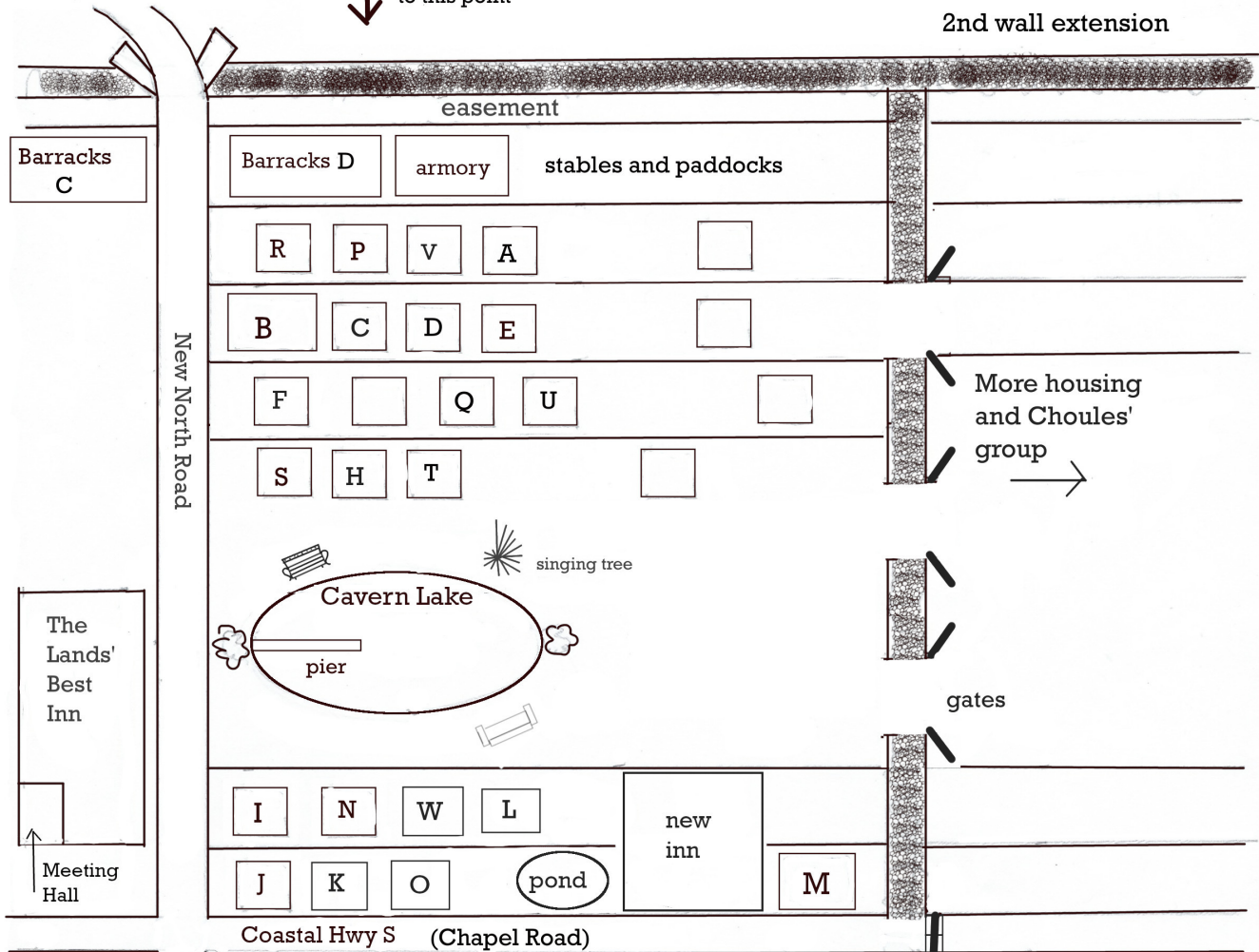


woods

road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point



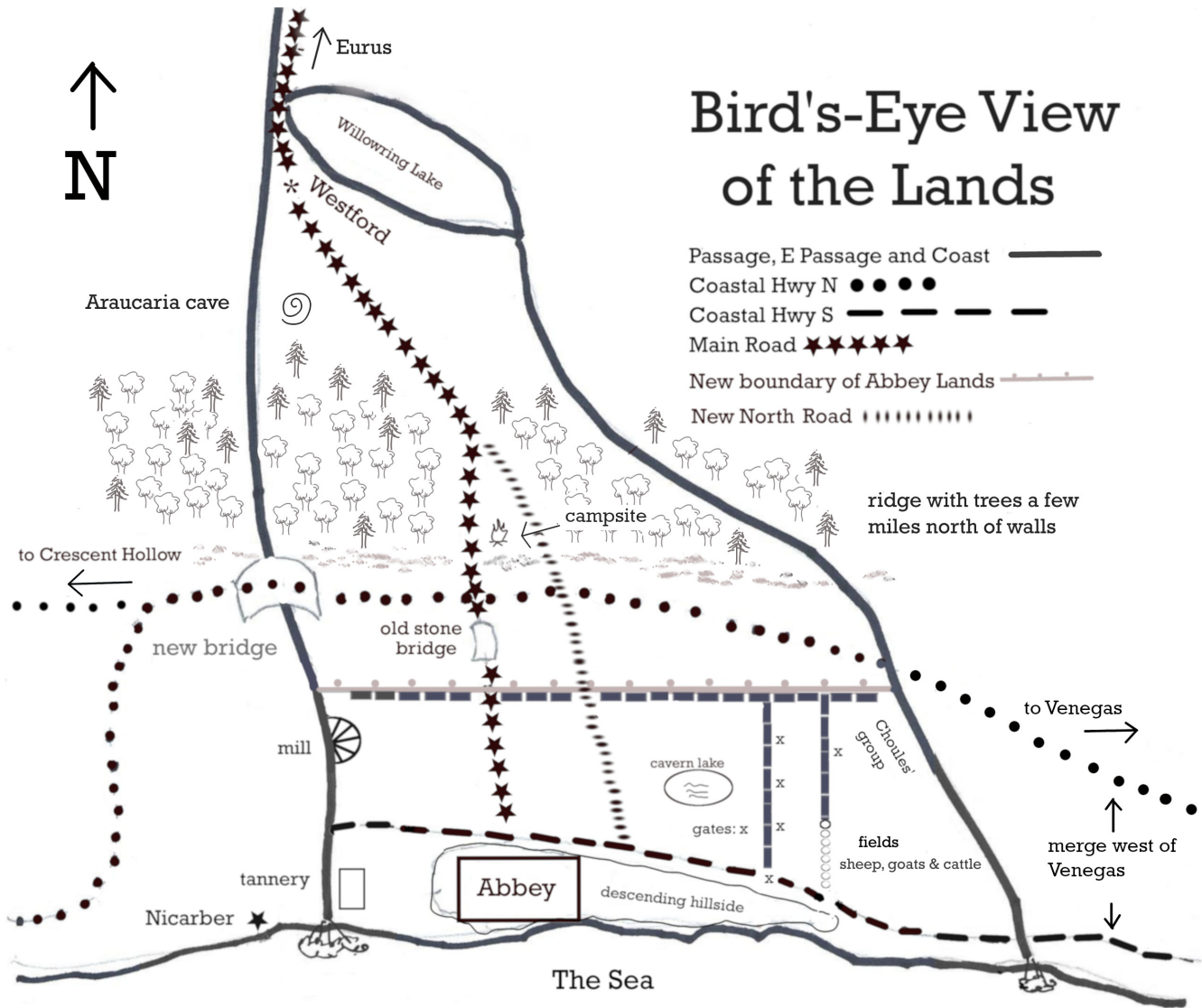
new switchback

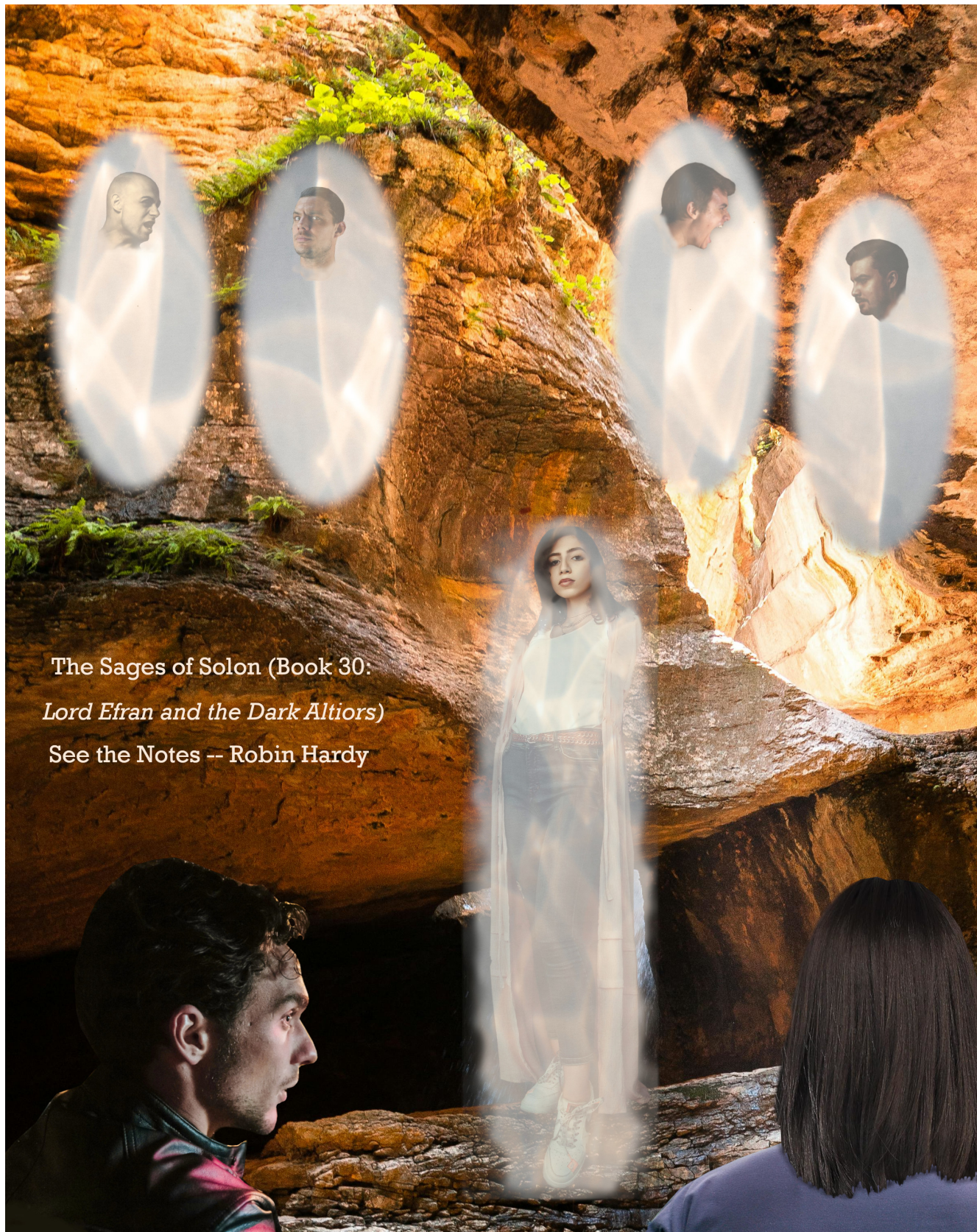
 to courtyard gates

- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C - Pelagatti's Hats
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F - new chapel
- G
- H - Wonders & Illusions
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K - Notary Oulton
- L - Tambling's family & Escarra
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring & Trina
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office

- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry (#71 Orchid Row)
- W - Barrueta & Colletta

barricade
 →





[This](#)¹ is the most beautiful cavern I've used yet in these illustrations, I think. Google tells me that it's a tourist attraction in Salta, in the republic of Dagestan, Russia. [Seagrave](#)² seems concerned about the [girl](#)³ trapped here, but all we can tell about Efran is that he needs his hair cut again.

Our Sages are, from left to right: [stressed](#)⁴, [angry](#)⁵, [shouting](#)⁶, and [wearing a denim jacket](#)⁷. The Sages in our story are a little confused about their name, as Solon was one of the [seven](#) considered the wisest men of Greece. The lights that encompass them are from [here](#)⁸.

Robin Hardy
June 16, 2024

PS. I am claiming no copyright on this illustration.

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