

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

Book 25

Lord Efran and
the Minor Regent

Robin Hardy



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Chapter 1

Captain Efran and his Commander, Wendt, sat in the conference room of Barracks A. Wendt sat at the head of the table, as usual; Efran sat in the first chair around the corner to his left. There was no one else in the room. The door was shut. And the two men were silent in contemplation.

Finally, Efran said, "It's stupid for you to sleep in the barracks."

Wendt, forefinger resting at his lips, said, "I don't know how to work it."

"You and Marguerite have been married for—what? A week now?" Efran asked. Today was August 19th.

"Yes," Wendt confirmed with a slight nod.

Efran expelled a frustrated laugh. "And how long were you thinking to go without sleeping with your wife?"

Wendt groaned, "It's—the specter of gossip that's got us both paralyzed. For me to be seen living with a woman conceivably old enough to be my mother—"

"She needs to come out in her true appearance," Efran dictated. For Marguerite was faerie, and Minka's dearly loved great-grandmother.

"That would be nice, but—" Wendt winced. "She's been using that persona for so long, and has become so comfortable in it, I don't see that I can order her to change."

"Have you asked her?" Efran asked.

Wendt inhaled deeply, resting his forearms on the table. "Efran, I'll be forty-five in October. I've known a few women, but never been married." Efran nodded in acknowledgment. Wendt continued, "I have no clue how to ask someone I genuinely love to put herself on exhibition as the most beautiful woman on the Southern Continent, without exaggeration."

Perturbed, Efran looked to the south-facing window that let in bright morning sunshine and a light breeze. He opened his mouth, but had nothing more to offer.

At this time, Minka was sitting with her Auntie Marguerite on the back patio of her chapel home. They were also quiet, until Minka observed, "You were always the one who gave me the courage to be myself, even though I am silly, and I talk too much, and step out without thinking. You are so poised, and gracious, and quick-witted—I think you can handle people who would stare at you."

Marguerite exhaled gently. "You are a dear. But I am also afraid it would create complications for Wendt."

"He's Efran's Commander. He can deal with complications," Minka said dryly, and Marguerite laughed. Minka went on, "But here's the problem: the longer you both go on pretending that you're not married and not in love, someone is going to see something that starts them talking. And then that would force you and Wendt to go public, which would make everything twice as complicated."

Marguerite silently acknowledged that. Then Minka said, "Ask Hartshough his opinion." He was not just

Marguerite's butler, but a longtime faerie friend—in fact, her only friend when she was pregnant by a married man.

Marguerite turned to look back toward the kitchen. “What do you think, Hartshough?”

What stepped to the door of the patio was a lumbering, malformed mountain troll. As a race, they were kindred to the wild valley trolls that had been wreaking destruction in Eurys and periodically attacking the Abbey Lands. But mountain trolls were gentle and peaceful, worlds more intelligent, just—prone to physical deformities that made them as reviled as their human-eating relations.

The sight of a mountain troll dressed in Hartshough's standard black dress suit caused Minka to gape and Marguerite to sigh. But he said, “I will if you will.”

Minka slowly stood to go put her arms lovingly around this aberration of nature. “Oh, Hartshough. You are truly Toogood”—that being his real name, as well. Tearing up, she squeezed him as tightly as she did Efran.

“Thank you, Lady Minka.” He patted her with a six-fingered hand.

She raised up to protest, “But I thought you were faerie!”

He lowered his lumpy head, and Marguerite explained, “He is faerie on his father's side, Minka. His mother was a mountain troll, so he has aspects of both. I don't even understand it myself, but there it is.”

“So he can change his appearance,” Minka murmured.

“Yes,” Marguerite said. “Otherwise, he'd never be able to come down from the mountains.”

Minka's bodyguards Goss and Fiacco (he newly returned from scouting the Fastnesses) had been standing just inside the front doors when they glimpsed the large troll lumbering out of the kitchen to the patio. So they ran quietly to the kitchen to watch unseen. And they witnessed all the following.

While Minka was petting Hartshough, Marguerite asked, “So, then. What do you think?”

Turning back to her, Minka looked at a young woman as flawlessly beautiful as Toogood was repellent. Her skin was rose porcelain, her eyes light violet, her hair almost lit with the glow of the sun. At Minka's fixed stare, Marguerite said, “If you react this way, what am I to expect on the street?”

Minka sat pensively. “Can you—tone it down a little?”

Marguerite looked thoughtful. “Hartshough, can you bring me my good hand mirror? Only—change back. You made your point, dearest man.”

“Yes, Lady Marguerite.” And it was their usual Hartshough bowing.

Goss and Fiacco effaced themselves as Hartshough passed through the kitchen. He saw them, but said nothing, and returned to the patio in a few minutes with not only Marguerite's hand mirror, but a tall standing mirror from the guest room. He handed the small mirror to her, then set up the tall one in front of the trailing grape vines.

Studying her reflection, Marguerite murmured, “Tone it down. Hmmm. . . .”

The first thing to go was the glow. Then Marguerite looked like any other fabulously beautiful Eurasian socialite. She looked to Minka in despondence.

“Stand up,” Minka ordered, nodding toward the tall mirror. Marguerite did, regarding herself almost in disgust.

Standing herself, Minka proposed, “Try this: a healthy thirty-five-year-old. Slender as you are now, but maybe add a little to the hips, just for realism. Not too much . . . good. Now, the light blonde hair is nice—maybe make it a little flyaway instead of so smooth. There! Sprinkle light freckles around your face. Ooh, that’s cute. Make that tiny nose just a little broader, maybe a little Polonti-ish. Yes. And instead of violet eyes, just make them blue—maybe even blue-green. Fill in those eyebrows a little, so they don’t look so perfect. And—a few crow’s feet around the eyes. Yes, that’s better. What do you think, Hartshough?”

She and he studied the subtle changes in Marguerite while she looked indecisive. “What about clothes?” Marguerite asked. She was currently wearing the loose grandmotherly caftan she favored.

Minka said, “You’ll be fond of pants, but for today, let’s just make it a simple housewife’s dress—you know, with the scoop neck and buttons down the front, and a full skirt falling past the knees—oh, in light green, I suppose. Only, you’re self-conscious about your hips, so, you’re also wearing a nice floral hip shawl. The flat shoes you’re wearing are fine. Pull your hair back loosely, to keep it from blowing in your eyes.” Hartshough approached with a selection of hair ribbons, one of which she chose.

As Marguerite made these alterations, Minka and Hartshough (and Goss and Fiacco) looked on silently. Finally, Minka turned to Hartshough: “Well? What are we missing?”

“Here.” Hartshough stepped into the kitchen to open a cabinet behind Fiacco, then returned with a shopping basket. It was already equipped with a few items. “A woman’s indispensable accessory.”

Marguerite took the basket, laughing, “You are so right, Hartshough.”

Minka declared, “Now I and my auntie are going to walk down Main and sit at Firmin’s.” Marguerite inhaled, then nodded. Goss and Fiacco ran back to the front doors.

While the women were passing through the hall, Justinian came down off the stairs, dressed to go out himself. The three stopped as his eyes swept from Minka to Marguerite. Goss and Fiacco watched from the doors as Minka said almost defiantly, “Justinian, I’ve been helping Auntie with a makeover.”

After a frozen instant he bowed, tipping his hat to them both. “May I say how utterly successful you’ve been in drawing out her true self, dearest Minka? The Lady looks divine, as she is.”

Minka grinned in victory and Marguerite exhaled, “Another charmer.”

“Trust me; they’ll love it,” he said, patting her hand, then progressed to the kitchen for his morning bracer.

Awash in confidence, Minka took Marguerite to the doors, where their bodyguards bowed. “Auntie, you already know Goss; this is Fiacco, who’s newly arrived from months out scouting. Now, my pets, Marguerite has been experimenting with a new look—she stopped wearing the makeup that made her look so old. Anyway, we’re just going to walk down Main, do some window shopping. We won’t need the horses.”

“Yes, Lady Minka. Lady Marguerite,” Goss affirmed. Fiacco added nothing to that, only taking care to not stare.

Holding Marguerite's free hand, Minka stepped down the walk to turn west on Chapel Road, her bodyguards following close behind. Arriving at Main, Minka glanced at Elvey's across the street, but decided, "We need to say hello to Ryal and Giardi."

"Yes," Marguerite agreed. So they entered the shop, where the firmly attached bell tinkled assertively. Goss and Fiaccio entered behind them to stand on either side of the door.

There were several customers at the counter whom Ryal was attending, so Minka stood back against the wall with her auntie to wait. Quietly, Minka chatted to her, "Auntie, are you having any more performances in the chapel soon?"

Marguerite replied, "Nothing that I know of, but I'll have to check with Hartshough. Although, Xander and his orchestra are continuing their weekly rehearsals." The man in front of them half-turned to openly eavesdrop.

"Oh, yes, he's so appreciative that you allow it. I hear him talking about the wonderful Lady Marguerite, who opened her fabulous home to music in Eurus and now the Abbey Lands," Minka said smugly.

"I don't think I could live without music," Marguerite admitted. "And I'm terribly grateful to be given the chapel, but I'm still a little queasy about taking what was meant as a public building." A woman in line glanced back at them.

"Oh, no. After the trolls destroyed Featherstone, Efran was perfectly right to give it to you, Marguerite," Minka said firmly.

By this time, Ryal, Giardi, and their customers were looking over with long, dubious glances. Bowring, having finished his business, came over slowly, supported by his cane, to bow. "Lady Marguerite?"

She said warmly, "How are you, Bowring? You're looking well."

Minka effused, "Oh, you do look so much better, Bowring! I'm sure Marguerite wouldn't mind your sitting in on Xander's rehearsals, if you like. Wouldn't that be all right, Marguerite?"

"Of course. They practice every week on the day after Dominica, in the afternoon," Marguerite said.

"Thank you," Bowring said absently, as he was studying her. Another customer who was leaving paused to peer at her.

Minka said, "And doesn't Marguerite look great? We got rid of all that makeup that made her look like an old lady."

"The makeup?" Bowring asked.

"Yes," Minka insisted. "You might better warn Trina away from it. Oh, and Auntie has started a health regimen with apple cider vinegar. It's marvelous." Another customer hurried out around them.

"I see. Well, it's good to see both of you," Bowring said, inclining his head. He departed carefully down the steps while Fiaccio held the door for him and a woman customer. An hour later, Averne, Firmin and Croft had sold out of all the apple cider vinegar they carried.

When the remaining customer had left the shop with a long sidewise glance at the women, Ryal and Giardi

remained pensively at the counter. That is, Ryal was pensive while Giardi was smiling. He said, "Hello, Minka. Lady Marguerite?"

She couldn't help laughing in response. "Hello, Ryal. Giardini."

Minka leaned on the counter, muttering, "Oh, she's a sight toned down from what she was, Ryal, but this is the new Marguerite, who's married to Commander Wendt, and they're going to stop hiding the fact." Minka raised her brows authoritatively.

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Chapter 2

Giardi said, "That's wise. And I like the way you're presenting it."

"Thank you, Giardini," Minka said in vindication.

Nodding slowly, Ryal asked, "Does the Commander know?"

"He will shortly," Minka said, looking off with wide, innocent eyes.

"Good luck," Ryal said as Goss opened the door for another customer to enter.

Minka turned away from the counter with her auntie firmly in hand. Glimpsing the customer, Minka said, "Let's stop at Firmin's, Marguerite."

The customer stopped dead, gazing at them. "Marguerite?" she asked in disbelief.

"Hello, Windry. How are you?" Marguerite asked.

Windry did not answer for staring. Minka patted her hand, whispering knowledgeably, "Apple cider vinegar."

Windry squinted, but the two women progressed to the door, which their bodyguards opened. They all heard Windry tell Ryal, "I'm divorcing Eryk." Then Ryal had to tell her that Eryk had already applied for a divorce.

Minka and her Auntie Marguerite continued strolling down Main, followed by Goss and Fiaccio. The women stopped at the large community well to wash their hands, which were not dirty. Glancing around, Minka exclaimed, "Oh, Auntie, look! The tivoli stone on Delano's is gone!"

Peering at the building, Marguerite shook her hands dry and said, "No, I think it's just painted, Minka." She bent to retrieve her basket.

"But Marguerite, who would deface that beautiful building?" Minka demanded in outrage. When Marguerite shrugged, Minka turned to the men behind her. "Do you know?"

Fiaccio looked to Goss, who said, "Delano painted over the stone himself, him and Wystan, Lady Minka. He thought it looked too much like makeup."

Minka, Marguerite and Fiacco all laughed, as did a passerby. “Aren’t our men clever, Marguerite? They’re such good company. Here’s Firmin’s right across the street. Let’s stop for refreshments.” She glanced aside before leading the others to the crosswalk, just to make sure there were a few cart drivers that would have to stop for them—and thus see Marguerite.

While Minka had Marguerite and their bodyguards sit with her in prominent streetside seats, the new 12-year-old waitress Lilou rushed to wait on them, as both the Lady Minka and Lord Efran ordered for their men and tipped excessively. Although it was still midmorning, hours before the lunch rush, Lilou set their tables with napkins and flatware, demanding, “What would you like?”

Minka said, “Oh, I’m not sure yet. Marguerite, do you know Lilou? I believe she’s the quickest server at Firmin’s now.”

“Yes. Hello, Lilou,” Marguerite smiled at her.

“How do you do, Lady Marguerite?” Lilou said, bobbing in a curtsy. But she didn’t really remember Minka’s auntie and was unaware of her makeover. Turning back to Minka, Lilou said, “We have new cheese balls that are breaded and fried, and they’re wonderful.”

“Let’s try those, then,” Minka agreed. “Get us a serving for each table; the men will have mild ales and I’ll have tea. What do you want, Marguerite?”

“Tea sounds good,” Marguerite said, placing her basket on the chair around the corner of the table. She and Minka sat on the same side of the table, facing the street. Although nervous, Marguerite lifted her face to the glances of the curious.

At that time, two men who had emerged from Barracks A were crossing Main, having been alerted to the party at Firmin’s. Halfway across the street, Wendt paused at the sight, then continued to the sidewalk. But Efran stopped dead in the middle of Main to evaluate the woman beside his Minka. Lowry, stopped in his cart, queried, “Captain?”

Efran wiped his lip, waving to Lowry, then finished crossing to hesitantly sit in the chair Minka patted next to her around the corner of the table. Wendt had just sat next to Marguerite (relocating her basket to the floor) which left both men sitting on either side of their table, facing each other. The remaining side along the street was empty so as to not block anyone’s view.

Goss and Fiacco had both stood at their table behind Minka’s to salute, so Wendt glanced over to nod, “At ease.” They sat again to watch the proceedings. Efran’s eyes bounced between Minka and Marguerite before looking to the Commander.

But Minka told the men, “The most wonderful thing! Dear Auntie got rid of all of her makeup and washed her face, which makes her look so much younger, don’t you think? And since she’s a resident here now, she decided to start wearing Abbey Lands clothing. It makes such a difference, doesn’t it?”

Wendt was smiling slightly at Marguerite, who was studying him tentatively, awaiting his reaction. Various groups of onlookers were collecting on the sidewalk across the street, or at Avene’s on their left and Croft’s on their right. Then Marguerite leaned forward to kiss him lightly on the lips, and Wendt said, “I need to put a wedding ring on you.”

“What luck! Whately’s is just behind Averne’s here!” Minka said.

“Have them bill the Fortress,” Efran instructed his Commander before turning to whistle at several men across the street. Three of them came running outside the crosswalks to land on the sidewalk in front of Efran, saluting. He instructed them, “You’re to escort the Commander and Lady Marguerite to Whately’s. They’re to bill the Fortress.”

“Yes, Captain.” Connor saluted. Turning to Wendt, he inquired, “Commander? Lady?” Behind him, Tiras and Verrin saluted as well.

Glancing back at them, then at Efran, Wendt stood, lifting his wife by a hand. He said almost wryly, “I suppose we’ll do that. Thank you for the directions, Lieutenant Commander.” Minka inhaled in victory, then she and Efran watched the newlyweds walk down Main to take the short cut to the jeweler’s. Marguerite’s forgotten basket stayed behind.

When they were out of sight, Efran looked at his wife. “What’d you do?”

She immediately assumed her innocent face. “Me? Almost nothing.” She paused, then said, “Actually, Hartshough’s the one who talked her into it.”

“Tell me about it,” Efran said, looking up as Lilou and Ionadi brought over drinks and fried cheese balls.

Efran lowered his head to Minka’s as he absently stirred the tea meant for Marguerite, listening while his wife whispered with subdued gestures. He put the spoon aside, then his hand sank to the table beside the cup and saucer as he continued listening. Traffic passed slowly around them; some pedestrians came within a few feet of their table, dropping something or stopping to search a bag as a pretext for straining to listen. But the black head remained so close to the curly-haired head that no one could hear anything except an occasional hiss of excitement.

While staring down the lingerers, Goss and Fiaccio also whispered back and forth, Fiaccio asking questions which Goss answered. They fell silent when the Captain lifted his head, then they followed his eyes to Chapel Road. Minka also turned to look. And the four of them saw the Commander and Lady Marguerite walking hand in hand east on Chapel Road toward the oyster house.

Looking almost anxious, Minka turned back to Efran. He pressed his lips together, nodding with raised brows, which was all the confirmation she needed. Efran then took a sip of tea, pulling the hors d’oeuvre plate toward him. “So, the fried cheese balls are new, are they?”

“So Lilou says,” she grinned, taking one while he took three.

Efran glanced over his shoulder toward the bodyguards. “Fiaccio! You’re back. Have you reported in?”

“Yes, Captain, to the Second Gabriel, yesterday,” Fiaccio replied.

“Good, then you get to report again, this time to me. You and Goss bring your plate over here,” Efran instructed, gesturing to the empty seats. The two rose to relocate with only their drinks, as their plate was empty.

“Where were you patrolling?” Efran asked.

“North of Eurus to Falcon Pass and back, Captain,” Fiaccio replied. “Commander Wendt sent Ori, Nyarko, Kaas

and me to check out reports of troll movement from the Fastnesses. Well, about—four months ago, at the end of April, we saw the first wave of trolls come pouring through the Pass. They weren't the nice mountain trolls, either; they were the maneaters. The dam' things must have smelled us, because they set traps all down the road from the Pass to Eurus—we almost lost Nyarko in the first one we found. And they kept coming, week after week! So we were trapped.

"We tried several times to cut through the terrain well off the road, but it's rocky, pitted with adder dens and stalked by cougars. All we could do then was work our way south while staying hidden. But it was so slow, we couldn't get back in time to warn you before they showed up here," Fiacco finished.

Efran nodded, finishing off the cheese balls. Then he asked Minka in alarm, "Did you get all you wanted?"

"Yes," she said, smiling. She was so full of happiness for her auntie and the Commander, she didn't need cheese balls.

"All right." Turning back to Fiacco, Efran asked, "What did you see in Eurus?" Other Abbey scouts had returned from Eurus about two weeks ago, right before the dancing mania hit. But they had been unable to observe much because of the influx of trolls.

"Oh, they had a war on with the trolls, for sure, until everyone fell to dancing. We had no idea what it was until the Second explained it to us, but we stayed well away, so weren't affected. The trolls were, and a number of them died, from what we saw. Then it just—stopped, but we don't know why. After that, it looked like the trolls lost interest in Eurus, and cleared out. They didn't all go back north; some went south, and a lot of them went east. If they try to set up a troop base there, we'll see how they do with the big cats," Fiacco ended.

"I see," Efran murmured. "Well, it would be nice to get scouts back up to Eurus again. The last we knew, before the dancing mania, the Surchatain and most of the Council—if not all—were trolls." Goss barked out a laugh and Fiacco gurgled.

With an arm across the back of Minka's chair, Efran looked contemplatively over Main. Then he draped his fingers over his lips to murmur to his men, "Do you know about Lady Marguerite?"

Minka glanced at Goss, smiling. He met her eyes and admitted, "We saw most of her—makeover, Captain." Efran raised his face in appreciation of the term, and Goss added in a low voice, "Hartshough's a mountain troll."

Efran looked quickly at Minka, who nodded. "And part faerie on his father's side. Auntie told him to keep using his cover. Neither of us could bear to see him treated badly."

There was a moment of silence, then Goss asked, "Should we keep it quiet?"

Efran winced, looking to Minka. She shrugged, "Keep what quiet? All you saw was me helping Auntie with a makeover. Who in the world cares what Hartshough looks like?"

Efran laughed lightly; Goss said, "Thank you, Lady Minka." She looked satisfied.

They sat a while longer, contemplating war, love, trolls, faeries, and other mysteries of the universe. Minka watched the women parade in the latest fashions directly in front of them, trying to catch the Captain's eye—or possibly Fiacco's, who was a handsome man, a Southerner. Minka doubted that either of them saw anything but obfuscating bursts of color. In fact, Efran had just caught sight of a bounty hunter he knew who was not only

permitted in through the gates, but whisked into the barracks.

A minute later, Goss said, “Captain.” At the direction of his look, they all turned to see the Second Gabriel trotting toward them from the barracks.

Dodging the women in dresses, he saluted. “Captain, we’re looking for the Commander. Do you know where he went?”

Efran hedged, “He’s . . . enjoying a belated honeymoon, Gabriel. Tell me the problem and I’ll—interrupt him, if I have to.” Leila, passing before Efran in one of Challinor’s more daring creations, stopped to stare at him at the word *honeymoon*, but he didn’t see.

“Oh.” Gabriel looked momentarily surprised. “Then—if you’ll come, Captain, we’ll see if we can leave him alone for a few more minutes.”

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Chapter 3

“Yes.” Efran stood, as did the others. He reached into his pocket for a handful of royals, looking around for Lilou. Not seeing her—as the surrounding tables were filling up with the midday crowd—Efran handed Minka the royals. “Pay Lilou, then go look in the chapel and—just see what kind of disturbance we’d cause if we had to get the Commander. Then please check on Joshua. I’ll be up shortly,” he said distractedly.

“All right.” She reached up for a congratulatory kiss, which he supplied with the crinkling of the eyes and everything.

While Minka went off to find Lilou, assisted by Goss and Fiacco, Gabriel and Efran were hastening back to the barracks. Gabriel told him, “Slade the bounty hunter just arrived from Crescent Hollow, Captain. He’s got some definite news, but won’t tell anyone but you or the Commander.”

Efran nodded. “And it must be important for him to ride at night.” Gabriel agreed; Efran was remembering that the last time Slade had ridden overnight to the Lands, it was to share the astounding news that Webbe the Destructor was the new Surchatain of Eurus.

The Captain and the Second entered Barracks A, where Captain Towner pointed back to the conference room. As they approached the door, Gaul stood aside for them to enter, then closed it behind them. Two other men, Hawk and Detler, were standing against the wall while Slade sat at the conference table finishing off a plate of beef in a cream sauce.

“Excellent fare, for a mess kitchen, Captain,” Slade observed, sitting back with his ale.

“We take care of our men,” Efran smiled, sitting across from him. Gabriel sat beside Efran as he went on, “I’m sorry that Commander Wendt is unavailable right now, but I hope you remember that I pay well for information.”

“Yes, I’m always willing to talk to you, Captain.” Slade drew a leather pouch off his shoulder to open it and withdraw a rolled document, which he extended.

As Efran unrolled it, Slade said, “I’ll give you the background of what you’re about to see. After Surchatain Sughrue made such a hash of attacking you, and lost so many men—at least three quarters of his standing army, from what I hear—the Council of Crescent Hollow deposed him. Then the dancing mania struck, which took out a lot of the nobles. Some died, but many of them, including Sughrue, disappeared.”

Listening as he glanced over the document, Efran nodded. Slade continued, “So the Council appointed an interim ruler in his place. What you’re holding is the official decree of that fact.”

Having checked the notary’s seal, Efran was reading the document. “‘Regent Rondinelli’? Not Surchatain?” he murmured.

“Neither Surchatain nor Surchataine,” Slade said humorously, at which Efran glanced up, uncomprehending. Slade continued, “First, the Council didn’t want to appoint anyone with the authority of Surchatain right away, but they needed a capable placeholder on the throne. So they chose this exceedingly bright female—” Efran looked over with raised brows—“who is thirteen years old,” Slade finished.

Gabriel barked out a laugh and Efran leaned back. “A thirteen-year-old girl. No, I don’t believe that at all.”

Shaking his head, Slade opened his pouch a second time. “I normally avoid stealing correspondence, as it’s a capital crime and all, but knowing what a skeptical customer you are, I made an exception in this case.” He handed Efran another document with a broken seal. “You see that it’s addressed to Grand Councilor Zollicoffer, dated July fifteenth of this year. Oh, and do take note of his secretary’s stamp of receipt.”

“Yes, I see that. Was Zollicoffer Grand Councilor when Sughrue was deposed?” Efran asked, scanning the letter.

“Yes. I believe that the writer of the letter, Lord Windish, mentions that. But I think most of your questions will be answered by reading it,” Slade said.

So Efran held it up to Gabriel’s view, and both silently read:

“To the Illustrious Grand Councilor Zollicoffer of Crescent Hollow
“From his servant Lord Windish

“My Dear Sir: I, as every other Hollowan, was dismayed beyond measure by the Carnage experienced by our valiant Soldiers on June the 28th during this hasty and ill-conceived Attack upon the Abbey Lands. While no one could have conceived that they employ Trolls, the Presence of these Creatures merely underscores the Justification which You and Your Wise Council had in removing the scatterbrained Sughrue from doing any more Damage from this Position of Power. I understand that he has fallen victim to the Dancing Mania, and Good Riddance!

“I understand now that the Council is urgently casting about for a suitable Stand-In until you are able to appoint the next Surchatain. I also understand that this Stand-In must not be one to aspire to Permanent Status as Ruler of Crescent Hollow. Nonetheless, this Proxy must maintain a sensible Rule in a calm, equitable fashion.

“I am sure You remember talking with my Niece Rondinelli, whom I have been raising since her Parents both died about eight years ago. As You will recall, she is now Thirteen, and I beg Your Indulgence for me to remind You of Your remarking what a lively, intelligent Wit and Presence of Mind she possessed, and—in Your Words—what a ‘Regal Bearing’ she displayed. I agree wholeheartedly.

“Were You to appoint her Regent of Crescent Hollow, she would be perfectly capable of enacting whatever Statutes the Council desired while maintaining a cool Dignity in the face of scrutiny. In fact, the Novelty of her Temporary Rule would draw so much attention to herself that it would allow Yourself and the Council the necessary Time and Privacy to interview Candidates for the Permanent Appointment of Your Choice.

“If You find this Proposal interesting to any Degree, I urge Your Council to meet with her and rigorously test her Ability to do all I have stated.

“Wishing to hear from Your Excellency at Your earliest Convenience.

“Your devoted servant, Lord Windish”

Efran lowered the letter, looking off in thought. Slade said, “The Council must have liked what they saw of her in the interview. You’ll note she was appointed Regent as of August the first”—almost three weeks ago.

Tentatively, Efran asked, “The . . . favored nobles under Auber and Gaia—are they still in orbit around the court?”

“Oh no,” Slade said dismissively. “The Council cleared them all out and installed courtiers entirely loyal to themselves.”

Efran studied his sardonic smile for almost a minute, then asked, “Gabriel, how much money do you have in the office?”

“About thirty royals and change,” Gabriel replied.

“Give it to him. I’ll have DeWitt reimburse you,” Efran said, standing.

Slade also stood. “Always good doing business with you, Captain.”

Shaking his head in mild amazement, Efran took both documents with the pouch and walked out.

Upon exiting the barracks, he had barely whistled before Kraken came trotting around the corner. When just riding around the Lands, Efran rarely had him saddled. Since Kraken liked it that way, he was attentive to his human’s directions.

Efran tucked the documents back into the pouch and grasped Kraken’s mane to leap up onto his back. He turned Kraken’s head to kick him to a lope, but had to stop again immediately at the next crosswalk for overdressed and overexposed ladies to pass in front of him.

Though Efran considered himself a patient man, he made the mistake of swaying slightly in aggravation. So as one lady lingered in the crosswalk because she could, Kraken stretched out his neck to take in his teeth the end of the sash securing the back of her dress. Then Efran watched it come undone when she decided to move on. Kraken released the sash to lope on up Main, and Efran twisted to see the whole back of her dress come apart.

Winching, he ducked over the horse’s neck to hiss, “Keep your teeth off the dresses!” But Kraken whinnied out a laugh.

Arriving in the fortress courtyard, Efran slid off his back and slapped his haunches. "Go make yourself useful." Agreeably, Kraken trotted around the northwestern corner of the fortress toward the back grounds. Efran waved acknowledgment of the sentries' salutes before trotting up the steps into the foyer. There, he paused to debate with himself about his nascent plan, then decided to run it past Estes and DeWitt before presenting it to Minka.

On his way to the stairs, he stopped to look into the library. The Librarian bowed to him. "Good afternoon, Lord Efran. How may I help you?"

"Just wondering how our Historian is getting on," Efran said tentatively, looking toward the pierced-relief partition in the corner. As it was illumined by the lantern on the small table which it hid, he could glimpse the troll girl bent over her writing board.

"Doing well, Lord Efran. She has finished Chapter Two and begun Chapter Three. I have been reading and translating them, and found only a few minor errors which she is quick to correct," the Librarian said in satisfaction.

"Excellent." Efran was still mildly disbelieving all this. But he asked, "Did you have Law class today?"

"Yes, Lord Efran, and we had an excellent turnout. Lady Minka was even able to attend for the last portion of it." He was careful to not say how long that portion was.

"Very good. Carry on," Efran said with another glance to the corner. Then he paused to murmur, "Sir Nomus, I'm wondering if . . . Alberon is still in the portal." Efran shouldn't have doubted it, but after seeing Alberon freed from his book prison, and then escape from Sasany Fields to inflict dead trolls on them, Efran was squeamish.

At once Efran saw the door to the hidden library open to reveal the Firmament instead. Taking a breath, Efran walked into the cosmos. As always, he had to brace himself upon seeing the universe spread out in infinity around him, with the sun, the moon, and the planets whirling in their orbits. The great waters flowed down from above, and the windows of heavens poured out golden light on them.

"Yes, Lord Efran. I am terribly busy right now, but you may glance in," replied the Atticitian. Standing at the end of the Hall of Memories that stretched out through space, Efran looked over to see him at work in a nearby portal in his shirt sleeves. It showed the trolls triumphantly taking Solace as their Queen.

The portal directly across from that showed Efran sitting on Kraken in the middle of Main. While the reanimated trolls were crushing themselves against the gates, Alberon was hanging by his jacket from Efran's fist, crying, "Stupid mortal! *You are still in the faerie realm.*"

Efran in the portal replied, "You're now nothing but a memory, Alberon." And then it faded, being just a memory.

Efran sighed, "That's it, then. Thank you, Sir Nomus."

"You're welcome, Lord Efran," Nomus replied without looking up.

Efran exited the Hall of Memories back into the library. Nodding to the Librarian, he went on to the stairs to ascend to the second-floor workroom. Here, he tossed the pouch onto the large table and announced, "I robbed the lower barracks of forty royals to pay Slade for what you'll see in there." As Estes got up to withdraw a money pouch from the locked cabinet behind him, DeWitt reached for the document pouch.

Throwing himself into his usual seat at the head of the table, Efran slid down to lean his head on the chair back and look up at the faerie tree branches overhead. Then he remembered: “Oh, and . . . Minka gave her auntie a makeover and walked her around Main as Wendt’s wife. So, he’s busy for a little while right now.”

Both the Steward Estes and Administrator DeWitt stopped dead to look at him. DeWitt’s mathematician Koschat merely smiled over the counting board. Sitting up again, Efran said, “But that’s just part of the news. Have a look at those documents, then I’ll tell you what I’m thinking. How are your babies doing?” Both of their wives gave birth to baby girls right after the dancing mania almost two weeks ago.

“Doing well, Efran, thank you,” DeWitt said absently, reading.

Estes added, “Yes, Broгна is fairly demanding on Kelsey, so we’re very glad to have her sister’s help.” He walked a pouch of royals over to the door sentry with instructions to deliver it to Barracks A, then he shut the door and returned to his seat to look at the letter DeWitt was reading.

“What did you have in mind, Efran?” DeWitt asked, looking up from the pronouncement.

“You’ve probably already guessed, but here it is.” And Efran laid out his idea to them.

They suggested refinements, which Efran accepted, then DeWitt said, “All right, we’ll send a pair of messengers in livery to Crescent Hollow tomorrow morning.”

Satisfied, Efran exited to descend the stairs with the documents. He paused on the first floor, watching residents and guests flow into the dining hall for the midday meal. Since he wasn’t hungry, he merely nodded to those who greeted him, then went on to the back door.

Descending the steps, he looked around the large back grounds. First, he saw Joshua, almost 20 months old, riding on Kraken’s bare back as he hauled a load of spent flowers and vegetable plants to the compost pile way across the grounds near the henhouses. A soldier was walking alongside diligently enough. Although Joshua lost his balance frequently riding Kraken (because he keep turning to wave to everyone) the horse had begun whipping his head around to shove the boy back in place. Nakam, the hairless dog that seemed to belong to all the children now, was trotting along practically under Kraken’s feet.

Then Efran looked over to the bench under the walnut tree where Minka sat watching him. As he came up to sit beside her, she said in mock peevishness, “There you are. You were gone for so long, and I mean it.”

“You’ll appreciate what I was doing, O Queene,” he said, handing her the letter and the pronouncement.

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Chapter 4

As Minka read the documents, Efran watched her eyes widen and her jaw drop slightly. Then she looked at him with large blue eyes to ask suspiciously, “What are you thinking?”

He teased, “You already know. Your husband and bodyguard, Captain Efran, is going to escort the Lady

Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands to meet her counterpart Regent Rondinelli in Crescent Hollow. You're to dress and adorn yourself extravagantly. And for this trip, I'll even—" he paused to brace himself, finishing: "allow makeup."

The Victrix eyed him sidewise, then said, "Actually, Auntie taught me that only social climbers and women who are insecure in their appearance use makeup. I will attire myself appropriately and leave my face alone."

Efran gaped at her in admiration, and she leaned over to murmur, "Besides, it's not so impressive when one cries so that the charcoal runs down one's face." He threw his head back to laugh.

When the children came over to demand Efran's attention, Minka took the letter and pronouncement back up to the second-floor workroom, where Estes filed them away against future needs.

The following morning, August 20th, they saw Graeme and Connor—two handsome Southerners—depart the gates in livery. They carried a written message from the Lady Sovereign offering congratulations to Regent Rondinelli and expressing her earnest desire to visit her in person, bearing gifts.

That day, Efran had the best carriage the Abbey owned cleaned and refurbished with a new suspension system. A pair of calm, reliable, silver-white horses were bathed and brushed thoroughly. And Efran notified four men—Allyr, Coxe, Finn and Tourse—to have their uniforms washed and ready to take shortly. Assuming they were invited, they would stay at least one day but not more than three.

Minka chose her wardrobe with care. First, she set out the fabulous embroidered dress that the Featheringham ladies had made, along with her favorite formal dress from Elvey's (made early on, when they were producing classically beautiful clothes). After some hesitation, she also pulled out the dress she almost got married in after Ryal had declared Efran dead. Produced by a EurAsian dressmaker with lace by Herzogl, it was simply gorgeous. She included casual dresses, and, in a statement of her authority and independent mindset, pants.

Estes took her to the Treasury to pick out jewelry and a gift for Rondinelli. She was careful here, not wanting to overdo her adornments. She already had the diamond-encrusted headband from the barge, along with the earrings and cuff that Efran had given her. So she picked out two more pairs of diamond earrings, a necklace, and a jeweled hair clip. No crown. As for a gift, the men urged her to take the useless, solid-gold ewer. They all wanted to get rid of it. So she did.

Minka also needed a traveling companion/maid. She wanted Ella to come badly, who was eager to play the part, but Efran wouldn't allow it. His daughter was too valuable to risk in a side rôle, and he did not want to annoy the Hollowans with any Polonti other than himself. So Minka chose an agreeable girl named Voge, and made sure she had the clothes and accouterments necessary for herself and her Lady.

At dinner that evening, the children were disgruntled but understanding that Efran and Minka had to leave again, but he assured them that, first, it would only be for a few days. And second, the Abbey wanted to make sure the new Regent would have no reason to attack them, as had become a habit with Crescent Hollow. Also, Efran told them, "We especially want them to have another Faire this autumn, so that we can buy you all gifts."

The children appreciated that, but Toby asked, "Efran, can we go to the Faire?" The children who were clustered around them—Alcund, Elwell, Hassie, Jera, and Chorro—waited with wide, hopeful eyes for his answer. Efran looked at them, then at Minka, who looked off with raised brows that implied cold nights ahead if he said no.

So he said, "If it's safe enough to take Minka, we will take any of you who want to go." And the children

cheered, jumping up and down. Minka, once again Victrix, eyed him with warmth, and kept the implied promise that night.

The scouts Graeme and Connor returned the following afternoon with Regent Rondinelli's gracious invitation to the Lady Sovereign and her escort to visit as soon as possible. So Efran sent another pair of handsome Southerners (Serrano and Shane) on August 22nd. They were to convey to the Regent gratitude for her invitation, and that the Lady Sovereign and her party would be arriving late in the afternoon of August 23rd.

After they had delivered that message, Serrano and Shane were instructed to find an inconspicuous place to change out of uniform into good Crescent Hollow workmen's clothes. Then they were to rent rooms in the Elegance Inn for themselves and the Abbey Lands party. Following, they were to simply reconnoiter until the Lady's party arrived, which they would observe from afar until meeting them at the Elegance that evening.

The reason for the subterfuge was simply that Efran did not know any of these Hollowans and therefore would not allow Minka to stay overnight at Plumptree—the Surchatain's sprawling estate which Rondinelli now occupied. He was still Minka's guardian.

So, early in the morning of August 23rd, the Lady Sovereign's party prepared to leave. The Lady's clothes and accessories were packed in valises, and the unwanted ewer packed in cotton in a securely nailed crate. Minka wore a regular work dress to travel in, as she would change into finery at the Elegance before going on to Plumptree.

When she came out to survey their transportation, she wilted. It was certainly a luxurious, comfortable conveyance, but it was a hard-topped carriage, which meant that she would have no one to talk to but her attendant, Voge. Although sweet, the girl was disinclined to talk, and Efran would disapprove of Minka hanging out of the window to talk to the men on their horses. Two more men, Detler and Leneghan, would share driving duty. (Efran had already shot down her suggestion of riding on top with them.) As a former Hollowan himself, Leneghan was also good for his knowledge of the city.

So when they were getting ready to ride, arming up with swords and bows, she went over to cuddle Efran beseechingly. "Please, can I ride with you, just for a little while?"

"No, there's no need to take another horse," he said with a questioning glance.

She means on me, Kraken informed him, and Minka said, "No, behind your saddle."

"What? Why?" Efran asked, irritated that Kraken was right.

"Just to have someone to talk to," she groaned.

"You have the maid," Efran pointed out.

Minka turned away, bemoaning, "She goes to sleep when I chatter," and the men looked over in sympathy and amused outrage.

"Then you sleep, too," Efran said, kissing her head.

"Bleah," she returned, plopping onto the comfortable seat. But by the time they were five miles past the new

bridge over the Passage, she stretched out to nap, as Voge was already asleep on the facing seat. (On Tourse and Caswall's first trip out to Featheringham about six months ago, they bypassed Westford to take a more direct but less traveled northwesterly route. To their surprise, the road was just as good as that running through Westford. Also, being less obstructed, it cut almost an hour off their travel time.)

Minka and Voge both woke about four hours into the trip, when the party stopped to rest and water the horses. The ladies stretched their legs in the trees, and both ate a little dried fruit and flatbread. Minka, groggy and irritable, was already resenting this Rondinelli for having the nerve to get herself appointed as Regent of Crescent Hollow at thirteen. Thirteen! Minka was eighteen.

They resumed riding, at which time Voge went back to sleep, but Minka was awake now. She opened the window to look out, but that let in too much road dirt propelled from the horses' hooves and carriage wheels. So she pulled down the screen, but that occluded her view. So she sat and pouted.

When the carriage pulled off to the side hours later, Minka immediately got out to see why. She was standing across the road from high concrete walls with a gap which had obviously accommodated gates at one time. When she saw Efran and Tourse walking toward this gap, she ran to catch up with them, and both turned to her.

"Please let me walk around with you. Is this Featheringham? Please let me look, too. I will go insane if I have to sit in that carriage another minute," she said.

Tourse smiled; Efran sighed, but said, "All right" as he placed his arm around her shoulders. Leneghan, who had been a guard here, came up behind them, as did Finn. But Allyr, Coxe, Detler and Voge stayed with the carriage and horses.

So the four with Efran walked into the dead compound. Leneghan went into the house, first, then came back out moments later. "Cook and Butler cleared out. No one's here, Captain."

Efran nodded, and they continued to look around for a few minutes. Finn, next to Minka, opened the creaking wooden door of the large concrete building to their left. He and Minka then peered into the shadowy warehouse of abandoned work tables, rusty braziers, and scores of open fetters attached to chains bolted into the floor.

Minka stared at them. "They were chained here to work," she whispered in shock. Vaguely remembering that she knew this, the fresh shock of seeing the evidence brought it home to her. Leneghan lowered his head in renewed shame. He had been a guard here, wanting to do something, but not knowing what or how. Everything that he, Dolivo, and Freling tried to do to help these women fell through . . . until Tourse and Caswall showed up.

"How did she justify this? That—Lady Nierling?" Minka asked in dismay. "How can anyone do this to another person?" She was already crying. Efran came over to take her in his arms, but she pushed away. She didn't want comfort; she wanted an answer to her questions.

After a moment of silence, Tourse said, "Racheal and I talked about that for a long time"—as his wife had been one of those enslaved. "She finally decided it was just a matter of—sliding away when the ground moves so slowly under your feet, you don't know what's happening. The point is, in the choices you make, you either move forward, or you move back—you don't stay where you are. You either walk forward into light, or sink back into darkness. There's no third way."

Minka looked into his wry, compassionate face, then she nodded, whispering, "I understand." Turning to take Efran's hand, she said, "I'm sorry I've been complaining so much on this trip. That's childish, and it makes everything harder for you. I'll ride quietly and do the best I can with this girl."

“I know you will,” Efran laughed, hugging her shoulders. “Tourse, don’t brutalize my wife like that.”

“I apologize, Lady Minka,” Tourse winced.

“Well now you’re just rubbing it in,” she pouted at Efran, but squeezed him as hard as she could. He always liked that. “Well, let’s not stand around here; let’s get going.” She took his fingers to lead him out of the compound.

As he followed, he assured her, “We’ve only got an hour to go.”

“I’m good,” she said.

When they reached the carriage, Minka climbed back in where Voge sat waiting. Minka said encouragingly, “Efran says we only have an hour more.” Voge nodded and lay down again. Minka sighed.

It took less time than that for them to reach the outskirts of Crescent Hollow, where the riders, horses and carriage in Abbey livery were spotted by the Regent’s scouts, whom Efran did not see. While the scouts returned to Plumptree to report their approach, Efran led his group to the obscure entrance into the city proper that he had used to get out—and get back to Minka—after the death of Auber about three months ago.

Then they went straight to the Elegance Inn, where the two who had arrived yesterday were waiting for them. In their reserved rooms, the men washed up and ate while Efran heard Serrano and Shane’s report: the city was quiet, though without the general bonhomie they saw under Auber. Also, a number of merchants had private arms guarding their shops. Very little was seen of the official force. Oh, and, the new owner of the Goadby’s brewery, Seger, was continuing to produce Seger’s Best Ale and Beer at a far reduced rate than during their heyday as a Goulven antidote.

In the women’s room, Minka sponge bathed and Voge helped her put on the embroidered dress and jeweled headband. Neither she nor Efran felt like eating much, particularly if there were a show of abundance at dinner tonight. Meanwhile, the men uncrated the ewer. After checking it over, Efran replaced it in its velvet wraps and packed it in a canvas satchel which he slung over his shoulder.

After Leneghan had changed out the carriage horses with Serrano’s and Shane’s relatively fresh animals, the party was on their way to Plumptree. Detler and Leneghan drove Minka in the carriage alone while Efran, Tourse, Allyr, Coxe and Finn rode alongside (leaving Voge, Shane, and Serrano to wait at the inn). At this time, almost an hour after the scouts had reported the arrival of the carriage, the Steward decided that they were mistaken and that no one was coming.

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Chapter 5

The visitors from the Abbey Lands pulled up into the courtyard of Plumptree and the riders dismounted, glancing at the few indifferent soldiers around them. Seeing their guests’ arrival, a pair did enter the palace by a side door, which Tourse alone noticed. Efran had put the heavy satchel on the ground to open the carriage door and lower the step to assist Minka down.

The visitors paused at the steps to the open doors of the palace. Here, they waited for the Steward, whose welcome was dictated by protocol. When minutes passed and he didn't show, Efran decided not to wait any longer. Disliking the lack of standard courtesies, he quietly told Allyn and Coxe to stay with Detler and Leneghan to guard their horses and carriage in the courtyard. They were not to be taken to the stables.

Taking up the satchel on his left shoulder, Efran placed the Lady's hand on his right arm to escort her up the steps into the foyer. Finn and Tourse accompanied them in.

They stood looking around as disembodied voices echoed from somewhere beyond the marble hall. One soldier in a ceremonial uniform ran in to gape at them, then ran back out. Efran took the canvas satchel off his shoulder to unwrap the ewer and set it at his feet. The Landers looked at each other, then a young adolescent in a heavy, ornate gown ran into the hall to stare at them. She was followed by two guards. "Are you from the Abbey Lands?" she asked.

The girl was a few inches taller than Minka, with light brown hair piled indifferently around a tiara and wide eyes in an expressive face. In fact, there was something of a resemblance between the two.

Efran bowed to her, as did the men with him, and Minka curtsied. He said, "Regent Rondinelli, may I present Minka, Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. I am Captain Efran, her husband and guardian. And we bring a gift of congratulations for your appointment as Regent of Crescent Hollow." Since she was staring fixedly at him, he gestured to the ewer at his feet.

"Oh. You *are* them, then," she said, blinking. "My Steward is not here. He should be here. But thank you for your gift." Glancing around, she gestured to the nearest guard. "Take the pitcher to the dinner master."

The Landers held back grimacing smiles as the guard came over to take up the ewer, groaning under its weight. It could never be used as a water pitcher.

Rondinelli turned to study Minka, who smiled at her. Then the Regent said, "I don't think we'll wait for the Steward. Instead, I think we should go to the dinner hall. So, if you will follow me, please."

She turned to swiftly lead them up the foyer into the open dinner hall, where they paused at the foot of a long table, just now being cleaned from a previous meal (in another lapse of hospitality). As Rondinelli looked distressed and indecisive, Minka said, "Sometimes we have to be quick on our feet when the men fall down, don't we? Let's go ahead and sit so they'll know where to put the food."

Rondinelli blinked at her, then laughed in relief. "Yes, let's. Your name is Minka? I prefer to be called Rondi. Here, the other end of the table is closer to the kitchen."

So they followed her to the far end. Noting one chair at the head of the table, Efran sat Rondi in it and Minka around the corner to her left. Taking his place around the corner to Rondi's right, Efran gestured Tourse to sit beside him and Finn next to Minka. Given the onset of twilight, servants brought in two large candelabras to light their end of the table. The guards who had attended the Regent in the foyer had now disappeared.

Glancing up at the entrance of the dinner master, Rondi instructed, "Bring everything." He bowed and turned away with a sigh. Given her tender age and the status of her visitors, Efran was momentarily appalled that there was no Councilor nor senior court representative at table to shoulder the welcome—no other Hollowans at all. If he let himself think about it, he'd be insulted; as it was, he was just watchful.

The Regent herself did not look uneasy, only interested. Scanning the attentive faces of her guests, she asked, “Are you all native to the Abbey Lands?”

Minka looked to Efran to answer. He hesitated, then said, “Regent, the Lands as they are now have only been established for a little over two years. But the fortress itself has stood for several thousand years.”

“Thousands of years!” she gasped. “How can anything stand so long?” Servers came around to pour their drinks and set before them the first course of fried cheese balls.

Efran nodded at his men to begin eating and drinking as he answered her with a smile, “That’s an excellent question. But the Abbey Fortress was established under a charter from heaven to care for abandoned children.”

She looked at him intently to ask, “What is a child?”

He paused again, then said, “The age of majority under Roman’s Law, which is the Law of the Lands, is sixteen.” She looked quickly at Minka, and Efran added, “The Lady is eighteen years old.”

Rondi studied Tourse and Finn, then looked back at Efran to say, “We were told that the Abbey Lands is populated by Polonti and trolls.”

Efran raised his face to laugh, and his men smiled. “I am Polonti, obviously, and probably half our army is Polonti as well. The Lady accuses me of collecting them. We have only one troll, who is the Fortress Historian and my wife’s pet.” He raised his brows to her, and she grinned at Rondi, nodding.

Chewing a cheese ball intently, Rondi studied her. Then she asked, “Did you have the dancing mania in the Abbey Lands? It was terrible here—some people died, and a number of others just vanished. I was kept locked up for days; I didn’t even know what was happening for the longest time. Did it affect you?” This was less than two weeks ago.

Efran said, “Yes, it hit us hard for a couple of hours, and then—just stopped.” He made no effort to explain anything beyond that.

Rondi evaluated him, then turned to Minka. “He sounds smart—even educated. Is he smart?”

“Very. I can’t put anything past him,” Minka said with frank regret.

Rondi swiftly glanced at Tourse and Finn before taking in Efran again, all of whom looked amused. “He lets you joke like that?” she asked in smiling wonder.

“Oh, dear.” Minka looked at Efran in pity. “I don’t think he could stop me if he wanted to.”

“I don’t want to,” he said, with his captivating smile. After letting it rest on his wife, he turned it on the Regent.

Rondi regarded him with frank pleasure. Then her smile vanished and she dropped her eyes to remain silent while the servers brought out steaming hot bowls of vegetable soup. The Landers watched this abrupt change in concern—she went from being interested and communicative to . . . scared. Efran looked at Tourse for his impression. He shook his head, communicating, *Something’s wrong*.

Efran glanced down the long, empty table. Again, why were there no other guests? And there should have been an honor guard behind the Regent, but there were no guards in the hall at all. Why? Long minutes of strained

silence attended the servers as they placed bowls of soup before the diners. Then they departed the hall with their serving trays.

From the corner of her eye, Rondi watched the door to the kitchen, then whispered, “I don’t know why I should trust you, but I do. I—I am desperate. They are using me to start a war with you to get hold of your Treasury. They will make sure that I die and then blame you for it.”

Her hearers were stunned, and Minka asked, “They who?”

“The—Council,” Rondi stammered out. “Grand Councilor Zollicoffer.”

Efran slowly sat back, looking at Minka and then Tourse, who raised his brows in warning. So Efran quietly asked Rondi, “How old are you?”

“Thirteen,” she replied in a murmur.

“Who is your legal guardian?” Efran asked.

“My uncle Lord Windish, who’s helping them,” she breathed.

Efran looked back at Tourse, who murmured over his goblet, “To take the Regent, a minor, without permission of her uncle is an act of aggression which may be answered with lethal force. But they probably know you’re not that stupid. So, if that is their plan, they’ll find a way to kill her while we’re here, and charge you with her murder. No guards, no guests, no witnesses to contradict the foregone conclusion.”

Efran looked off, thinking, *Is that the setup here? How can we know? My charter is to care for children. How do I rescue this child without starting a war?*

He suddenly looked over at Rondi picking up her soup spoon with a sigh. Tourse and Finn were already sipping their soup; but Minka held her spoon idle when she saw Efran’s alert look. He put a hand over Rondi’s bowl, and her eyes shot up. “Is anyone watching us?” he whispered.

Minka glanced to the service door and murmured, “No.”

So Efran carefully exchanged his bowl of soup for Rondi’s. Then he bent to smell it. “Garlic, and a lot of it,” he whispered. “Does your kitchen use much of it?”

“Garlic? Eww. No one wants to smell like a peasant,” Rondi said, grimacing.

Tourse, Finn and Minka sniffed their bowls, then shook their heads. Tourse quietly observed, “No garlic nor arsenic in ours. But all the bowls would have been drawn from the same pot, so if there’s garlic in hers, it would be in all of ours.”

Efran nodded minutely; Rondi sat frozen. Minka caught her breath as Tourse switched his bowl with the one sitting before Efran, which had been served to Rondi. Tourse leaned over to smell it, then quickly sat upright. “Either the Regent loves garlic madly or it’s poisoned.”

“They didn’t waste any time,” Minka hissed. Pale and shaking, Rondi looked around blankly. Minka added, “And they’re not bringing out the next course, either.”

Efran said, “All right, this is what’s going to happen, quickly: I’m going to be the one poisoned. In my death throes, I’m going to knock over these candelabras and start a few accidental fires—again.” He flicked his eyes humorously to Minka, who was not smiling. He continued, “Tourse, you and Finn get Minka and Rondi out—she’s to order all the courtyard guards into the dining hall to fight the fires. Then get them, Allyr and Coxe back to the Elegance; get everyone out of Crescent Hollow by the back way.”

Minka and Tourse objected at the same time, but he overrode her: “Captain, my duty to you is not just to obey your orders, but to protect the Lord Sovereign, on whom everything else depends. I’m going to stay to get you out by a back way that the current residents probably don’t even know about.”

Minka leveled her gaze of command on her husband, who smiled. “All right, Tourse, I’ll accept that.”

Finn interjected, “We’ll get the ladies home directly, Captain, but someone will be watching for you and Tourse on the back road out of Crescent Hollow with horses.”

Tourse nodded in agreement, so Efran said, “Good. But we’re doing this right now. Are you ready, Rondi? Get the guards out of the courtyard.” When she inhaled and nodded, he added, “Lots of screaming, ladies.” They almost laughed.

Efran lurched up from the table, knocking over one candelabra which Rondi had to dodge. He held his stomach, crying out, “Poison! I’ve been poisoned! Murderers! ARRRGH!” He fell to the floor, conveniently grabbing the second candelabra on his way down. Rolling on the floor, he tossed a dislodged candle to hit the nearest wall hanging. Everyone else at the table jumped up, knocking over chairs, dishes, tableware. Minka and Rondi ran out screaming, guided by Finn.

In the deep twilight of the courtyard, Rondi shouted at the guards, “Go to the dinner hall! All of you! Quickly—it’s on fire!” They ran in as instructed while Finn rushed the women to the carriage, catching Allyr and Coxe to give them the Captain’s orders in brief. Finn opened the gates for Detler and Leneghan to drive the carriage out, then Finn, Allyr and Coxe rode out with the two spare horses.

Kraken balked at leaving without his human, but Allyr hissed at him, “He’s going to meet us at the back way!” So Kraken settled down to cooperate. Remembering a trick that had been done to them at the Lands, Allyr closed and locked the gates behind them, then carried away the keys to toss into the nearest sewer.

While the nobles’ district of Crescent Hollow descended into chaos because of the fire alarm at Plumtree, the Lands’ carriage pulled up to the Elegance for Coxe and Allyr to strip it and their horses of the Abbey livery. Then they waited while Finn ran in to collect Serrano, Shane, and Voge with all the luggage. The white horses that had originally pulled the carriage were quickly saddled, then the entire party vacated the inn with two riderless horses in tow.

Shortly, they were clopping down a dark, winding street. After they had passed the last dingy shop, the street led into a dirt road. In the darkness, the carriage horses stumbled off the road, so Shane dismounted to lead them back aright. Kraken broke away from following the carriage to take the lead on the otherwise invisible path. Shane walked beside him.

Jointly, they led the group reliably through a broken-down sheep gate onto a rough road that ran alongside the edge of a hickory wood. Just outside the unauthorized entrance to Crescent Hollow, Serrano and Shane on their horses, with Kraken and Trud, stayed behind to wait in the shadows for two Landers on foot. The rest of the party progressed down the dirt road until it met up with the paved eastbound road. From there, they traveled faster.

When Efran had Plumptree's dining hall sufficiently ablaze so that the guards couldn't even reach them, he and Tourse ran gasping into the servants' corridor giving entrance into the now-deserted kitchen. There, Tourse plucked a lantern off the wall to lead the Captain to a walk-in pantry. Upon shutting themselves inside it, Tourse whispered, "We need to empty the shelves on this back wall." They two then rapidly relocated thirty or more containers from the shelves onto the floor while smoke seeped in under the door.

Tourse then had to spend a few anxious minutes prying out a small shim from the edge of the shelves. Efran covered his face with his sleeve as he held up the lantern for Tourse to work. Finally, the shim dropped free, and Tourse pushed on the empty shelves to reveal a walled tunnel, obviously original to the house.

After entering it and closing the shelf wall, Tourse said, "Hold the lantern down here, Captain." With the light, Tourse bent to slide a bolt on the edge of the door into a steel barrel in the ground. "So that they won't come after us too righteously," Tourse murmured. Efran raised his face in a silent laugh, suppressing a cough.

By lantern light, they followed this tunnel past several exits conveniently marked in faded white paint, "Hill St," "Grocers Dist," "East View," and so on until coming to one at the very end which merely gave it to be, "Sheep Gate." Sure enough, that exit led into a dilapidated hut, the door of which opened onto a rough road that ran along the edge of a hickory wood. At this point, Tourse extinguished the lantern, leaving it at the side of the road.

As they waited for their eyes to adjust to the darkness, they both looked back at the ominous clouds of smoke and red-yellow glow that rose over Crescent Hollow.

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Chapter 6

After pausing to observe the results of their diversion, Efran and Tourse began trotting down the rough road along the hickory wood. Efran asked, "How did you know about the tunnel?"

"When we were here for the Faire, while the nobility were mingling after hours, Rigdon and I went exploring, first just for something to eat. The villain saw the shim in the pantry, which had lain undisturbed for who knows how long. We opened it up, went down to look around, then put all to rights in the pantry when we got back a few hours later. Melchior and Martyn were pretty unhappy with us until we told them about it, then we all kissed and made up. But then we had to load up for the return ride immediately after. No sleep for the nosy," Tourse narrated.

"Served you right," Efran laughed.

The paved road ahead of them was fairly well illumined in the moonlight. But as they passed an intensely dark copse, a large black figure shot out after them. Tourse wheeled, anticipating a fight, while Efran had to grab the bridle looming over him to keep from being knocked down. "Are you all right, Captain?" one man asked as another rode up.

"Yes, Shane. Let's go," Efran said, hauling himself up into Kraken's saddle.

And shortly thereafter, Efran, Tourse, Serrano and Shane were riding in pursuit of a carriage.

They caught up with it less than an hour later. But as it was deep in the night, the women were asleep, and all were exhausted, so they pulled into the woods to rest.

Kraken woke everyone before sunrise the next morning, which was good. Although the men were stumbling around half dead and blind, they couldn't afford to let the Hollowans catch them outside the Abbey walls. So they ate and relieved themselves before harnessing a different pair of horses to the carriage.

Before they got moving on the brink of daybreak, Minka woke to fall out of the carriage, crying; when she found Efran, she jumped on him, crying. Satisfied, she staggered back to the carriage to spreadeagle on one of the seats. Then she had to get out again to stretch her legs in the woods and eat whatever was left in her pack.

Following that, she climbed back into the carriage to take off the embroidered dress and headband and dig out her pants outfit to put on. As Rondi awoke, Minka helped her shed her heavy gown to put on one of Minka's work dresses. It fit her tolerably well, but she was too shy—or scared—to stretch her legs in the woods by herself, so Minka went with her.

By the time they returned to the carriage, the men were ready to leave. While Voge lay down on the seat to go back to sleep, Rondi and Minka sat on the opposite seat to quietly talk. Minka asked her about her parents, and her relationship with her uncle, and what she thought about being made Regent.

Rondi had little recollection of her parents, as they had died when she was about five years old. And she didn't want to talk about her uncle at all.

Regarding the last point—being made Regent—Rondi said, “I couldn't make sense of it.” She looked out the screened window, unconsciously playing with the wide linen skirt as she talked. “I didn't understand why Windish thought it was a good idea. And, they explained nothing to me, of course—they just told me what to do. Everyone else—the, the courtiers, and the nobles, and the staff and the guards, were all just—sneering at me. I didn't know who to trust; didn't have any friends. It was the most frightening thing that's happened to me since my parents died.”

“Oh, I can imagine,” Minka said in deep sympathy. “Well, you'll love the Abbey Lands; it's our safe place. And since you're underage, you'll be completely cared for. You can pick a new family if you like, or stay in the fortress. We have eleven wards there now, not counting our adopted children. The number changes by the week, as we get new children in or adopt out some that we have.”

Rondi nodded, and there was a long period of silence, as Minka did not chatter or ask more questions. Then Rondi whispered, “I lied.”

“Pardon?” Minka turned from trying to see out of the window.

Nervously, Rondi said, “I—lied about the Council planning to kill me and blame you. I just made that up because I was desperate to get out of being Regent.”

“Oh,” Minka said. “Well. You're out of it.” Then she looked blankly at the shifting shape of the landscape fleeing past the screened carriage window. Shortly, Rondi lay down and fell asleep. Minka stayed awake.

A few hours later, in midafternoon, she heard the rooftop bells chiming a welcome. Not long afterward, the wall gates alarm bell sounded, so that Rondi and Voge both woke up. Minka waited complacently, listening to the

wall guards greet Efran: “Captain!” “Good to see you, sir.” “Welcome back, Captain.”

As they rode up Main, Rondi abruptly raised the screen to look out. And Minka saw the familiar look of wonder cross her face upon seeing the white fortress with its green canopy at the top of the hill. At that moment, Minka knew that everything would be all right.

Rondi craned her neck to look over the Lands as the carriage wound its way up the switchback. When the carriage lurched to a stop in the courtyard, Minka watched her exhausted husband open the door to assist Rondi down with a tired smile. A hand at her back, he called over one of the men: “Corwyn, this is Rondi; she’s thirteen. Take her to one of the children’s matrons—ah, Dorey, Eudoxie, or Nesse—whoever’s there. Have them get her set up.”

“Right, Captain. Come, then, Rondi,” Corwyn said, and she went right with him. But she darted a worried look back to Minka, now on the carriage steps. Minka smiled back in reassurance, so Rondi looked up happily at the genial soldier.

After leading Minka down from the carriage steps, Efran had turned at someone’s question, but she pulled on his wrinkled, sweaty jacket to bring his ear down to her lips. He hugged her, then stilled, listening. “*What?*” he expelled. She raised her brows, nodding reluctantly.

Efran looked up to the heavens, then bellowed, “Tourse!”

On his way to the stables with a weary horse, the summoned paused to look over. He surrendered his animal to Coxe, then walked back to his despondent Captain, who whispered briefly in his ear.

Tourse thought that over, then said, “I suggest we share this delightful news with your administrators right away, Captain.”

Efran exhaled in agreement, firmly taking Minka by the hand. Then while the horses, carriage, tack and luggage were efficiently routed to their proper places, Efran, Minka and Tourse climbed the stairs to the second-floor workroom.

Estes and DeWitt looked up in surprise at their entrance, then silently watched Efran fling himself into his chair while Minka and Tourse sat at his right hand (after Tourse got up again to close the door). Efran did not attempt to take her onto his lap, but sank down in the chair to regard the faerie tree branches overhead. He said, “I burned down Plumptree because a thirteen-year-old girl lied to me.”

Estes and DeWitt looked at him, his companions, and each other, then DeWitt put down his quill and said, “Start at the beginning, Efran.”

Groaning, Efran sat up to describe their arrival at Plumptree, their reception at dinner, Rondi’s description of the plot, and Efran’s subsequent actions, including their escape and abduction of the minor Regent. Then he had Minka repeat Rondi’s confession in the carriage.

There was a period of silence while everyone thought about that. Then Tourse said, “Captain, Rondi may have thought she made it up, but I believe that she unconsciously put together what she was seeing. I believe there may be some truth to it, and I’ll tell you why.”

Everyone watched while Tourse collected his thoughts, then said, “First, look at all the lapses in protocol: the Steward and high officials who never appeared, the guards who disappeared, the lack of preparation for dinner—

who serves a visiting head of state fried cheese balls? What does all this tell you, but that there was some behind-the-scenes juggling when we made good on our stated intention to come, bringing *both* Lord and Lady Sovereigns?"

DeWitt suggested, "They didn't believe you'd really come, but when you did, they saw an unexpected opportunity present itself."

Tourse opened his mouth but Efran sat upright, blurting, "They had already eaten! They were clearing the table as we came in."

"Exactly," Tourse said. "And no one joined us so that there would be no witnesses other than us Landers when their Regent drops dead."

"To prevent their people having to testify under oath, and possibly getting caught in lies," Estes noted.

"Yes." Tourse leaned forward to make his next point. "I've been over and over the question of the soup. Although all servings had come to the table hot, the smell of garlic was strong in Rondi's bowl *only*," he observed to Efran, who nodded, having smelled it himself. "Now, it's possible to survive a small dose of arsenic, even repeatedly. But feeding a strong dose to a young girl is quite likely to kill her. So her death not only prevents her testifying as to your innocence, but the outrage enables the Council to appoint a Surchatain who will then hold the Landers on charges of murder. We're all put to death, and they seize the Abbey Fortress and Lands in compensation for the crime. It's too perfect a plan to pass up."

By this time, Efran was sitting back with his arms crossed over his chest. "You're right," he said quietly. "But Rondi warned us, even though she didn't realize how much she knew. She cleared the courtyard to get herself and our people out, then you knew how to get you and me out because of your prior snooping."

"It's a gift," Tourse admitted to light laughter. "But the real kicker is the Lady Minka's observation that the servers stopped bringing in courses. The second course, the soup, should be immediately followed by the third course of fish. It never came! We were sitting around discussing garlic and poison and whose bowl smelled and what we should do about it, and not another server showed his head until the Captain raised hell about being poisoned and started throwing candelabras around."

That prompted confirming laughter while Efran nodded and shook his head at the same time. After a moment of contemplation, he murmured, "Now what do we do?"

Tourse offered, "Wait for their reaction."

Without looking at him, Efran muttered, "I need to promote you to something, dammit."

Tourse refrained from commenting and Estes acknowledged, "That would be overdue. But right now, what do they know? For instance, do they know you survived? Or that we have Rondi?"

Efran looked over to reply, "I doubt it. But we need to maintain silence to all Crescent Hollow messages and keep Rondi's presence quiet." He got up to open the door and instruct the door sentry, Clough, to make those imperatives known to all the men.

As Clough ran off, Efran looked back to ask, "Is the Commander back on duty, or . . . ?" His administrators shrugged or looked blank, so Efran sighed, "We'll catch him up later. As you were." He looked to Minka, and she rose to put an arm around him while they turned out.

He sighed, "I can't believe it. Getting out of that was a miracle. But now we have to tell the children there'll be no Faire."

She made him stop at the head of the stairs. "Efran, why can *we* have a Faire? We have so many merchants who'd sponsor booths, and we could put them all around the lake. Wouldn't that be fun?"

He stopped, blinking at her. Then he led her back to the workroom, where Tourse was still talking to DeWitt and Estes. They looked over, and Efran said, "Minka wants to have our own Faire around Cavern Lake. Can we—find someone who'll pull that together?"

Estes and DeWitt looked thoughtful, unwilling to look so eager as to get roped into organizing it themselves. But Tourse said, "Let me ask Racheal. Some of her ladies might be willing."

"Thank you, Tourse," Estes said immediately.

"That would be grand, actually," DeWitt remarked.

"A promotion," Efran groaned, turning out.

Efran and Minka went to their quarters for fresh clothes, which they took up to the vacant third-floor room. After bathing in the waterfall, they lay down in the bed for some personal relaxation. But Efran relaxed so much that he fell asleep, so Minka just cuddled him while he rested.

When he awoke about a half hour later, she made him get up and get dressed so that they could go tell the children the good news about the Abbey Lands' first Faire. He groggily complied, and their appearance on the back grounds caused a minor sensation. The children ran over for Efran to throw a few of them in the air (and catch them). Nakam ran among them, barking. Hassie demanded, "Did you leave already?"

Efran paused in vague confusion. "Yes, we left—yesterday."

"You must have had fast horses," Calix said.

Efran began, "Yes, and, since it looks like there won't be a Faire in Crescent Hollow this fall, Minka wants to have our own Faire here on the Lands."

The children jumped up and down in excitement, then they heard someone else screeching. Everyone looked over at Joshua taking one shaky step after another toward them all by himself, fists lifted shoulder-high for balance. The young soldier Javier walked beside him just for company.

"Joshua! Look at you!" Minka cried. Efran dropped to one knee, his beautiful smile encouraging the baby on, who screeched again.

He made it all the way to his father's outstretched arms. Efran stood to toss him up in the air a few times while he cackled in victory. Chorro, watching, said, "That would be a fun ride at the Faire." So the children began proposing the entertainments they wanted to see there.

Other children ran over at the talk of a Faire. In the cluster around Efran and Joshua, Noah demanded, "Will you have fire swallowers and jugglers and toffee?"

“Fire swallowers would be safe at the lake,” Elwell observed.

“Goat riding? And prizes for who stays on the longest?” Alcmund asked.

“Goat riding? I never heard of that,” Toby said pensively.

“It just sounds fun,” Alcmund said.

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Chapter 7

While Efran tried to convince the children to have their tutor make a list of what they wanted to see at the Faire, Minka looked toward Rondi standing apart, watching timidly. So Minka went over to her, smiling. “Are you getting settled in, Rondi?”

“Yes, everyone is very nice. The matron Dorey has got me a bed and a little private space when I need it. But I’m really glad for the company. Only—” Her face tensed up. “I heard your Efran shouting at another man. Did you tell him about my lies?”

Minka took her arm. “Yes. But you don’t have anything to worry about there, because they all talked about it, and decided that you weren’t lying at all—you just picked up on everything that the Council was trying to hide from you.”

Rondi looked out to the Sea in tentative hopefulness. “You think so? Why?”

Minka walked her closer to the fence, away from children clamoring over mandatory rides at the Faire. “Because our men are convinced your soup was really poisoned, and no one else’s was.”

Rondi turned her gray eyes to her. “You mean, if I hadn’t said anything, I would have died.”

“Probably, yes,” Minka said. “And we all would have been put on trial and convicted for your murder.”

“Oh.” Rondi looked faint, so Minka took her to the bench under the walnut tree, but they didn’t sit. “All because my uncle. . . .” Rondi trailed off.

“Rondi, you said something about your uncle agreeing to the Council’s plan. Can you remember what he said?” Minka asked.

“I . . . I’m trying, but it was just a quick comment,” she said, focusing on the distance.

“I think I know what might help you remember,” Minka murmured. Guiding her toward the back door, she paused near Efran in the middle of the children. “Rondi and I are going up to the workroom.” He glanced over, nodding.

While Rondi looked all around at everything, Minka took her upstairs, stopping at the open door of the workroom. Goyne was making his report on kitchen expenditures to DeWitt at that time. Seeing Minka with a

new girl, Goyne quickly rose to bow to them. DeWitt nodded and Estes said, knowing, “Hello, Minka. Who is your friend?” The new girl was staring at the faerie tree growing up through the center of the table to the ceiling.

“Estes, this is Rondi, the Regent from Crescent Hollow. Rondi, this is the Steward Estes, and Administrator DeWitt, and the Kitchen Administrator Goyne,” Minka said, pointing them out.

Jerking her attention from the tree, Rondi blurted, “Oh! They all look so friendly.” The men smiled, and Goyne blushed.

“They’re good men,” Minka told her firmly. “Anyway, Estes, I thought it would help for Rondi to see the letter from her uncle Windish to the Grand Councilor.”

“Ahh,” Estes said, turning to the shelves behind him. DeWitt nodded briefly before returning to Goyne’s report. Estes withdrew a folder from the shelves from which he removed the purloined letter to hand to Minka.

“Thank you,” she said, then pulled out a chair for Rondi at the table. “Sit.” She did, and Minka placed the open letter on the table in front of her. The men silently watched her read while Minka slipped into the chair beside her.

After reading it, Rondi slowly put the letter down and looked off with glassy eyes. “No one tested me or even talked to me,” she whispered. “It didn’t matter how I performed. They just stuck me in a dress and put a crown on my head and shoved me from one appearance to another. I never ‘enacted’ any statutes or signed anything. It was all for show.”

In the silence of the workroom, she looked down at the letter again. “Now I remember what my uncle said—he was talking to the Grand Councilor after I had read an announcement in assembly that they had written up for me, about taxes. They had me tell all the people that I was raising their taxes. As I was leaving, my uncle said something about ‘a perfect scapegoat’—when neither of them realized that I heard. What’s a scapegoat?” Rondi asked, looking around at the men.

“A sacrifice,” Estes said gently.

She absorbed that, then looked at Minka. “They were planning to kill me from the beginning.”

Minka acknowledged, “Perhaps. But you’re out of their reach now. This is our safe place. It is your safe place, too.”

Rondi nodded, lowering her eyes, and they heard the dinner bell ringing below. Minka stood, taking Rondi’s arm to lift her. “Come. Dinner is always fun.” Rondi stood with her, and Minka looked back to Estes to say, “Thank you.”

He said, “It’ll be all right, Rondi. Things always work out for the good here.”

She smiled at him tentatively, then looked again at the spreading tree, in which faeries hid to drop kisses on the unsuspecting.

In the dining hall, Minka introduced Rondi to everyone at their usual back table, then sat her between Kaas and Seagrave, across the table from Minka. The soldiers smiled at the wide-eyed girl, who could hardly think what to say. Tucked next to Efran’s right arm, Minka chatted for her.

When Wardly and Ricci brought their plates and drinks, Efran asked for a plate and ginger beer for their guest. So Rondi was brought baked chicken with parsley, garden greens and twisty rolls, with peach pie for dessert. Like any child, she ate the pie first. She looked at Minka to whisper, "That was *very good*."

Minka grinned back. "If you clean your plate, you can have another piece. But Efran makes all of us eat our greens before pie."

"Pie," Joshua demanded from Efran's leg.

"You heard Mama. You have to eat your greens first," Efran told him, sticking a small piece of chard in his mouth. Joshua considered spitting it out, but his father raised his brows, so the toddler chewed on it.

In feigned outrage, Ella told Rondi, "He even tells me what to eat!"

Rondi looked from Ella to Efran. "And you're his . . . daughter?"

"Yes, and he seems to think I need parenting," Ella pretended to fume.

Her husband Quennel added, "Which is why he handed you over to me."

That comment drew laughter from everyone within hearing range. Rondi blurted to Efran, "You're very young-looking—" to be the father of an almost seventeen-year-old.

He paused on a mouthful, not about to explain the circumstances here. While Minka and Ella watched him, he swallowed and said, "I'm aging by the minute, trying to raise these two."

Upon the objections of Efran's wife and daughter, Quennel acknowledged, "Takes more than one man for Ella alone."

Rondi looked around in mild astonishment at the reactions all down the table, especially as Ella turned to mockingly beat on her husband. "You're just proving my point," he noted, taking her in one arm to kiss her. Efran glanced at them, noting that the more Ella came out of her shell, the more she tended to act like Minka.

Speaking of whom, there was abrupt movement in Minka's vicinity as an elegant figure in gray evening wear prodded the soldier on her right, "Sorry, my good man, you have to make room here because Efran thinks I know how to kill." Justinian plopped his tall hat and silver-knobbed walking stick onto the table while draping one leg over the bench to claim his spot. Snorting, Stephanos scooted down for him, which meant that someone on the end of the row got shoved off the bench.

Minka said, "Justinian, you make us all look like peasants. Have you met Rondi, former Regent of Crescent Hollow?" She nodded toward the girl across from her. "Rondi, this is Lord Justinian."

Justinian glanced at her. "How do you do? Are you married?"

She startled, then bent to laugh with bright eyes and pink cheeks. Efran leaned around a grinning Minka to tell him, "She's thirteen."

"Oh really," Justinian said skeptically, glancing at her again. "I want to see a birth certificate." Rondi looked away, laughing, which did present a pretty profile. Raising his chin to Wardly, Justinian said, "A plate and a mild ale over here, if you would."

“Yes, sir!” Wardly ran off, remembering how he tipped.

“Justinian, what happened?” Minka asked, napkin at her mouth. “Rondi is lovely, but your calendar is usually full up.”

He sighed the sigh of the oppressed. “There is nothing worse for a single gent than sharing a house with a madly in love married couple.” He paused to sneer mildly at Efran and Minka, then grudgingly noted, “At least you two aren’t constantly making lovey-dovey eyes at each other.”

Minka and Efran reflexively turned to each other, she with her look of adoration and he with obsession. Justinian groaned at the heavens, but Wardly interrupted with Justinian’s plate and ale, which he placed before the customer: “Ere yer go, Sir.”

“Thank you, young man.” Justinian reached into his pocket to place a royal in Wardly’s hand.

Crowing, Wardly brandished it at his younger sister, who was running up with a plate and ale for the lord as well. Discouraged at seeing the big tipper already served, Ricci nonetheless set dinner in front of Stephanos, who had finished eating. He looked over in mild surprise at the hopeful young face at his shoulder. Accepting the second serving, he nodded at Justinian next to him: “That’s him what hands out the tips.”

So Ricci pivoted to grin expectantly at the finely dressed lord. With an air of resignation, he muttered, “Why not I?” as he handed her a royal likewise. When she beamed on him, he asked, “Are you busy tonight?”

Efran rose up on Minka’s other side like the proverbial dragon, but she rammed an elbow into Justinian’s ribs, crying, “He’s joking with you, Ricci!” Swiveling to Efran, she repeated, “Joking!” He uttered a low growl in reply, but Ricci skipped away happily.

While diners up and down the table watched with tightly restrained smiles, Rondi breathed, “That’s the funniest thing I’ve seen since last year’s Faire when the puppeteer accidentally hit the fire-swallower who accidentally singed the back of a lady’s dress without her knowing so that men were following her around the rest of the day, and she took all their calling cards.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, then Minka turned bright-eyed to Efran with, “And to think we’re going to have our very own Faire and who knows what may happen?” As he lowered his head in dread of the hypothetical, the two rows of benches attached to that table were rocking for the laughter. Joshua patted his father’s head in consolation. Fortunately, everyone made it to their proper place for that night, at least.

However, in the late afternoon of the following day (August 25th), a contingent from Crescent Hollow arrived at the wall gates of the Abbey Lands. They were not joking.

Efran rode Kraken down the new switchback to arrive at the chapel house unseen by anyone at the wall gates. Commander Wendt came as far as the front door to confer with him and Gabriel as to what should be said to the Hollowans, and by whom. This discussion took all of five minutes, so that Efran could take a roundabout way to Barracks A and remain unseen. Wendt got dressed and followed on foot.

Gabriel leisurely rode up Main toward the wall gates, already manned by a line of soldiers with longswords, headed by Gate Commander Barr. Also, an elite archery unit led by Quennel rode down the main switchback on their way to support the Second Gabriel.

There were four uniformed Hollowans waiting impassively at the locked gates, with normal incoming traffic held up behind them. Abbey soldiers rode out from the northeastern gates to direct this traffic east down the coastal highway to the new northbound road of the Lands. The Hollowans watched this accommodation, but did not attempt to make use of it themselves.

They turned as Gabriel rode up to the main gates with Barr mounted beside him and the archers and swordsmen behind them both. Gabriel announced, "I am Commander Wendt's Second in Command Gabriel; this is the Gate Commander Barr. State your purpose."

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Chapter 8

Three of the Hollowans looked to the fourth, who was apparently their leader. Surveying the configuration of the Landers before him, he said, "I am Commander Krotzer of the Crescent Hollow Army. We demand to know if you have our Regent Rondinelli in your possession, and an explanation for the fire that gutted much of her estate."

Gabriel replied, "Commander Krotzer, under Continental Law, we are required to give no information whatever to an adversary who attacks our Lord Sovereign during a visit of goodwill, which invitation was issued by your Regent. As evidence of the nature of our Lord Sovereign's visit, he brought no arms but a token bodyguard for the Lady Sovereign, and the gift of a solid-gold ewer almost two feet tall."

Krotzer glanced at his companions, one who nudged his horse forward to whisper to him. Then Krotzer asked, "How was your Lord Sovereign attacked?"

Gabriel paused to contain his (apparent) momentary rage, then uttered, "In the most cowardly and despicable action of administering arsenic in the soup you served him. Whether it was by order of your Grand Councilor Zollicoffer or another, we hold your entire leadership responsible for his—" Here he deliberately broke off.

With hardly a pause at this accusation, Krotzer demanded, "Then where is Regent Rondinelli?"

"Even if I knew, I would not tell you, sir," Gabriel said.

So Krotzer asked, "How is your Lord Sovereign, then?"

Gabriel spat, "We'll entertain no more questions. You will withdraw from our gates immediately or I'll order the archers to fire." He and Barr then turned their horses away from the gates, where Quennel's archers nocked, drew and anchored. The Commander's eyes swept them only for a moment before the four of them turned to ride north again.

Gabriel and Barr exchanged glances, then the Second dismissed the archers and swordsmen. Both officers gave up their horses at Barracks A and went back to the conference room, where Captain Efran, Commander Wendt, Captain Towner, Captain Stites, and Towner's scribe Viglian waited.

As Gabriel and Barr joined them at the long table and a sentry closed the door, Gabriel asked, "Did you hear,

Commander?" He glanced at the others at table to include them in the question.

Wendt, at the head of the table, leaned back. "Yes, Gabriel, and a very good performance. Mentioning the arsenic was a nice jab—that'll set them back on their heels."

Efran, arms crossed over his chest, said, "But they know she must be here."

Stites added, "They'll send spies to look for her. We can't hope to keep them out; we let almost anyone in to look around. They could get someone on the hilltop and even in the fortress."

"Yes," Wendt agreed. One arm across his chest, finger on his lips, his eyes scanned the ceiling while the other men watched silently. "She's thirteen," he murmured. Efran nodded. With a slight smile, Wendt said, "Efran, find a mature young man to be her unofficial guardian. He's to wear good street clothes—not a uniform. He's to accompany her wherever she wants to go on the Lands, and he's to watch for anyone who takes an unusual interest in her, especially anyone she recognizes."

"Ah," Efran said in illumination.

"She's to be bait, Commander?" Barr asked uneasily.

Efran smiled. "Minka calls it 'bait that bites back.'" The others appreciated the subtlety.

When Wendt dismissed them, Efran rode Kraken back up to the fortress, where he summoned Captain Chee, Minka, and 18-year-old Mathurin, a Polonti in Chee's regiment, to the second-floor workroom. Here, Efran explained the Commander's plan to them, and how Mathurin was to play his part. Then Efran sent him to The Lands Clothing Shop for a wardrobe of good middle-class clothing.

At that time, Minka reminded Efran that Rondi needed clothes as well, so he gave her carte blanche to get Rondi whatever Minka thought appropriate. Following, she took Rondi first to the all-purpose clothing stash on the third floor, where she found a number of pieces Rondi liked, even pants. From there, Minka (and a bodyguard of four) took her down to Flodie's Oddities and Articles of Worth, where both girls discovered some wonderful new old clothes.

As further protection, Efran went to Ryal to ask how to formalize Rondi's standing in the Lands. Ryal discouraged him from adopting her until they ascertained her legal relationship to her uncle. But Ryal would permit him to ennoble her as Lady Officer of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. So Efran did this without fanfare, simply informing everyone that she was now titled.

After Law class the following morning, August 26th—which Rondi attended with Minka, Ella, Soames, the Librarian, and any number of soldiers—Efran sent a sentry to ask Minka and Rondi to come up to the workroom. Upon arriving, both looked immediately at the smiling young Polonti who stood to bow to them. He wore a nice casual set of shirt, pants and vest, and his hair was neatly trimmed.

With DeWitt, Estes and Koschat indifferently listening, Efran began, "Rondi, this is a friend of mine—and Minka's," he added at her look. "His name is Mathurin. He knows the Lands well, so we thought he would be good company for you to just explore. You're older than most of the other children here, and we want you to get to know the place you live, and all we have to offer. So Mathurin will be your guide for as long as you like. He'll be given an allowance for every day's meals and entertainment. All I require is that you attend Law class before heading out. How does that sound?"

“I’d love to do that,” Rondi said tentatively. “Can Minka come?”

Efran hesitated, but Minka said, “I may every now and then, but honestly, Rondi, you’ll have more fun when I’m not there to chatter at you all the time. Then you can come back and tell me what you did. That’s one of the best things about doing something new, isn’t it?—to have someone to tell all about it.”

“That’s true,” Rondi said, smiling shyly.

“Shall we head out, then?” Mathurin asked, offering his arm.

She ducked her head, blushing. “All right.” She took his arm, and Mathurin barely refrained from saluting Efran before they left.

With their departure, those in the workroom were silent until DeWitt noted, “Wendt’s a cunning man.” Efran nodded, smiling.

Around that time, four exhausted emissaries arrived at Grand Councilor Zollicoffer’s estate Chaudoin in Crescent Hollow. They were fed a light meal in Zollicoffer’s receiving room, then he entered to hear their report. They stood and bowed; he nodded for them to sit as he eased himself into his favorite chair. “Well?”

“Yes, Grand Councilor,” Krotzer began. “Their Second in Command and another Commander met us with archers and swordsmen at the gates. First off, they accused us of feeding their Lord Sovereign poisoned soup—specifically, arsenic.”

Zollicoffer’s face tightened. “Really. How is he?”

“They wouldn’t say. He could be dead, and they specifically mentioned you as the responsible party, if you’ll excuse me, Grand Councilor,” Krotzer said. Zollicoffer waved away the offense, so Krotzer added, “He also mentioned this solid-gold ewer that they supposedly brought as a gift to the Regent.”

“That’s a nice embellishment,” Zollicoffer snorted. The ewer was now resting in a hidden closet of his library. “But what of her?”

“They admitted nothing, and sent us right away,” Krotzer said.

“Of course,” the Councilor murmured. “She’s there. No bodies were found in Plumtree, and we got numerous reports of their carriage and horses riding away, though two were unmounted.”

He thought about this for a while, but the Commander had nothing more to report, so Zollicoffer dismissed them. When they had bowed and departed, he instructed his Steward, “Summon Windish.”

“Yes, Grand Councilor.” The Steward bowed before departing.

In minutes, a very nervous nobleman was brought in to face the great man. “Your servant Windish at your beckon, Grand Councilor.” He bowed, sweating.

“Yes, Windish, have a seat.” Zollicoffer swept a hand to the chair opposite him, and Windish dropped into it as though carrying weights in his pockets. “Our representatives to the Abbey Lands have just returned to report that

they accuse us of poisoning their Lord Sovereign with arsenic,” the Grand Councilor said wryly.

Windish goggled at him. “Then—those stupid servants put the bowl in front of the wrong person!”

“Apparently so,” Zollicoffer sighed. “But they all got away, and Rondinelli with them.”

“She’s there? At the Abbey Lands?” Windish asked quickly.

“Indubitably. And we must pry her out,” Zollicoffer said. “We can do nothing more than appoint an interim Surchatain until we can produce her body. Were we to declare her dead without it, they will bring her out as the rightful ruler, who will then accuse us of her attempted murder, and the murder of their Lord Sovereign by mistake.”

On the verge of fainting, Windish sank back into the overstuffed chair. “Mind your sweat,” the great one uttered, so the nobleman quickly lifted his head to pat it all over with his handkerchief. In that same sardonic tone, the Counselor said, “Nonetheless, be of good cheer, Windish; all is not lost. Who are her friends?”

“What?” the nobleman gasped, still mopping his head. “Friends?”

“Yes, Windish. Tell me who Rondinelli’s friends are,” Zollicoffer said with strained patience.

“Friends. She had no friends; she was so awkward and stupid,” Windish said despondently.

The Councilor closed his eyes briefly in vexation. “Who did she admire, then? Who did she wish she could be friends with?”

“Oh, well.” Windish blinked rapidly to signal that he was thinking. “That would be Lady Barrueta’s daughter Colletta. She’s a beautiful young woman, just turned sixteen. She has suitors from around the Continent that Lady Barrueta is ranking according to net worth. Her husband, Lord Popoff, unfortunately died of the fever about a year ago, you remember.”

“Ah, yes. Very well, Windish, you may go,” Zollicoffer said.

Windish stood to bow in great relief. “Yes, Grand Councilor. Thank you very much, kind sir.”

“Goodbye,” Zollicoffer said.

After Windish had staggered out, Zollicoffer rang the bell for his Steward again. He entered almost immediately to bow. “Yes, Grand Councilor?”

“Sampey, summon Lady Barrueta and her daughter,” the great man instructed.

“Right away, Grand Councilor.”

At the Abbey Lands, Mathurin and Rondi had just set out on horseback, just those two, with a picnic blanket and a basket attached to his saddle. They were trotting down the new switchback which led directly to the new northbound road. Cavern Lake was only a few hundred feet to the east of the road, as the lake had expanded a great deal since its genesis 17 months ago, when Captain Efran had broken through a crack in the ground climbing out of a cavern.

Rondi, not a proficient rider, glanced at Mathurin next to her. He rode as though he were an airy extension of the horse itself. “Now I know what Minka meant,” she muttered.

“Pardon?” he said, drawing a little closer as they emerged from the switchback.

“Minka said her burning desire was to get as good on a horse as Efran is. All you Polonti ride well, don’t you?” she said accusingly.

He smirked. “I can’t speak for anyone other than myself, but, yes. Yes, we do.” She laughed, and he smiled at her. She ducked her head self-consciously.

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Chapter 9

Rondi and Mathurin rode around the lake looking for the perfect place to settle down for their picnic. They avoided the pier, crowded with fishermen, then she asked, “How about under one of those beautiful trees?”

“Oh ho, they’d love that,” he said.

“What? ‘They’ who?” she asked.

“The faeries in those trees. They’ll pluck at your hair and your sleeves, then steal your food when you’re not looking,” he said, casting dark glances at the trees with their laughing branches.

“Well, I’m not sure how much I believe you, but right here by the water looks like a good place,” she said, so Mathurin immediately stopped and dismounted to begin unstrapping their picnic paraphernalia.

As he spread the blanket on the grass, she asked hesitantly, “Don’t we need bodyguards?” She was dubiously scanning the area.

Shocked and offended, he stopped in the very act of pulling a corner of the blanket straight. “You want to give me a chance before you call for backup? I’m a fairly good fighter.”

She cried, “Oh! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to—” At his smug look, she cried, “Oh, a joker! Minka says she can’t trust the first thing out of your mouth.”

“Me? Mine?” he asked in surprise.

“No, you Polo—” She stopped dead.

He eyed her steadily. “Polonti,” he filled in for her. Her face was slack in apprehension. He smiled deviously: “She’s right.”

She fell forward on the blanket, crying, “Stop that! My stomach hurts from laughing already!”

“Good. I want you to remember our time together,” he said, sitting beside her to open the basket.

In the courtyard of the fortress high above them, Efran stopped beside the gate sentry, Gaul. Peering down at them, Efran asked, “How are they doing?”

“She hasn’t stopped laughing, that I’ve seen,” Gaul replied.

“Good.” Efran smiled, patting his shoulder.

When Rondi and Mathurin were done eating, they packed up the remains of their picnic and remounted to walk their horses around for the tour. When she gaped at the oyster house, he promised to take her there for the next concert.

They turned down Main Street for him to point out all the shops. But then they stopped for the ladies to pass in their dresses, which were increasingly risqué. “Oh, no,” Rondi breathed. “They look like the lady at the Faire who didn’t know what all she was showing.”

Having heard that story, Mathurin laughed so hard that he actually fell out of the saddle. The horse looked down at him in surprise, but Rondi screamed lightly and hopped off her horse to check on him. “Oh, are you hurt?” she cried, pulling up on his shoulders. She draped his arm over her shoulders to help him stand.

At that point, Ryal came out of his shop with a worried look. “Are you injured, son?”

With Rondi looking anxiously at Mathurin’s lagging leg, he raised his face to say weakly, “I’ll be all right, thank you, Lord Ryal”—with a broad wink.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Ryal said, rolling his eyes as he reentered the shop.

But Rondi demanded, “Are you sure? Can you walk?”

“Possibly,” Mathurin said.

At his tight voice, her eyes shot up to see him grinning again. “You!”

She started beating on him, but he said, “No! Like this!” He jumped onto a board covering a sidewalk gap and began to stomp and clap: *bam bam CLAP! bam bam CLAP! bam bam CLAP! bam bam CLAP!* She watched in wide-eyed bafflement as he sounded the war drums.

Polonti all down the street dropped what they were doing to follow him: *bom bom WHOP! bum bum CLANG! dum dum BOP!* Stomping, clapping, pounding, banging—they used whatever they had in their hands, near their feet, or just shouting to sound the drums. Rondi was circling in wonder at this performance.

But when the wall gate guards joined in with the alarm bell, the courtyard guards began clanging a genuine alarm. “Oh, no. No! No!” Mathurin called up to the courtyard gate guards, waving his arms. And the war drums went dead.

By the time Efran ran out to the courtyard a moment later, Main had resumed the normal rhythm of a workday. He peered down the street clear to the wall gates, noting nothing unusual—except Mathurin hopping off the sidewalk board to Rondi’s clasped hands. Seeing the Captain fix on him, Mathurin raised his hands in innocence. Efran turned away, muttering, “Well, it’s for a good cause.”

Meanwhile, Rondi was gazing at Mathurin. “What was *that*?” she breathed.

“Polonti war drums, useful on many occasions,” he said, then aborted a salute as Commander Wendt came up with his wife.

Eyeing him, Wendt said, “Good show. You’d do well on the drum line.”

“Thank you, sir,” Mathurin said crisply. “Commander Wendt, Lady Marguerite, please meet Rondi, lately Regent of Crescent Hollow. But—I don’t guess you are anymore. Are you?”

“I hope not,” Rondi said, then added breathlessly, “I’m very pleased to meet you, Commander. Lady Marguerite.”

“Hello, dear. You’ll be dining with us soon,” the new, made-over Marguerite said, patting her hand.

“That would be lovely, thank you,” Rondi gasped.

“Good. Carry on,” Wendt said. Then he and his wife continued down the street.

Watching them go, Rondi said, “This place is amazing.” She was weaving slightly.

“Yes, it is. You look like you need to sit. There’s Firmin’s. They have pie. We didn’t have pie in our picnic basket, did we? Come sit down and have pie,” Mathurin suggested.

“Yes. I will have pie,” Rondi said, so they led their horses to Firmin’s to sit and have pie.

When the dinner bell rang a while later, Mathurin delivered Rondi to the back bench in the dining hall with a bow. “See you tomorrow after Law class,” he said.

She looked a little distressed. “If we do this every day, you’ll get tired of me.”

“What, are you kidding?” he laughed. “You should see my normal day. Lady Minka.” He bowed to her as she came to the table. She nodded, smiling, and he walked off.

Efran brought Joshua to the table, which filled up immediately upon his arrival. Minka pulled Rondi down to the bench on her right. “You’re so quiet! Did you have a good time?” Minka asked, gently probing. She wanted everyone to have a good time.

Rondi blinked. “This has been the most amazing day of my life.”

Minka winked back at Efran, who was nodding in satisfaction. Patting Rondi’s arm, she said, “You’ll have many more here.”

Over the next several days, Rondi continued to go to Law class before her outings with Mathurin. Early on, she looked intently at the partition in the corner of the library, lit by a lantern. “Someone’s behind that,” she whispered to Minka.

“Yes, our Fortress Historian. She’s writing up our stories,” Minka whispered back.

“Can I look?” Rondi asked, craning her neck.

“Let’s wait till she comes out. The Librarian doesn’t want anyone to disturb her,” Minka said firmly, and the Librarian pursed his lips in confirmation. “How far along is she now, dear Librarian?” Minka asked.

“She is currently on Chapter Eight, writing up the events surrounding the first visit of the Destroyer, Lady Minka,” he replied.

“What was the Destroyer?” Rondi asked, wide-eyed.

Minka looked back to the Librarian. “May we read it, perhaps?”

“I will see,” the Librarian promised, whereupon Soames cleared his throat in a signal that he wished to begin class.

Many people were surprised by how focused Rondi was in Law class, asking questions and commenting on what she heard. Doing so, she became Soames’ favorite student, so that even outside of class, soldiers who had been there would stop to ask her one or two questions about what they had discussed.

In one session, Rondi asked, “This is based on the Law of Roman. Does Crescent Hollow follow that Law?”

Soames replied, “No, Lady Rondi, Crescent Hollow follows the Book of Notary Rules, sometimes referred to as Continental Law. It is similar in many areas, but not identical to Roman’s Law, which focuses more on the rights and responsibilities of individuals. The Notary Rules deals mostly with heads—of families, of entities, of states. Heads are given much greater weight under Continental Law.”

“I see,” she said. “Thank you.” And she thought, *That means that in Crescent Hollow, I would be subject to my uncle even when I reach my majority.*

At the end of class every day, she would literally run to the courtyard to wait for Mathurin, biting her nails in fear that he would not show up. But he always did.

During this time, the wall gate guards were enforcing the criteria for entrance to the Lands handed down by the Commander. Specifically, all men without a family, an obvious trade, a clear purpose for desiring entrance, or proof of employment in the Lands were turned away. And they were turned away from all gates. At the mill gate, only the miller’s customers were allowed in. At the northeast gates, the east gates, and the Chapel Road gates, all visitors except messengers (identified by their green sashes) were required to produce a specific reason for entry. And no one obviously from Crescent Hollow was permitted in—until an exception was made on August 29th.

On that day, Abbey scouts reported the approach of a bright green carriage, obviously from Crescent Hollow, in which two women were riding. Efran, Wendt, Estes and DeWitt quickly conferred over a plan that was set in motion before the carriage even arrived.

Also by that day—the fourth day of Mathurin’s guardianship of Rondi—he and she were riding all over the Lands, from the roaring Passage on the west to the farthest fields and livestock pens on the east. Rondi wanted to see it all, and she asked questions about everything she saw.

“Who owns all these cattle?” she asked.

“Well, different people. The Minogue family owns those penned over here; someone else owns the sheep and goats, I think, and the Fortress owns these in the pens with Abbey pennants. Hereward’s in charge of those. There he is. Wave to Hereward,” Mathurin said.

Rondi waved, and Hereward waved back. Then she asked, “What do you mean by the Fortress owning the cattle? How can a building own something?”

“Oh. Well, in one way the fortress is a building, as when I say, ‘the dining hall in the fortress.’ But in another, more important way, the Fortress is a—a ruling body, that sets the rules, and leases houses or plots based on Roman’s Law. Captain Efran is Lord Sovereign, which is like the King, but don’t say that because it really irritates him. It just means that he is the protector of the Lands, and, the one who makes the final decisions. His Steward Estes and Administrator DeWitt handle all the practical matters. They supposedly answer to him, but the Captain will do what they want because they know the details better than he does,” Mathurin explained.

At her silence, he looked over in concern. “Did I explain it all right?”

“Perfectly,” she said. “I understand exactly.”

“Oh. Good.”

“But—how do you know all that?” she wondered.

“Oh, it’s just—plain when you see it working day after day,” he struggled to explain.

“I guess so,” she said thoughtfully. Then she asked, “Don’t Polonti have their own language?”

“Yes,” he said. “I don’t know it well enough to speak it. An old couple in Westford took me off the streets when I was just toddling from one trash can to another. They took me in, fed me and read to me constantly.”

“Oh,” she breathed.

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Chapter 10

Disconcerted by Rondi’s hazy eyes at his answers to her questions, Mathurin asked, “Are you ready for pie at Firmin’s?”

“Yes,” she grinned. So they headed back to the populated Lands.

At this time, a luxurious Crescent Hollow carriage was approaching the Lands. Colletta, almost catatonic for boredom, groaned, “Tell me again what I have to do in this awful place.”

Her mother, Lady Barrueta, patted her hand. “It’s very simple. We have to find Rondinelli. You remember her?”

“No, I have no idea who she is,” Colletta murmured, eyes closed.

“I’ll help you find her. She’s the one they made Regent,” Barrueta explained.

Colletta’s beautiful eyes barely opened. “The one they’re going to kill.”

“Shh! We don’t know anything about that. We need to find her, and you need to convince her that you miss her *so much*, she *must* come back to Crescent Hollow with you,” Barrueta said firmly.

“So they can kill her,” Colletta said.

“No, now, we don’t know that. But Zollicoffer paid us an enormous amount of money just to get here, and there’ll be more when we bring her back.” Barrueta raised the carriage window screen to look out as they slowed at the gates.

“Who’re you carrying?” a gate guard called to the driver.

The driver replied, “Lady Barrueta and her daughter Lady Colletta of Crescent Hollow.”

“One moment, please,” the guard said. And the carriage sat where they were while other traffic was let in around them.

“Idiots. Morons. Heathen,” Barrueta breathed as they waited.

Then they heard the gate guard again: “Very well, drive on through. We’ve sent a man to check Firmin’s, and they’re holding a luxury suite for your passengers. Firmin’s is the third establishment on your right, here; the hostler is waiting at the curb to show you to the stableyard.” Colletta sat up, looking at her mother in astonishment.

The driver said, “Why—thank you, that’s very good of you.”

“Courtesy of the Lord and Lady Sovereigns, sir,” the guard said. And the carriage rattled through the gates.

“The Lord Sovereign,” Barrueta murmured. “Then he must have survived.”

The carriage stopped at the curb, and the footman hopped down to open the door, lower the steps, and assist the passengers out. Colletta emerged first, blinking at a lovely landscaped pond right in front of her. Her mother had to nudge her out of the way to step down.

As they turned up the sidewalk, three people standing in the outdoor seating area looked over. Barrueta grasped her daughter’s arm to whisper, “That’s her! That’s Rondinelli! With—” She peered at the young Polonti man who was regarding her humorously and the beautiful woman with light blonde hair.

Both Hollowans were speechless as the woman came over with a glittering smile. “Hello! Do you know our Rondi?”

Barrueta was mute, so Colletta said weakly, “Ah, yes, we do. Hi, Rondi! [She merely looked back, expressionless.] Oh, this is my mother Lady Barrueta of Crescent Hollow, and I’m her daughter Colletta. We missed you, Rondinetta!”

“Oh, then, you must come to dinner with us! I was just inviting dear Rondi and Mathurin. Oh! I’m so sorry—I am Lady Marguerite.”

“Lady Marguerite of Eurus!” Barrueta cried. “I knew I recognized you!” (How Barrueta recognized Marguerite after her makeover was a legitimate question which no one asked.)

Marguerite said, “Yes, except that I live in the Abbey Lands now. I am married to their Commander Wendt.” Both Hollowans stared at her. She continued, “But if you’ve just come from Crescent Hollow, you’ll need to freshen up. Go do that, and I’ll have a man at your door to escort you to my house—it’s right around the corner here. I see the doorman is ready to take you in. Don’t rush, now; we won’t start until you arrive.”

Nodding goodbye, Marguerite turned to walk Rondi and her guardian down Main. They crossed at a bright yellow crosswalk, then disappeared around the corner.

Once they were out of sight, Barrueta snapped awake. “Come! We’ll change and get down there immediately! I can’t believe it! What luck!” She grabbed her daughter’s arm and poked the doorman to make him trot before them.

As Marguerite led Rondi and Mathurin into the chapel house, the guests already standing around the table turned to bow. They were Fiacco, Finn, Suco and Ure. All were soldiers in uniform; Fiacco and Finn were Southerners, Suco and Ure Polonti. Marguerite greeted them, “Ah! Welcome gentlemen! I’m so sorry to be late to my own dinner, but while I was collecting Rondi and Mathurin, we encountered two more guests. Have we got hors d’oeuvres yet? No? HARTSHOUGH!” Those who had never heard her summon her butler startled at the volume, then smiled and relaxed a little.

The fact was, Finn was the only one who had been here at the Lands for more than a few months. Fiacco was an old-timer from the Red Regiment, but had returned to the Lands just days ago after scouting the Fastnesses for almost a year. Suco was new, still learning to read and write in the Southern Continental language. Ure was very new, having arrived at the Abbey Lands from Sasany Fields only weeks ago. He was struggling to absorb the nuances of the spoken Southern Continental language. The slender faerie trees scattered about the first-floor hall might have startled the soldiers were they not all familiar with the trees growing up and down fortress walls on the inside and out.

Hartshough appeared with a large tray of canapés. “I am still experimenting with smoked salmon toppings, so it would be most kind of all of you to give me your opinion on my efforts. Please take several each; I have more samples in the kitchen.” So saying, he approached Ure with the tray. After assessing what was required of him, Ure took one canapé. “Another, if you will be so kind,” Hartshough instructed, and refused to move from in front of the bewildered Polonti until he had three in hand.

Hartshough likewise urged canapés and cut-glass goblets of ale on the other guests. Standing with their ale and appetizers, they conversed very little, trying to figure out why they were here. All except Rondi and Mathurin had been instructed to appear by DeWitt just an hour ago. But Mathurin, consuming an excellent canapé, thought he heard something. He reflexively raised his eyes to the loft, where he saw Lady Minka and Lord Justinian leaning on the rail to watch. Minka grinned down at him.

The doorbell relay rang in the kitchen, so Hartshough glided to answer the front door. Shortly, Lady Barrueta’s strident voice was heard throughout the hall as she bustled in, looking around. Spotting her quarry, she smiled like a piranha. “There you are, dear Ronettelly!” Colletta entered behind her, also to look around, and a collective sigh went up from the men. Rondi glanced at Mathurin and lowered her eyes.

Marguerite said, “There, now! I believe we’re all here. Let me make introductions. Lady Barrueta and daughter Lady Colletta, you already know Lady Rondi, and have met Mathurin. Please meet the other gentlemen Fiacco,

Suco, Finn and Ure. I regret that my husband and the Lord and Lady Sovereigns were unable to attend tonight, so we will just entertain ourselves.” She paused as a bright flash of light cut through the deep twilight outside, startling the guests. It was immediately followed by rumbling thunder.

Marguerite noted, “It appears that our dinner will be accompanied by a thunderstorm. More candles on the table, please, Hartshough.” While he quickly obliged, the guests were again startled by the sudden patter of rain on the windows. Although the chapel house was certainly secure, something about it seemed to bring the essence of the storm indoors.

“A rainy night with friends is magical in a way, isn’t it? All of you please be seated. Your names are at your places.” Marguerite then swept to her place at the head of the table.

Rondi found her seat around the corner from Marguerite to her right. Next to Rondi were Fiacco, then Lady Barrueta, then Ure. Around the corner at Marguerite’s left were Mathurin, Finn, Colletta, and Suco. (Were the guests not so dazed by the accommodations, they might have wondered how place cards were arranged for guests invited just moments ago. All was due to the skill of the butler, of course.)

The Southerners attempted to talk to the ladies over the din of the rain, but Ure and Suco sat immobile. They were in as strange an environment as Minka had been at Sasany Fields, only without her gift of chatter. Mathurin smiled at Rondi, and she exhaled.

Hartshough placed two trays of hors d’oeuvres on the table, but no one reached for them right away. They were looking around as though listening. Lady Barrueta leaned forward to try to get a clear line of sight around Fiacco to her object. “So, dear Rondinetta! Aren’t you anxious to get back home?”

“Shhh!” Colletta hissed. “What is that? Someone is singing. Someone is outside singing!”

Rondi said dreamily, “No, it’s the rain. The rain is singing love songs.”

Suco said, “A Singer? *Mele?*” That was a Polonti gifted with song which lured women. Suco looked questioningly to Ure across the table, who nodded.

“I hear it,” Colletta breathed. “I hear the music, and feel the rhythm in my heart. Warm, and . . . beautiful.” She turned to Suco beside her. He looked alarmed at the prospect of trying to talk to her.

Finn, on Colletta’s other side, threw up his hands. He told Fiacco across from him, “That’s the Polonti singer who draws women to *Polonti*.”

“Oh.” Fiacco looked mildly depressed.

The front doors suddenly banged open for Efran, soaking wet, to slide in on the marble floor. After scanning the hall in panic, he suddenly raised his face to the loft. Seeing Minka at the railing, he ran to take the stairs three at time.

Justinian groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose, as Efran crossed the loft to sweep her up and crush her to him. “I heard the Singer,” he said shakily. Those at table glanced in bemusement at the Captain’s mad dash. But from where they were sitting, they could not see those on the loft.

Dangling in Efran’s arms, Minka whispered, “I told you before: I already heard that song in the rain, just like they’re hearing it tonight. Shhh, put me down so we can watch.”

Calming, he set her down on her feet while Justinian looked mildly disgusted. Efran grunted, “A Singer wasn’t part of the plan.”

“I think we’re getting unsolicited faerie help,” Minka said, glancing up to petite heads giggling from among the faerie tree leaves at the ceiling.

Efran put a hand to the back of his head. “The metal plate tingles whenever there’s lightning,” he grumbled.

“Shh! Just watch,” Minka whispered again. So the three of them looked over the railing to the floor below. But the infallible Hartshough was bringing up dry clothes for the Captain, who received them appreciatively. And he didn’t even have to leave the railing to change (although Justinian covered his eyes).

Below them, Colletta was gazing at Suco in adoration. “What a beautiful man,” she whispered.

“No,” he said, practically shaking in fear. “I cannot even speak well.”

“But your voice is beautiful,” she insisted.

Finn added in falsetto, “Oh, isn’t he adorable? Look at those shoulders!” Fiacco snorted over his plate.

“No, no,” Suco said. Unaware of the source of the compliment, he cast a panicked glance around the table, insisting, “You must see Aceto.”

“I don’t know him,” Colletta said dreamily. “I only see the one beside me. Marry me.”

Suco was sweating now. “No, I earn but nothing. I must be raised to rank to get but a house.” This was the greatest impediment the men saw to marriage: all women wanted a house.

“I don’t care. I want you,” Colletta insisted.

“No, no, marry *me!*” Finn cried in an abnormally high register. Fiacco almost choked on a canapé. Marguerite was watching placidly, sipping her lager in a glass. Ure, seeing who had just made the demand, peered at Finn in confusion. Polonti raised in the wild like Ure had little understanding of satire, but domesticated Polonti, such as Efran, Estes, and Mathurin, could wield it benignly or viciously, as the situation demanded. Rondi was watching Mathurin’s enjoyment in delight, especially because he appeared to be safe from Colletta’s adoration.

As the rain’s song intensified, Lady Barrueta murmured, “And who is the specimen of manhood beside me?” Her voice was deep and lusty.

Finn, Fiacco, and Mathurin looked instantly to Ure. “Congratulations,” Mathurin said, raising his goblet to Lady Barrueta’s new quarry, who was clueless. Ure regarded him, then turned his eyes to the middle-aged, highly made-up, moderately overweight and immodestly dressed matron who parted her lips at him, breathing heavily.

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Chapter 11

Ure glanced around, licking his dry lips. He was famous in Sasany Fields for killing four trolls who had attacked him when he was traveling alone. But this ambush was unprecedented in his experience.

Lady Barrueta did not waste time talking as her daughter did; she was a woman of action who had been without a husband for over a year now. So she threw her substantial self into Ure's lap, grabbing his head to kiss him violently.

Unfortunately, Walford's Ready Furniture was not constructed with the possibility in view of such extreme demands on joints. The chair splintered underneath the hapless Ure, who was then pinned on the pieces under the lady's bulk. Beneath them both was a pretty but unpadded area rug over a marble floor.

Marguerite's guests stood in horror but mostly amusement, and male voices descended from the heavenly loft in laughter. The only ones not attending to Ure's discomfort were Colletta and Suco, as she was pursuing the more subtle course of twining her arms around his neck while he contemplated how quickly this might disqualify him from a leadership position, and possibly get him kicked out of the army altogether.

While Suco attempted to unwind Colletta's arms from his head, Ure had managed to flip to a prone position on the treacherously sharp wood fragments. There, he endeavored to crawl out from under the lady, but she thwarted him by sitting up on his back. He raised his face at the sudden sharp pains, and she breathed, "You shan't slip away so easily, my darling."

"Shan't" means 'shall not'!" Suco shouted almost as a battle cry. He rose abruptly while Colletta clung stubbornly to his neck. Seeing his comrade in mortal peril, Suco shifted Colletta to his back, still clinging, then ran around the table to embrace Lady Barrueta's lower ribs and raise her, grimacing with the effort.

The moment her bulk was lifted from Ure's back, he scrambled on all fours underneath the table, then rose to his feet on the other side to run toward the front doors. Hartshough was there to open them seconds before the fleeing man disappeared in the darkness and the rain. Efran, Minka and Justinian had come partway down the stairway to watch this dénouement.

They retreated back up to the loft as Lady Barrueta stood and Suco forcibly removed Colletta's arms to put her in her own chair. While Colletta leaned on his shoulder, cooing at him, Lady Barrueta realigned her dress and sat again. With steely determination, she said, "I will have him yet. I will find him and marry him. What is his name?"

There followed a few moments of silence, then Finn said, "Bullara."

Mathurin choked on his ale. Finn turned complacent eyes to him as he coughed out, "Sounds right to me." Bullara was a huge man who was employed in the fortress for his ability to move anything. He was part Polonti, not exceptionally bright, but willing to do almost any task required of him. Only, he was afraid of chickens.

"Bullara is mine," Lady Barrueta uttered.

Fiacco raised his glass and said, "To your happiness, Lady Barrueta."

The whole table drank this toast to her as a phantom voice from above said, "Hear, hear!" It sounded like Efran. But on the loft, Minka had to restrain Efran from throwing Justinian over the railing, who was impersonating

him again. (The faerie trees would have stopped Justinian's fall if Minka hadn't.)

Asserting control of his situation, Suco stood. He bowed to Marguerite at the head of the table, saying, "Please excuse me, Lady Marguerite. I have duty this night."

She replied, "I understand. Thank you for coming on such short notice."

As he started toward the door, Colletta practically fell over her chair in reaching for him. "Don't go!" she cried.

He glanced back without pity. "I must."

"But what is your name?" she pleaded.

He paused only a heartbeat before replying, "Vonk." This was a Polonti soldier who was highly unpopular for his generally bad attitude, but had not yet transgressed to the point of dismissal from the army. Mathurin, Finn, and Fiacco watched in admiration as Suco walked out.

The remainder of the dinner was not only delicious, but convivial. As the door was closed behind Suco, Commander Wendt walked in. "Sorry I'm late, but I think I got most of the backlog cleared away," he said while the men at the table sprang to their feet. His eyes swept them as he returned a casual salute, then kissed Marguerite even before handing his dripping cloak to Hartshough.

Mathurin and Finn immediately moved down a seat, pushing Colletta to Suco's empty chair. Wendt nodded, taking the seat at his wife's left hand and declining her offer to sit him at the head of the table.

Meanwhile, Efran, Minka and Justinian had come down to join them. Fiacco began attempting to dislodge Barrueta from her seat, but Minka said, "Don't bother." She sat in the end chair that Efran had pulled up around the remains of Ure's chair. "Hello, Lady Barrueta! I'm Minka. Are you enjoying yourself?"

The lady squinted at her dubiously as Efran sat beside Minka. Justinian took the seat across the table from him, next to the listless Colletta. Determined to counteract the *mele* in the rain, he fully deployed the charm. "Good evening, Lady Colletta. I am Lord Justinian, famous entertainer."

When she looked at him, Minka chortled, "Oh, he's hilarious. Don't get us started, Justinian."

"No, don't," Efran muttered, then paused to watch the Commander receive his plate from Hartshough. His soup was set to the side. As Wendt began eating, Efran told him, "Ure and Suco were here, but when the *mele* hit, they barely escaped with their lives."

Wendt laughed. "So that's why you bolted out of the briefing. But why aren't you wet?"

"Hartshough, of course," Efran said, leaning back for the butler to place his plate of baked salmon before him. Efran didn't usually waste time on soup. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome, Lord Efran," Hartshough said with a bow.

Barrueta suddenly fixed on him around the invisible Minka. "You're Lord Efran."

"Yes," he said, smiling at her sidewise.

Minka leaned behind the lady to say, "Hello, Fiaccio." He started to attempt to get up to bow, but she said, "Stop that. Rondi! Are you having fun?"

"Yes!" Rondi cried behind Fiaccio, who leaned forward to eat. Rondi began covering some of the fun she and Mathurin were having. He, in turn, kept a vaguely anxious eye on the Commander, given her disclosures.

Meanwhile, Barrueta accused Efran, "You survived after all."

"Yes," he said. He lifted, turning toward her. "But more importantly, so did your Regent. The plan all along was to poison her, wasn't it?" he asked with an intimation of that captivating smile.

Echoes of the *mele*'s song must have remained in the diminishing rain, for she looked suddenly confused. The rest of the table went silent. Colletta looked at her mother while still leaning toward Justinian. He ceded ground to the interruption, soundlessly sipping his soup.

When Efran crinkled his eyes at her, Lady Barrueta's resistance crumbled. "I had nothing to do with that," she breathed, looking away.

"I'm sure you didn't," he said quietly. "But Zollicoffer is trying to finish the job, isn't he?"

She raised a hand to self-consciously tug upward on her low neckline. "He paid me two hundred royals to get Rondinelli to come back with us to Crescent Hollow. I don't know his intentions after that."

Efran looked to the Commander as though awaiting orders. Wendt chewed thoughtfully a moment, then said, "Lady Barrueta, what did the Grand Councilor tell you about the poisoned soup?"

In discomfort, she said, "He mentioned nothing about it to me personally; I only heard gossip that the servers placed it before the Abbey Lands lord instead of—her."

"The Regent Rondinelli," Wendt clarified. Rondi sat still, but unafraid. She felt that all of these Landers were her friends and her defenders. To be surrounded by this protection was such a comforting experience that her eyes watered.

"Yes," Barrueta admitted, eyes on her untouched plate.

"Why did they want to kill her?" Wendt asked gently, as father confessor.

After a short struggle, she replied, "They want to replace her with their own preference for Surchatain. Some—quirk of the Law prevented their doing that after Surchatain Sughrue was deposed. But were the Regent to be murdered, they could appoint anyone they chose with a declaration of emergency. The man of their choice has access to your Treasury, and a golden ewer to prove it."

Those who knew the provenance of the ewer darted their eyes to Wendt, who asked, "Who is that?"

"I don't know," she said honestly. Minutes passed while everyone sat thinking.

Then Justinian daubed the corners of his mouth with his napkin and said, "So, you have several options before you. One is to allow the women to stay here in sanctuary while Zollicoffer realizes his plan has gone awry and devises another one unknown to us. Or, you can send them back with false information, which may or may not satisfy Zollicoffer, but could certainly subject them to interrogation, and, again, result in the creation of a new

plan. A third option is for you to send someone back in their place who would carry a notarized letter from the lady affirming that the dashing gentleman in possession of it has saved their lives from the criminal Polonti and trolls in the Lands. Moreover, he bears proof that he has access to the Treasury rather than the fraud who claims it.”

Minka breathed, “No, Justinian, it’s too dangerous.”

He sighed, “Dearest Minka, I made sure that my letters to you from Eurus concealed the extreme measures I took to get the information required.”

Wendt glanced at Marguerite, who said, “That’s true.”

Disgruntled, Efran said, “I want to be the one to go.”

Minka gasped but Wendt said, “Absolutely not, Captain. Lady Barrueta, are you willing to send such a letter to Zollicoffer back with Lord Justinian in your carriage? If you are, we’ll provide all your needs, and that of your daughter, here.”

“Yes,” she said a little reluctantly. “But he won’t regard your notary. It’s unnecessary anyway, as he knows my handwriting.”

Efran grumpily added, “She can explain Justinian’s rôle to her driver and footman; they’ll testify if needed.”

“Yes,” she said, glancing at him.

The Commander said, “That’s what we’ll do, then. Let’s take a day to refine the plan, and send him off day after tomorrow.”

Abruptly, Efran asked Marguerite, “Did you send the rain? Or the *mele*?”

“Oh, no,” she disavowed. “Both are beyond my purview.” Efran looked skeptical, but Wendt smiled.

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Chapter 12

“So, let’s talk specifics,” Wendt said, handing his plate to Hartshough with, “Thank you. That was excellent, as usual.”

“You are too kind, Commander,” Hartshough said.

After glancing at the Hollowans, Efran asked, “Hartshough, who’s stationed at the door?” Efran was craning his neck to see around a tree.

Before Hartshough could answer, two men trotted up to the table to salute him. “Dango and Tomer, Captain. Commander,” said the first.

“Dango, escort Lady Barrueta and Colletta to their rooms at Firmin’s. We’ll talk more tomorrow,” Efran told the mother as she struggled to rise, and the men stood.

“Very well,” she said, exhausted. The rest of those at table watched Dango take charge of the women as Tomer returned to the front doors.

Mathurin stood. “The matron will be looking for Rondi.”

“Oh, yes,” Wendt said as she got up.

“Thank you for the dinner,” Rondi told Marguerite, who smiled at her. Looking around the table, she began, “Thank you—for. . . .” Stuck there, she looked about to cry, but Mathurin came over to offer his arm, so she went out with him.

“Now then,” Wendt exhaled, leaning back. “How do we work this?” Remaining at table with him were Marguerite, Finn, Justinian, Efran, Minka and Fiacco.

As they began batting around ideas, Minka leaned on Efran’s arm. He whispered, “Let’s get Tomer to take you up to the fortress.”

“No. I’m fine,” she said, sitting upright. When she started nodding a few minutes later, Efran reached over to put her in his lap. She laid her head on his neck and closed her eyes. The chair underneath them did not protest.

In another hour, Wendt felt they had the beginnings of a satisfactory plan, so dismissed them until daybreak tomorrow, when they would reassemble at Barracks A. They all departed (except Justinian and Marguerite, who lived here) and Efran carried Minka up the switchback to the fortress.

The following day, August 30th, preparations were underway for Lord Justinian’s sally into Zollicoffer’s territory. Hartshough pressed several of his suits and shirts, after which Justinian acquired a few more of a Crescent Hollow cut for purposes of espionage. Lady Barrueta told her driver and footman that they were to deliver him to Crescent Hollow on an urgent errand for her, and were to do whatever he told them. The Commander briefed her on her letter of introduction of Justinian to Zollicoffer, then returned the first draft to her for corrections.

Justinian had twenty calling cards of rich linen cardstock printed up at Tallmadge the printer’s shop. They bore “Lord Justinian” in an elaborate script on the first line, followed by the second line of, “Eurus—Westford—The Abbey Lands” in plain print.

As Justinian would require a gift to secure an audience with Zollicoffer, Estes took him up to the Treasury to look around. He selected a solid gold set of pieces which were unquestionably made during the reign of Ares of Westford, thus establishing their provenance to the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea. These small pieces—a set of two matching cups with saucers and stirring spoons—were packed in a nondescript, battered valise lined in velvet, with a hidden lock to which Justinian carried the key on a neck chain. Estes also supplied him with a copy of the markings on the underside of the ewer, to confirm that it was the piece which the Lord Sovereign had brought as a gift for the Regent.

Lastly, DeWitt supplied Justinian with 100 royals in several pouches, purses, and camouflaged carriers. Justinian would carry one of these, a money belt, on his person tomorrow, then the rest he hid in the carriage.

With these preparations in place, Justinian spent most of that night saying goodbye to several lady friends in the Lands, who were anxious that he should remember them in his moments of upcoming danger. And then with daybreak, it was time to leave.

Wearing an indifferent travel suit, Justinian met the carriage driver Moises and the footman Schwall in front of Firmin's. Justinian's suitcases were packed in the carriage, but he carried Lady Barrueta's letter of introduction on him and the valise with gold cups in hand. Fiacco and Finn would ride along as bodyguards. Dressed in good Hollowan tradesmen clothes, they would accompany his (that is, Lady Barrueta's) carriage on horseback, but remain incognito to everyone but Moises and Schwall.

Wendt and Efran were at Firmin's to see him off, and both shook his hand. Wendt said, "You're a clever man. Somehow, I think you'll pull this off."

"Thank you, Commander," Justinian said, then turned to receive Efran's hand.

"Don't you dare get yourself hurt and upset Minka," he said tightly.

"I will take care for her feelings, dear brother," Justinian promised. Then he hopped into the carriage and settled down with a salute to them. The footman took his seat; the driver tapped the horses, and the carriage rolled out of the wall gates with Finn and Fiacco following.

Once they were well on their way, Justinian stretched out on the comfortably padded seat to go to sleep. By this time, Commander Wendt was mobilizing a great many men under Efran to arm up and load provisions. They were to leave immediately for an abandoned stone complex about an hour's ride east of Crescent Hollow.

Justinian awoke when they were about a half hour from that city, which he confirmed by a glance out of the carriage window. Upon their arrival at the Elegance Inn, he pointed out his two suitcases for the doorman to carry, while he took the small valise into the inn himself, where he rented a luxury suite.

According to prior instructions, the carriage was to remain in front of the inn while he changed into good clothes, then transport him to Zollicoffer's estate Chaudoin. From there, the driver and footman were to return to Lady Barrueta's house. Finn and Fiacco would remain available to Lord Justinian, so whatever he needed after that, they'd see to. (And if he needed some of the money hidden in the carriage, they would retrieve that for him as well.)

Within a quarter hour, Justinian was reboarding the carriage. And in the late afternoon, Moises delivered him to the doorstep of Zollicoffer's Chaudoin. Stepping out of the carriage with the valise and the letter, Justinian waved to the driver. "Thank you, Moises, Schwall; you needn't wait." They saluted him and turned the carriage as Justinian nimbly trotted up the steps to the ornate double doors. The pair of guards stationed there watched in aloof curiosity.

"Good day, gentlemen," Justinian greeted them in elite boredom. He set down the valise to withdraw a sealed letter and a calling card from his vest pocket. "Grand Councilor Zollicoffer is not expecting me, but he will want to see me in private. I have a gift for him from the Treasury of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea." He extended the letter and the card to the guard on his right. Then he deliberately picked up the valise.

The guard glanced at the card, then jerked his head toward the house. The other man opened the doors into a foyer appointed with opulent furnishings. The first guard escorted the visitor in. "Have a seat, Lord Justinian, and I will notify the Grand Councilor."

“Thank you, my good man,” Justinian said, sitting with the practiced flourishes of the well-dressed. Again, the valise was placed in a protected spot at his feet, as it was not locked. The guard departed with the letter and the card.

At the moment, the Grand Councilor was sitting in the lounge with three influential friends drinking Campari. The door guard entered and bent to whisper in his ear, handing him the card and sealed letter. Expressionless, Zollicoffer looked at the card, then said. “Ah. An old friend. Excuse me, gentlemen. I’ll try to return quickly, but if you’re summoned to dinner, go on and I’ll join you directly. I cannot afford to offend my chef.” The other men laughed, but looked at the letter in pointed curiosity. He took it with him as he exited the room and shut the door behind him.

He carried the letter and the card to his study, where he told the guard, “Stand by.”

“Yes, my Lord Grand Councilor,” he said, taking his position at the doorway.

Zollicoffer eased down to his leather chair to break the seal on the letter. He opened it to see that it was dated today, August 31st, and began to read:

“To my dear Grand Councilor Zollicoffer
“From Lady Barrueta

“My dear Zolli, everything you said about the Abbey Lands has proved frighteningly true. They are unprincipled savages with an unholy appetite for gold, which they have accumulated to an astonishing degree. Nonetheless, after Colletta and I spent almost two days searching for R, we finally discovered that one of their Polonti chieftains has taken her to this place they call ‘Featheringham.’ As I understand it, this is a stone complex about an hour’s ride east of Crescent Hollow.

“But I haven’t introduced the carrier of this letter to you! Dear Zolli, please meet an old friend of mine whom I met in Euris, Lord Justinian. He is witty, versatile, and well-traveled. Because of his various talents, he has gained the trust of these Abbey savages most adroitly. If anyone can get you access to R, or the Treasury, he can. He is open to the possibility of assisting you, but requires a personal consultation.

“So! There you have the fruit of my labors, Zolli.

“Much love, Barré”

The Grand Councilor refolded the letter thoughtfully, then said over his shoulder, “Escort in Lord Justinian.”

“Yes, Lord Grand Councilor.” The man bowed and turned away.

Moments later, Justinian, with his valise, appeared in the doorway of the study to bow. “Lord Grand Councilor, thank you for seeing me.”

Zollicoffer, appraising him from his chair, waved the letter. “Lady Barrueta speaks most highly of you. Have a seat, Lord Justinian.”

“Thank you, Grand Councilor. If you permit, however, I would first like to present my gift to you from the Abbey Treasury,” Justinian said. After depositing his hat and walking stick on a corner of the desk, he placed the

small valise before Zollicoffer and opened it up, then stood back with hands folded.

Zollicoffer leaned over to look in the valise with an involuntary gasp. Picking up one cup, he examined it with the eye of an expert. "This is exquisite," he breathed, turning the cup over to regard the "9999" stamp and maker's mark. "Unquestionably genuine." He replaced the cup reverently in the velvet, then looked up at his visitor with sharp eyes. "So, what must I do to earn such a gift?" he asked with a slightly sardonic tone.

"Accomplish your original purpose, as I understand it," Justinian said. He leaned over to close the valise and surreptitiously lock it (because he did not want Zollicoffer immediately stashing it away in a hiding place). Then Justinian sat in the proffered chair. "I should explain."

"That would be helpful," Zollicoffer noted. "Allow me to assist you." Rising from his chair, he went to his built-in bar to wave at an array of stately bottles. "Have you a preference?"

"Any in that selection would do," Justinian said.

So the Grand Councilor poured him a straight shot of vermouth. Handing him the cut-glass cup, he said, "Please do continue." He himself sat with a glass of vermouth to hear Lord Justinian's explanation.

"Thank you." Taking a sip, Justinian found it as excellent as he expected. He set it down on the desk to place his fingertips together. Then he said, "My understanding is that your visitor, the Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Lands, made off with your Regent. Why, I'm still not clear on." His expression was believably baffled. "Nonetheless, she remained at the Abbey Lands for a short while, until his advisors insisted that her presence was a lightning rod for attacks. Therefore, he allowed them to relocate her to a compound that had belonged to Lady Nierling, a designer of Crescent Hollow, before her murder.

"And the Regent is still there, with a token bodyguard," Justinian said. "They are refurbishing the house, which is in good condition, to serve as her habitation with a few lady friends. Now. Were someone with even a small army to storm the compound and recover her, news of this would be sent directly to the Lands. Their Lord, who is a possessive man, would immediately send a modest force to retaliate. But by the time they arrived from the Lands, the rescuers sent from some place as close as, say, Crescent Hollow, would be long gone. Furthermore, the rescuing Hollowans could leave behind a contingent hiding in the woods along the road to ambush any approaching force that would attempt to acquire her again."

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Chapter 13

"Intriguing," Zollicoffer said, unimpressed. "I see great risk to myself here, and no indication of how it would benefit you."

"The benefit to me, my dear sir," Justinian said, eyes ranging blankly around the study, "is that while they are distracted with the raid on their sister site, their Treasury is left undefended. I believe I have demonstrated that I have the ability to access it, if I'm not impeded by too many guards. So with the diversion you provide, I can obtain as much of it as I have time to carry out."

"I'll want a cut of your haul, as well," Zollicoffer said.

“That’s reasonable. But how much I can get, and still get away safely, depends on how effective a rescue you pull off,” Justinian said.

“I accept that,” Zollicoffer said, leaning back to tap the arm of his chair. “So, I will confer with my Commander today, and you will return tomorrow morning by seven of the candle. At that time, I will tell you when the raid will take place, which will give you time to return to the Lands and get into the Treasury. When I have her, I will send you a message at the Lands saying, ‘The dove is in hand.’ That will be your cue to return here with my cut of the haul.”

“Excellent,” Justinian said, standing to replace his hat and take up his walking stick. “Tomorrow at seven, then.”

Opening the door of the study, Zollicoffer told the guard, “Lord Justinian is leaving, but will return tomorrow morning at seven.”

“Yes, Lord Grand Councilor,” the man said, bowing. “This way, Lord Justinian.”

Upon leaving, Justinian tipped his hat to the Grand Councilor, who smiled slightly. Then Justinian walked out with a blank face.

Zollicoffer stood at the door of his study, thinking. Then he gestured another man over. “Bring Commander Krotzer here.”

“Yes, Lord Grand Councilor,” the man said, turning to run off.

While he was gone, Zollicoffer went over to stroke the old valise in appreciation. But when he tried to open it again, it wouldn’t budge. He pressed and pulled here and there, but finally left it, for now. “Lord Justinian will open it for me again tomorrow,” he promised himself.

Krotzer appeared at the doorway. “Yes, Lord Grand Councilor?”

“Yes, Krotzer,” Zollicoffer said, glancing to the window. “I know it’s getting dark out, but I need you to send scouts immediately to Featheringham—Lady Nierling’s complex, you know. I want them to see if there’s any evidence of activity inside it, but they’re to be very careful not to be seen. I just want to know if there’s anything going on there.”

“Yes, Lord Grand Counselor,” Krotzer said.

“Excellent. You’re dismissed,” Zollicoffer nodded. As Krotzer left, the Councilor looked back at the valise, puckering in displeasure.

At this time, Justinian was walking the short distance from Chaudoin to the Elegance in the twilight. Street lamps were just being lit as Finn and Fiacco rode up cautiously, unsure whether they should make public contact with him. But Justinian gestured, “Go ahead and stable your horses while I have dinner brought up to our suite.”

“Yes, sir,” Finn said, glancing around. He and Fiacco turned their horses to lope back to the inn.

Justinian smiled and tipped his hat to a pair of passing ladies, then muttered to himself, “Stupid, stupid, stupid. I’ve bungled it; should have waited till tomorrow to make contact with him.” His mistake was in giving Zollicoffer too much time to improvise on Justinian’s plan. “Ah, well. Nothing for it now but to play it out.”

He returned to his suite to partly undress and order a dinner for three of veal chops with grilled mushrooms, broccoli and onions, served with a nice red wine. When Finn and Fiaccio arrived to wait with him for dinner, he told them, "Make sure I'm up by six of the candle tomorrow; I've got to be back at Chaudoin by seven. As soon as I'm there, one of you ride out to Featheringham and tell the Captain to expect an attack that day. The other needs to watch if any troops leave the city in that direction. After you see them leave, you might want to get back to Chaudoin and have a look around for me."

They were all three mildly startled by the knock on the door. Fiaccio got up to answer it, then he and a server brought in their dinner, for which Justinian tipped. They sat to eat lightheartedly, with Finn and Fiaccio falling off their chairs laughing at the lord's impersonation of both Captain Efran and Lady Barrueta in a compromising situation.

A few hours later, two scouts were sent from Krotzer to report to Zollicoffer. He received them in his study to hear the lead scout say, "Lord Grand Councilor, we looked in the compound from across the road—there's still no gates at the opening in the walls, but there were a lot of lights and activity. Something's going on there."

"How many men?" Zollicoffer asked.

"We couldn't get close enough to count, Lord Councilor, but—it didn't seem like a great many. There weren't but a few wagons pulled up in the courtyard, and, there didn't seem to be a large number of men gathering."

"I see," Zollicoffer murmured in satisfaction. Of course Lord Justinian's information was true, because Zollicoffer wanted it to be. And how could someone that well dressed lie?

The second scout poked the first, who added, "Only, there was something spooking the horses badly, sir. We couldn't stay and watch as long as we liked; they were about to bolt."

"Very well; that's good enough confirmation," he said absently. "Dismissed." For some reason, he discounted whatever had spooked the horses.

The scouts bowed before leaving, and Zollicoffer picked up the valise again in irritation.

The following morning, September 1st, Finn and Fiaccio had Lord Justinian dressed in a new suit and out the door in time to reach Chaudoin on foot by seven. They followed him on horseback from a distance, until seeing him admitted into the front door. Then Fiaccio turned his horse to the main east entrance of the city and spurred to a run. Finn obscured himself to watch the main road.

In less than an hour, Fiaccio pulled into Featheringham, looking around. When he was suddenly surrounded by red uniforms, he raised his hands, shouting, "I'm Fiaccio!" He had forgotten that he was still dressed like a Hollowan. "Where's the Captain?"

"Back in the house!" one man pointed.

So Fiaccio trotted his horse to the steps of the house and loosely tied him off before going in. The door to the dining room stood open, where the Captain was talking with Gate Commander Barr, who was Efran's hand-picked leader of this operation. Both looked over as the new arrival saluted. "Fiaccio reporting from Crescent Hollow, Captain. Lord Justinian made it in to talk to the Grand Councilor last night; told me to warn you that you should expect an attack today."

“Oh ho,” Efran said, nodding at Barr. “Then Justinian did his job. Where is he?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” Fiacco said. “He said he was summoned back this morning at seven, and I did follow to see him let into the house again. But last night he told us, once we saw the Hollowan troops leave, to come back by the house and check on him. That—just didn’t sound right.”

Efran almost paled. “Justinian told you to come back and check on him?”

“Yes, he asked that someone get to Chaudoin and, have a look around for him,” Fiacco said uneasily.

Efran regarded him for a moment, then turned to his Gate Commander. “I’m leaving the counter-assault in your hands, Barr. If anything happens to Justinian, Minka won’t forgive me.”

Barr almost smiled in sympathy. “We’re good, Captain.”

“I know.” Efran patted his shoulder and turned as though to walk out, but the other two men stopped him.

“Not in Abbey red, Captain,” Barr said. Fiacco was grimacing, shaking his head.

Efran glanced down at his uniform, groaning. All the men here were likewise dressed in red. Then he looked toward the back of the house. “One man was a—a butler, and the other was the cook?”

Barr replied, “Yes, Captain, that’s what I understand.”

So Efran went back to pillage what might be left in their wardrobes. Shortly, he emerged again wearing striped dark gray pants, his own white shirt, and a sober, decades-old charcoal dress coat. To complete the look, he wore a string necktie. He handed his Abbey jacket and pants to Barr. “See that those get back to my quarters, please.”

“Yes, Captain,” Barr said.

Then Efran looked back and forth between him and Fiacco. “Well?”

Fiacco said, “Yes sir. You look like an undertaker.” Which occupation was permitted for Polonti in Crescent Hollow—that and menial labor.

“Oh. That’s good, then,” Efran said. “Let’s go,” he waved to Fiacco.

While Fiacco led his horse to the opening in the wall, Efran went to the stables where Kraken was kicking his stall door. It was now mostly splintered. Efran groused, “You’re reminding me of Bastard. All right, enough. We’re going for a ride.” Efran brought over a saddle blanket.

Looking at his outfit, Kraken’s ears shot up, and he brayed out a horse laugh.

“Shut up,” Efran grunted, throwing the blanket over his back. “I’m in disguise. Will you be quiet or should I put a black plume on your head?”—as horses drawing a hearse wore. Kraken went still.

Minutes later, the rider in old, somber black came loping to the compound entrance on a midnight black horse. Several men looked over and Fiacco said, “Sheesh, Captain, now you look like an angel of death.”

“Better and better,” Efran said. He looked down at Capur—a relatively new Polonti—to say, “I’m going with Fiacco to check on Justinian.”

“Yes, Captain Death,” Capur said, saluting.

Efran bit back a reprimand. New Polonti worked so hard learning the Southern Continental language, it was brutal to correct them for a joke, even to a superior officer. “As you were,” he sighed.

Efran and Fiacco turned west to begin loping, but Fiacco’s horse suddenly shot into a gallop. “Wha—? Slow, boy, what?” Fiacco found himself straining to slow his normally placid animal.

It took him at least a quarter hour to calm his horse to a walk, and he was still quivering, with occasional starts. A few minutes later, Efran caught up to him. “I should have warned you—a small troop of trolls is squatting in these woods. They’re not enough to stop a loping rider, but we’re cautioning everyone not to stand still out of the compound. We haven’t been able to trap them yet.”

“Yes, sir,” Fiacco said. But since they’d left the troll troop behind miles ago, they were able to continue at a saner pace to Crescent Hollow.

At the time that Fiacco had set out for the compound, Finn watched as Justinian was let into Chaudoin by the butler, and the Grand Councilor himself met his guest at the front doors. “Ah! You’re right on time. Let’s go back to what I have to show you.”

“Certainly,” Justinian said blandly.

But at the door of his study, Zollicoffer paused. “Now I find I can’t get the valise open,” he observed pettishly.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. You need the key.” Justinian took from his pocket a gold chain on which a rather elaborate key hung. This he handed to the Grand Councilor with a little bow of apology.

“Oh, of course.” Rather than play with the valise now, which he very much wanted to do, Zollicoffer merely laid the chain with the key across its top.

“Now, then.” Zollicoffer led to a corridor off the kitchen, at the end of which was a metal door with a reinforced lock. Seeing this, Justinian gently inhaled. This kind of thing was what he feared when dealing with men who were accustomed to unimpeded power.

Zollicoffer paused with an apologetic air. “Here is my problem, Lord Justinian. I think if I explain it to you, you’ll understand, and won’t begrudge my precautions. I have difficulty trusting people. And while it appears that there is indeed the activity you describe at Featheringham, I can’t *know* that yet. So, I am about to ride out with my men who will rescue our dear Regent from these Polonti criminals.”

As the Grand Councilor said this, Justinian saw out of the corner of his eye the soldiers collecting behind their lord. Zollicoffer continued, “I like you, so I want very much for what you tell me to be true. I also want my part of the Abbey Treasury. However, to make sure that what you say is true, you’re going to wait for me in the Incineration Room.”

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Chapter 14

“The what?” Justinian couldn’t help laughing.

“Here, let me show you.” Zollicoffer opened the metal door for them both to step into a small metal-clad room about eight feet by ten feet. Piled up all around the room were reams of documents, a few books, and much loose trash.

Almost complaining, Zollicoffer said, “I deal with so many confidential documents, it’s difficult to properly dispose of them when I’m done with them. This room answers that dilemma. All confidential documents that are no longer needed are simply tossed into this room. Then when Sampey—my Steward—sees that it’s quite full, he simply alerts the butler to ignite it. That’s done simply by lighting a wick in the kitchen, which burns through a fireproof tube until reaching the openings all along this wall here.” He patted the wall in approval.

“Now, I’m not threatening to burn you to death, or anything,” he said with a droll face at the ridiculous thought. “I merely want to give you time to think about what you told me. Is it true?” he asked almost pleadingly.

“In every aspect. To the last jot and tittle,” Justinian said solemnly.

“Ah. That’s good to know,” Zollicoffer said, perking up. “Now, to make *sure*—because I like to be thorough about everything—I’m going to let you wait here for me while I go off with my men. Now, if you what you have said is true, which you have assured me that it is, I will return with the Regent within—four hours, easily. So, as we’re leaving right now, we should *easily* be back by noon. Now, when I return with the Regent, I will let you out so that you may go rob your Treasury or whatever.”

“But, my dear Lord Grand Councilor,” Justinian smoothly interrupted. “If I am here while you have Efran and his men engaged there, then they will no longer be engaged elsewhere while I am endeavoring to get you more pieces from the Treasury.”

Zollicoffer looked thoughtful. “That is a detail we will have to address when I return”—which told Justinian that the Grand Councilor was not sold on that part of the plan. “Oh! The fun part is, if I don’t return with the Regent by noon, then the Steward will tell the butler to light the wick. And then—” Zollicoffer raised his shoulders helplessly.

Justinian regarded him quietly, then said, “Happy hunting, Lord Grand Councilor. I look forward to seeing you return.”

“What a good sport you are,” Zollicoffer said in admiration, clapping his arm. “Lock him in,” he said, stepping out. The door closed and the lock was turned on the outside.

As he listened to their muted footsteps, Justinian looked around the paper filled, metal-clad room, and sighed faintly.

An hour later, Efran and Fiaccio met up with Finn on foot as he kept watch on the estate. “Anything?” Efran asked, kneeling beside him in the bushes about twenty feet from the front doors, with a good view of the drive going around back, as well.

Finn glanced at his costume, saying, “No, Captain, not since I saw Lord Justinian go in this morning—” Finn

broke off, and they all watched a carriage pull out from the back. As it was a pleasant morning, the carriage windows were open, and the Grand Councilor looked with satisfaction on the well-tended grounds. "That's him," Finn whispered. "That's the Grand Councilor Zollicoffer."

"All right," Efran said. "Where's your horse?"

"Tethered behind this row," Finn said, nodding at the tall bushes around them.

Efran glanced behind him at the restless brown legs on the other side of the hedge, then said, "We've just come from the Elegance, where we left our horses. Justinian's not there. You haven't seen him leave the house?"

"No, Captain," Finn said definitively.

"Then he must still be inside. So, you go stand watch at the east entrance to the city; come back when you see the troops going out. They won't be leaving from here," Efran said.

"Right, Captain." Finn cautiously raised up to work his way through the greenery to his horse. A minute later, Efran and Fiaccio watched him ride out after the carriage.

Standing, Efran nodded to the front double doors. "Let's go in."

Fiaccio looked startled, but stood with him. "Yes, Captain." What else could he say?

Efran went to the front doors to raise the knocker and bang it down several times. Fiaccio stood at his side, slightly behind him. Neither of them knew that at this time of the morning, with breakfast over and the midday meal not yet in preparation, the house was practically empty of staff, but for maids upstairs.

The front door was opened by a guard in uniform who looked with some surprise at Efran's blank face and bleak dress. Efran asked, "Do you have a body here?"

"A . . . body—" That's all he got out before Efran hit him in the face, not overly hard.

The man dropped, and Efran dragged him to a coat closet near the door. Laying him out gently behind the overwraps and shutting the door, Efran turned as the second guard walked up. Fiaccio came in, quietly closing the front door behind him. He looked over expectantly as the undertaker asked the second man, "Where is the body?"

"He's not dead yet," the guard said.

Efran considered that. "When will he be dead?"

"Noon, if the Grand Councilor hasn't found what he's looking for. Now, look here, who are—" He also fell when his face came in contact with Efran's hand, and was tucked in beside his buddy to nap. There was no lock on this door, obviously, so Efran hung a chair over the doorknob. It didn't look too much out of place. Fiaccio contemplated that arrangement a moment: if the purpose were to prevent the door opening, it wouldn't work on the outward-opening door. But as there was no handle on the inside of the door, Fiaccio decided to overlook this.

"We've got to find him," Efran whispered. "You search the upstairs, quickly."

"Yes, Captain." Fiaccio ran up the stairs while Efran turned toward the kitchen.

The butler, having heard some unfamiliar noises in the foyer, peeked out of the kitchen door to see Death approaching. So the butler closed himself quickly in a pantry and squeezed his eyes shut.

Efran glanced into the kitchen, then pulled out again, looking in one room after another. He glanced down a short corridor that ended at a metal door. Because he was used to seeing the Treasury door, he assumed that this was a vault. Not wishing to waste time with gold, he turned away. However, he noticed something irregular about the door frame. But since he didn't analyze the sight at once, it slipped out of his mind.

Past that door, in a stuffy metal room, Justinian looked up at the slits between the wall and ceiling, which would be opened to allow in air to feed hungry flames when the wick was lit. And he said, "God, I'm not a religious man. I'm not even sure that I have a conscience. But, it would be generous of You to give me a little more time to obtain one. I know You don't owe me any favors—I've not regarded You as I should, but now that I seem to be forced to consider my own mortality, I would appreciate Your mercy toward a, a . . . sinful man. That's it. That's what Efran calls himself, which seems appropriate in his case, so it would certainly be in mine as well. Efran does go on about what he's seen You do, and I know that Minka prays, so, if You would, please consider this rambling my—petition for assistance."

Upstairs, Fiacco was going from room to room, poking his head in. Looking in one room, he found a maid making a bed. She looked at him in considerable surprise, and he said, "Excuse me. Have you seen a tall, slender man, brown hair, dressed in nice sage suit?" She glanced away as if sifting her memory, then shook her head. "All right. Thank you," he said.

Fiacco backed out again to continue searching rooms, and happened upon the second upstairs maid. He put the same question to her, and she had not seen such a person, either. So he went back downstairs.

Meeting Efran in the foyer again, Fiacco said, "I didn't find him."

"Neither did I," Efran said. "He must not be here." So they went out the front doors again.

Meanwhile, the upstairs maids were conferring indignantly about having to answer questions from strange men in the bedrooms they were cleaning, and agreed that this was not in their contract. So they both left out the back door, taking their personal effects.

Shortly afterward, the coat closet door was shoved open from the inside against the unreliable latch. One guard, a hand over his throbbing face, looked down briefly at the chair hanging on the doorknob. He removed it to its proper place while the second guard emerged behind him. "Is the lord councilor back yet?" the second asked dully, wondering what all the undertaker stole while they were out cold.

"I don't know, but I'm not going to be here waiting for him," the first said.

"Me, neither." They went to their quarters in the back of the house to change out of their uniforms and also lift a few random knickknacks to hock for their owed pay.

Efran and Fiacco melted back into the bushes when they saw the two men come out from somewhere at the back of the house. One holding his head, they walked down the street toward the low/middle class business district. Fiacco nudged Efran, and both looked over at Finn pulling his horse to a stop on the street at the end of the drive.

Efran walked quickly toward him while Fiacco made a detour to retrieve his horse from behind the tall bushes. Finn held his prancing horse in place as he reported, "Captain, the Grand Councilor's troops have just ridden out

toward Featheringham. There's not more than fifty or sixty of them. The Councilor is following them in his carriage."

"Ah. Which he thinks he'll need to carry Rondi back," Efran said. "And that means he took Justinian's bait. So where is he?" Finn shook his head to convey, *Who knows?*

When Fiacco rode up, Efran told him, "Fiacco, I want you to look any place in the city Justinian might have gone to wait—the public park, the outdoor eateries—Finn, you're to watch for the returning troops."

Finn then remembered, "He said to check the house for him, Captain."

Fiacco told him, "We just looked. He's not there."

"Oh," Finn said, troubled.

"Well, go—watch for the troops," Efran said distractedly. *Again. Again they're telling me to check the house.*

"Yes, Captain," Finn said. He and Fiacco turned their horses to lope away.

Efran then began walking around the house, just looking. He saw one man whom he assumed to be a servant enter the back kitchen door with a large basket of produce. Efran did not know that this was the Steward, who was angry for having to go to market like a housewife because the High and Mighty Grand Councilor was too cheap to hire more help.

Efran went to a window to watch the Steward begin unloading the produce on a worktable. He was angrily calling for someone. Then Efran watched the pantry door slowly open for the butler to step out. The Steward, eyeing him incredulously, said something to the effect of, *What were you doing in there?*

And Efran read the butler's lips as he said, *I saw Death approaching.*

The Steward began a harangue which included the promise that Death certainly would drop by if the butler failed to go draw water and wash the produce immediately. So the butler took a large bucket out the back door toward a hand pump a good fifty feet from the house. Efran stepped away to watch him, then returned to look in the window at the Steward.

The movement caught the Steward's eye, who glanced up at the sinister figure in charcoal gray with a string necktie. The Steward stared at him for an instant, then fell straight backwards in a dead faint.

Efran moved away, thinking, to walk an entire circuit around the house. "What am I missing?" he whispered. *Teach me what I do not see.* "I don't know what I'm not seeing. He told them to check the house. Where is he, then?"

About this time, Zollicoffer had his driver pull the carriage off the road along the edge of the woods directly across from the opening in the wall around Featheringham. With windows all around the carriage, he could see out the front over the horses' backs, but there was nothing of interest in that direction. So the Councilor looked out the window to his right as his soldiers roared into the gap on their sturdy steeds. There was—something awaiting them; Zollicoffer couldn't exactly see what. There was fighting, or certainly a lot of hubbub, almost a— a wave of motion that he didn't think one thirteen-year-old girl could produce.

The longer he watched, the more dubious he became of a quick victory. His men's riderless horses flew out of the opening a few at a time to begin galloping back toward Crescent Hollow. And the fighting seemed to go on and on without his men bringing out the girl or anyone to his carriage.

In fact, the fighting was so intense, it seemed to send waves against the carriage, which was rocking. Zollicoffer looked ahead in bewilderment at the carriage horses screaming and rearing, trying to get free of the trees. Then there was a sudden deep bounce, and Zollicoffer looked to his right in amazement at his driver and footman running into the road as if their feet were on fire.

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Chapter 15

Through the carriage window on his right, Zollicoffer was watching his driver and footman disappear down the road toward Crescent Hollow when the door on his left, that facing the woods, creaked loudly. Irritated that its hinges still had not been oiled, he turned to look at the matted, wiry heads poking in the doorway with gaping mouths and sharp canine teeth—the Grand Councilor began screaming and screaming and did not stop, until he did.

Between wrapping cool, wet cloths around the Steward's head as he lay moaning, and washing and chopping all the vegetables that would be required for the midday meal, and cleaning up the broken bits of pottery from the jug the Steward had been holding when he decided to faint, the butler was so busy that he almost failed to notice the time. Therefore, it was fully a half hour past noon when he remembered to light the wick. He did that quickly, then got back to work.

After having walked all around the house several times, Efran had consumed another hour searching places around the estate where Justinian might have hidden or been dumped. Not finding him, Efran went back to the front of the house. *It's close to noon*, he thought, glancing upward. *The guard said they'd have a dead body at noon if the Grand Councilor hadn't found what he was looking for by then.* He hadn't been back yet—of that Efran was sure.

Well then, where—? All at once, Efran remembered what had caught his attention about the door frame around the vault. After a frozen instant, he went to the front door and entered without knocking, looking for a certain corridor.

There it was. He ran down it, smelling smoke. Glancing at the singed door frame, he put his hand to the lever—which was almost too hot to touch—but it was locked. Efran wrapped his hand in his sleeve to unlock the door and kick it open.

The rush of air sent the mountain of papers under Justinian's feet spiraling up in a whirlwind of flames. Nonetheless, seeing the door fly open, he firmly clapped his hat on his head and prepared to leap over six feet of fire. Efran sprinted forward to catch him as he jumped, then threw him over his shoulder to bolt out of the metal room. Bits of burning paper followed them out because neither man took care to close the door again upon their exit.

Justinian was wheezing and coughing, slapping his smoking pants, but fell off Efran's shoulder as he was

passing the study. "Wait!" Justinian gasped.

Resettling his hat, he staggered into the Grand Councilor's study to grab the valise and key off the desk. Then he turned to the bar to hand a bottle of vermouth to Efran and bring out another bottle, that of sherry. "All right, we're good to go, brother. Thank you." With his rescued treasures in one arm, Justinian patted Efran's shoulder, and the two of them walked out.

They went down the long drive to sit in the cool grass at the street curb. After removing his hat, Justinian used the key to open the valise and bring out the two gold cups, one which he handed to Efran. Replacing the key around his neck, Justinian asked, "What'll you have?" He gestured at the bottles sitting beside them.

"Ah, the sherry," Efran said, holding out his cup.

"Oloroso. Excellent choice," Justinian said, pouring.

He was filling his own cup with the same when they heard rapid hoofbeats. Kraken came within view, wearing his bridle but no saddle. Spotting his human that he had been tracking all morning, Kraken veered toward them, and both men held their cups safely out of range when the black nose came down to investigate.

"You! Hiya! You there!" Efran and Justinian looked up at the angry hostler of the Elegance rushing toward them with a raised fist. "Your horse there destroyed his stall!" Kraken fell down behind them to roll luxuriously in the nice green grass.

Taking a sip, Efran asked Justinian, "How much you got on you?"

"Eh." Justinian carefully held the cup away from his suit as he opened his money belt with one hand. Seeing payment forthcoming, the hostler stopped before them, wheezing. Then he squinted at their cups, glinting in the sunlight. Justinian pulled out a handful of royals to extend to the man, who received them, blinking.

Taking another sip, Efran said, "Bring the rest of his tack, please."

"Alrighty, then," the man said, then peered at something behind them. "Yeah, smoke comin' from the house, there."

Both men glanced back to see a trickle of gray smoke rising from some point at the rear of the house. "That's why he was called," Justinian said, indicating his somber drinking companion.

"Ah. Need a hearse, then?" the hostler asked.

"Let's see who dies," Efran proposed.

"Alrighty then," the man said dubiously. He bit a royal, which was unquestionably genuine, then began lumbering back to his stables.

The two men on the curb drank quietly while neighbors of the house behind them began calling for a bucket line. The Steward and butler were wandering aimlessly outside. "How did you know where to find me?" Justinian asked.

"I didn't," Efran snorted. "I saw the corridor and the door earlier, but discounted it. Then when I was standing in front of the house, wondering where you were, I remembered that the door frame of that vault looked seared.

What the devil was that room?" he demanded, looking over at him.

"The Incineration Room," Justinian said. Efran peered at him, and he added, "The Grand Councilor didn't entirely believe what I told him. I can't understand it."

"Well, he sent a small force, and followed them in his carriage, so, it must have been the suit that convinced him," Efran said, nodding at his pants.

Justinian was agreeing when the hostler's lackey approached, lugging Kraken's saddle and blanket. Efran patted the grass to his side. "Put it here, please." Kraken looked over, but seeing that the saddle was not immediately to be applied to his back, he laid his head down again, sighing.

As the boy set down his burden, Justinian handed him another fistful of royals. "We're waiting on bodies, so please bring us two deluxe dinners from Hufnagle's. Not Everyman's."

"Will do," the boy said, eagerly taking the handful. Glancing up at the house that was now fully engaged, he said, "Hope you get a nice crop there, sir."

"As do we all," Justinian said while Efran smiled over his cup. "Run along, now. Hufnagle's. We don't need drinks," Justinian emphasized.

"Aye, sir." The boy turned to run to the nearby establishment. Shortly, he returned with the required dinners of Beef Bourguignon, and Justinian poured a second cupful of sherry for Efran (being on the third himself. Or fourth.)

They finished the dinners, leaving the dishes and the empty sherry bottle in the grass. "Don't let me go to sleep," Efran said, lying back on Kraken's ribs. "Fiacco and Finn will be returning to report on the Councilor's success."

Justinian stood unsteadily. "Hold them if they come before I get back. I'm going to water the Lord Grand Councilor's bushes."

"All right," Efran said, watching him determinedly stagger off. Then he looked up to the brilliant blue sky. "That was You," he whispered. "I had no clue where he would be, and, You stepped in to remind me that I saw singed wood around a door that I hadn't opened. Thank You, from me and Minka."

One of Hufnagle's dishwashers came for the dishes, and took the Oloroso bottle as well. Shortly thereafter, Justinian returned to drop onto the grass beside Efran and pass out. Kraken snuffled his hair.

Efran did not sleep. He was waiting on his men, hoping that there was a good reason for the delay.

He had another hour to wait. Meanwhile, he kept an eye on the progression of the fire at the end of the long drive behind him. It had very quickly reached the point that nothing but a thunderstorm could have subdued it, but the skies were still a sparkling blue—almost like an ocean of air, with white peaks of clouds.

Justinian sat up abruptly as four horsemen advanced to rein up before them, saluting. With Finn and Fiacco were Connor and Seagrave. Finn exclaimed, "You found him, Captain!" They all dismounted to shake Justinian in congratulations.

"Yes, well, I had help," Efran said, almost unheard. He added, "Here you are, but I haven't seen the Councilor or his men return."

“There’s a reason for that, Captain,” Connor said, studying the inferno behind them.

Glancing back at what used to be Chaudoin, Efran said, “I see it’s time to move on.” After donning the hat, Justinian repacked the cups and took possession of the valise and the vermouth. He looked disturbed, however, to find his walking stick missing.

Efran saddled Kraken, but as Justinian was without a ride, they all merely led their horses to the Elegance Inn. Having just finished repairs to Kraken’s stall, the hostler went dumb at seeing him again. Efran assured him, “He won’t break out tonight, because I’ll be here. Right?” He stroked Kraken’s nose, who nodded.

Perceiving that they were all being judged, the men unsaddled and groomed their own horses. Then they sat in the outdoor pavilion of the inn to talk. The men had ale, but Efran ordered water for Justinian. He regarded his brother in mild disgust, so Efran offered, “Would you rather have a ginger beer?” Justinian shuddered and accepted the water.

“Now, then. *Where are they?*” Efran asked, looking around the table for an answer.

Seagrave deferred to Connor, who replied, “Dead or captured, Captain. We killed thirty-five and took another twenty as prisoners who surrendered. We . . . were unable to save the Councilor.”

Efran had hardly begun a question before Connor went on, “He had parked his carriage on the edge of the woods, where the trolls found him. We killed three; another two ran away wounded, but the Councilor was beyond help by then. However, we did save the horses. We did not find the driver or the footman, so we believe they escaped on foot to return here.”

“Probably. We wouldn’t have noticed them,” Efran said. Then he looked to Justinian. “All right. Start with yesterday. Give us the whole story.”

Justinian sat up to straighten his jacket and begin his report. As he progressed through the interview to the events of this day, Fiacco exclaimed, “He asked you straight up in the metal room if you were telling the truth, and you said ‘yes’?”

“Never backtrack on a lie to an enemy. He’ll kill you for it. The worst explanation is better than confessing you’re an incompetent liar,” Justinian lectured.

“Hear, hear,” Connor laughed. “And besides, the Captain’s got your back.”

As the men turned to him appreciatively, Efran shook his head: “It wasn’t me.” Justinian believed him, but said nothing.

After covering that day’s events, they talked about what was to be done next. Connor told Efran that Barr was going to send a messenger to Commander Wendt to ask what they should do with the prisoners. Efran was shaking his head again. “Feed them tonight and tomorrow morning, then let them go.”

The men considered this silently, and Efran repeated without offense, “That’s what he’d tell you to do, but I’ll take responsibility for the decision. Let them go home. If you do, they’ll never fight us again.”

“Acknowledged, Captain,” Connor said.

Efran instructed, “Connor, you and Seagrave go on back to Featheringham now, before it gets dark. Justinian, Finn, Fiacco and I’ll follow tomorrow morning. Justinian will pick up a bodyguard of whoever’s to be sent back to the Lands tomorrow. Then we’ll see who all Barr wants to stay at Featheringham.”

“Yes, Captain.” Connor and Seagrave stood, saluting, and shook Justinian’s hand with repeated congratulations for his success. Finn located the room of Lady Barrueta’s driver and footman, Moises and Schwall, to tell them that they’d be leaving for the Lands first thing tomorrow morning.

In Justinian’s luxury suite that evening, Finn and Fiacco bedded down in the receiving room while Justinian and Efran took the beds in the inner room. Efran was almost asleep, impatiently waiting for Minka to come to bed, when Justinian said, “I prayed.”

“What?” In the darkness, Efran turned his head in the direction of the voice that was not Minka’s.

“I prayed, Efran. When it looked like I was going to burn to death, I asked God to help me,” Justinian said.

“Well, that’s the only reason I found you. You weren’t even burned, were you?” Efran murmured sleepily.

Surprised, Justinian put a hand to his calves. “No,” he said.

“There you are. Not only is Zollicoffer dead, but his house is a pile of burned-out rubble,” Efran said, eyes closed.

Justinian sat up. “Whatever happened to the ewer?”

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Chapter 16

Being asleep, Efran didn’t answer Justinian’s question. Anyway, Efran didn’t know what had happened to the ewer, either. But what happened was, in the clean-up efforts of the late Grand Councilor’s house, a laborer found a mass of gold that had once been the ewer. Elated, he scraped it all up, covered it with rags, and took it to a Crescent Hollow jeweler, who paid him one hundred royals for it—an infinitesimal fraction of its value, even as a shapeless mass.

The following morning, September 2nd, Justinian, his suitcases, the valise and the vermouth were loaded into Lady Barrueta’s carriage. Efran, Finn and Fiacco rode alongside as they exited the city east toward Featheringham.

It was an easy hour’s ride. Scouts saw them coming and rode out to meet them in satisfaction. When they entered the gateless walls, they found that Barr had all the men lined up in greeting—the Abbey men and the 22 prisoners, who watched with dead eyes.

There was much backslapping as Efran dismounted and Justinian emerged from his carriage. First thing, Barr nodded to the Hollowan troops. “Connor gave us your instructions to release them, Captain. They’re fed and ready to go, if that’s still your intent.”

“Yes.” Again forgetting what he was wearing (for now, the undertaker’s costume), Efran walked over to stand before the Hollowans, some trembling at the sight. “I am Captain Efran. On behalf of Commander Wendt of the Abbey Lands, I am releasing you. I urge you to remember that we are not your enemy, and to remind the next Grand Councilor that *we are not your enemy*. Oh, and—stay in a group; avoid the woods. There may be more trolls. God speed.” He turned to look back at the entryway, where the Abbey soldiers parted to leave a wide path.

At first the captured soldiers did not move, then a man in front began stalking out. When no one stopped him, the others followed. Immediately all had departed to walk, trot or run west.

Efran watched the last of them leave, then told Barr, “Give them a couple of hours to get a good head start, then send two men to scout Crescent Hollow for us. Do you have more Hollowan clothes here? If you don’t, get the ones off Finn and Fiacco; I’m going to bring them back to the Lands with me and Justinian today. Whoever you’re going to release to go back, they need to get ready now.”

“Yes, Captain,” Barr said. “Do you wish to change into your uniform?”

Briefly startled, Efran looked down at the charcoal coat. “Yes, but I’m going to keep these clothes.”

“Yes, Captain,” Barr said, almost smiling. Then Efran went to the house to put on his uniform and bundle up the undertaker’s clothes.

Within a half hour, Efran, Finn, Fiacco, and 25 more men rode out of Featheringham to accompany Justinian’s carriage east. Efran carried a report from Barr to the Commander outlining their successful rebuff of the attack, while Efran would give his own report in person. Justinian, surprisingly, did not sleep on the way back. Rather, he did some thinking as he watched the landscape pass by.

An hour before twilight, they heard the alarm bell at the wall gates of the Abbey Lands clanging welcome. Efran had been hearing the fortress rooftop bells chime long before then. Justinian was surprised to hear them as well.

Upon entering the gates, Efran dismissed most of the men to their mess and barracks, but kept back a few for homecoming errands. When Justinian had unloaded his possessions and the unused royals from the carriage, Efran told Moises and Schwall, “Take it and the horses around to the stables; we’ll inform Lady Barrueta that her carriage is back. Then we’ll see what she wants to do.” The driver nodded and Efran dispatched Quoid to run that message to her.

Meanwhile, Justinian had placed the valise and key atop the royals. When Efran turned to him, Justinian said, “All this needs to go back to the Treasury. I’m keeping the vermouth. But you’re welcome to drop by and have a drink with me.”

Efran paused, assessing the pile, then whistled a pair of men over. “Mohr, Skalbeck—take all this to Lord Justinian’s suite at the chapel.”

“Yes, Captain,” Skalbeck said.

As he and Mohr divided up the bulk between them, Mohr picked up the dropped key to hand it to Justinian. “Do you wish to keep this on your person, sir?”

Justinian took it hesitantly, eyeing Efran, who said, “If that’s not earned hazard pay, I don’t know what is.”

“Thank you, Efran,” Justinian conceded. “Only, I don’t see any reason to tell Minka the details.”

“Oh, no, none, no fear,” Efran said.

At that time, Commander Wendt and Captain Towner emerged from Barracks A. Justinian paused to watch Efran salute, then give Barr’s written report and the gist of his own to Wendt: “A success all the way around, Commander, due to Justinian’s subterfuge. Zollicoffer is dead—killed by trolls—and his estate burned down, accidentally. Featheringham is secure and no one will be taking Rondi.”

“Excellent, Efran. I can’t wait to hear the details,” Wendt said. Then he looked over as a rider loped up on a small horse.

Efran had barely turned before Minka landed on him to squeeze him, hard. He closed his eyes, relishing the welcome. Then she dropped down to pull away slightly, taking Justinian’s hand. He bowed, and her face went slack. “What was on fire?” she asked, looking between them.

Justinian and Efran glanced at each other. “Fire?” Justinian queried.

“Yes, you both reek of smoke, especially you, Justinian,” she said, eyes wide. Brows raised in query, Efran looked at him.

“Hmm. Fire.” Justinian looked down at yesterday’s suit he was wearing, as he did not wish to wrinkle up a fresh suit on the ride home.

“Yes. Fire. A big one,” Minka said intently. Wendt was half listening as he read Barr’s report.

“The truth is,” Justinian began, “Grand Councilor Zollicoffer’s house burned down, and your husband helped me save some valuable pieces from the Treasury before it—burned down.” He gestured to Mohr and Skalbeck far up the street.

“That’s the redacted version,” she said, turning her large eyes to Efran.

“It’s—accurate,” he said with his most honest face.

She looked between them, then leaned on Efran again, who wrapped her up. “Well, you’re both home, and that’s all that matters. Only—Rondi gets to stay, doesn’t she?”

“Oh, yes,” Efran assured her.

“Good. Come up to dinner. You, too, Justinian,” she sighed.

“Certainly. But as I don’t wish to alarm anyone in the dining hall, allow me to change first, if you will.” Justinian gestured at his smoky suit.

“Hurry,” Minka ordered, climbing up on Rose. Efran, smiling, hopped up on Kraken and turned his head.

At dinner, the children sat at the back tables around Efran and Minka to hear a slightly longer redacted version. Rondi came over to hear this version herself, as well. She was white-faced as she sat beside Minka to hear Efran’s recounting. He looked to Rondi to tell her, “Zollicoffer is dead—not by our hands—and we sent back

about twenty of his men that we declined to kill. So I don't think anyone will be demanding your return to Crescent Hollow."

She nodded, dropping tears of relief, and Minka put an arm around her.

One of the door guards, Lambdin, came up to salute Efran, who turned around on the bench. "Captain, Lady Barrueta and her daughter wish to return to their home in Crescent Hollow tomorrow, and asked whether Rondinelli wished to return with them."

Heads swiveled to the girl, who half gasped, half laughed, "No! Thank you anyway! No thank you!"

That provoked sympathetic laughter, and Efran nodded to Lambdin, "Lady Rondi declines the offer. But send a couple men along with supplies for Featheringham."

"Yes, Captain." Lambdin saluted and went out with the message.

Hassie pushed her way in to sit beside Rondi, who looked down at her. "I know how you feel," nine-year-old Hassie told her authoritatively. "Minka brought me here last year, and I was so happy to be here, but my mother and father came and tried to take me away, and I didn't want to go. So they had a big meeting about it, and the natty Lord Ryal told them I didn't have to go. So they had to leave me alone, and Clute never followed me again," she ended in victory.

Rondi sighed. "That's so good to hear."

Toby, behind them, nodded. "They listen to the children. If you don't want to go, they won't make you."

Rondi inhaled in deep relief. She glanced up at Mathurin, standing a ways back from the table, and he smiled at her.

When Lady Barrueta's carriage was ready to leave the following morning, September 3rd, the wall gate guards sent up another message to Efran: she and her daughter had requested that Bullara and Vonk be among their bodyguards.

On hearing this, Efran stood confounded in the courtyard. "Bullara. Vonk. Not our regular soldiers. But I remember hearing the names. When . . . ?" Upon remembering the *mele*, he groan-laughed, "No, no—tell her they're not eligible for bodyguard duty."

So the lady's carriage departed with a bodyguard of four other soldiers (to guard against the trolls) and Rondi watched them go as one would see off an attacking army that had been routed.

But Efran took Minka up to the second-floor workroom with other concerns about Rondi. Entering, he told Estes and DeWitt, "I might need your input here." So they glanced up from their worksheets.

Efran sat in his usual chair, but allowed Minka to sit next to him instead of in his lap. "Now that it's certain Rondi is staying, I want her to be treated more as a—like Ella, instead of as a child. She's already going to Law class, which is good, but, she needs structure in her day. She needs to work at something."

So all the men looked at Minka for an answer. Hesitantly, she said, "Yes, she does. And I know that Mathurin needs to get back to his regular duty. Let me talk with her and see what she's interested in. But while we're doing

that, she needs better clothes, Efran. I took her to my clothes closet and Flodie's, which we both enjoyed, but there wasn't much that fit her. She needs new clothes."

"Yes, of course. Yes," he said, only a little defensively. "New clothes," he repeated. "Oh! Of course. *New* clothes. The Lands Clothing Shop? Or—Elvey's?" he choked out, given the outlandish creations that were being produced by Elvey's and modeled by Efran's former lovers.

Minka looked thoughtful, so Estes got up to open a cabinet for a money pouch which he handed directly to her. "Can you carry that?" he asked on second thought.

"Yes, thank you, Estes," she said. "You know, it's been a while since I've been down to The Lands Clothing Shop"—in the east Lands, past the new northbound road. "That's where I'll take her. And our bodyguards," she added, to forestall the inevitable direction.

"Yes, thank you," Efran said, standing to kiss her head. "Should I go with you—?"

"No," she said quickly, knowing his reluctance to oversee the clothing selections of a 13-year-old. "You sit right here and help DeWitt. He's struggling with something."

"Yes, the thought of Efran helping me," DeWitt muttered. He raised up in relief as competent help arrived. "Here you are, Koschat." DeWitt shoved a ream of papers at him, which Koschat accepted without complaint.

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Chapter 17

Minka settled Efran back down to his chair with a kiss while DeWitt told him, "I'm paying Koschat extra for the work he's doing for me."

"Of course," Efran said, leaning back to watch Minka swing out with the money pouch. Then he put his feet on the table and contemplated the upper branches of the faerie tree.

First, Minka went to the courtyard to ask Detler at the gates for bodyguards for her and Rondi. "Mathurin, if he's available. Or just anyone. Oh! Give that to them. I'm going to find her. Thank you," she said, shoving the pouch on him.

"Yes, Lady Minka. Thank you for asking and not trying to run off without them," Detler said blandly, taking the pouch.

The other guard, Salk, gaped at him and Minka stopped, open-mouthed. Then she fell on him, laughing, "Oh, Detler! Are you ever going to forgive me for that?"

"Not for a while, Lady Minka," he grinned.

"You poor men," she said, patting his arm.

When she had gone back into the foyer, Salk looked wide-eyed to Detler to whisper, "When did she do that?"

“I’ll tell you,” he said, and did.

Minka stepped out from the lower corridor onto the back grounds to look around. The children were out of class now, at play, with Nakam trying to herd them and Joshua toddling around in the midst of them. They were careful not to run him down, and whenever he fell down, which was frequently, one of them stopped to help him up. Rondi, really too old for their games, sat on the bench watching contentedly.

“We have something better for you, young lady. I just don’t know what yet,” Minka whispered, heading toward her.

Rondi looked up with a tentative smile as Minka came over to take her hand and pull her off the bench. “Since you’re a Lander now, Efran wants you dressed like one. We’re going to get you some new clothes.”

“What? Me? Clothes? New clothes?” Rondi asked in a rapid progression of understanding.

“Yes, at The Lands Clothing Shop. That’s where Justinian gets his fancy suits, you know,” Minka said smugly, leading her toward the western side of the fortress. She waved to the sparring groups, who turned to bow to them, but she did not attempt to catch the archers’ attention, which could result in someone getting hurt. And she only paused briefly to admire Tess and Ella working with the horses. All the while, Rondi followed her in a stop-and-go daze.

Minka paused again as they came around the corner and passed the great faerie tree. Every time she saw it, she vividly remembered talking with 12-year-old Efran and 20-year-old Efran at this tree. Just recalling those conversations, foreshadowing so much and illuminating so much, sent tingles down her spine.

“Those trees are wonderful,” Rondi whispered.

“Oh, there’s so many wonderful things here to fill your heart,” Minka said, and Rondi drew a shaky breath.

They were met in the courtyard by a whole herd of horses, it seemed. And all their riders looked back at their charges. Minka exhaled, “Detler! What have you done?”

“Not my fault, Lady Minka—I had to let them sort out how many was coming,” he disavowed. “Mathurin’s got the pouch, by the way.”

Rondi gasped out a laugh as he saluted them from the saddle. “Well, I think you know Mathurin, Rondi,” Minka said. “But the other handsome men here are Stourt, Jehan and Coish,” she pointed out, and they saluted her as well, grinning. Stourt was also astonished that the Lady remembered his name, as he wasn’t often called for bodyguard duty. But he didn’t know how hard she tried to remember them all.

“Ere go, ladies,” Detler added, standing beside another horse. “I know that many of us do not like to use mounting blocks, but we do what we have to, right?”

Minka strode over to the block, laughing, “How dare you try to shame me, you brute? Just to show you who’s in charge, I’ll use the silly block!” She stepped up, placing her foot in the stirrup, and swung her leg over.

The mounted bodyguards cheered her: “That’s showin’ ’im, Lady!” “There!”

Detler then placed the block beside the other horse, Gaunter, and reached a hand to Rondi. She came over,

nervous at the prospect of mounting without Mathurin's help. But doing just what Minka did got her up in the saddle. The men applauded her as well, and none of them had to be told that the entirety of her riding experience consisted of these last few days on the Lands.

"Very well, then. We're going down to The Lands Clothing Shop," Minka announced. "And only those of you who go in with us will qualify for hazard pay."

The men snorted or laughed, and Rondi felt like Queen of the Inhabited Realms right now.

At the clothing shop, Mathurin was compelled by the other three to stay with the horses while all the rest of them went in. There, Minka led Rondi around to look at the sample dresses on display to see what she liked. Rondi liked everything. So Minka picked out a few ready-made riding dresses of linen and cotton that were simple enough to be fitted on her with a sash belt. Then Minka had her measured for another few that were more formal, requiring a closer fit.

Minka bought her boots, and another pair of house shoes. Then as they were strolling to the counter to pay, Minka stopped abruptly, gasping, "Pants!" So Minka bought two pairs for Rondi, with a matching jacket, all which had to be altered.

When they finally arrived at the counter, Tourse's wife Racheal met them, smiling. She was one of the owners of the shop. "I hope you found what you needed; the displays have been shamefully neglected. We've taken on arranging the Autumn Faire, and I do wish I had a runner attached to my side."

Rondi's eyes shot up. "A Faire! I helped with the last Faire we had in Crescent Hollow! Oh, could I help you? I'm a good runner, and I even got new boots!"

Racheal smiled dubiously between her and Minka, but the latter breathed, "Oh, that's perfect. That's a perfect job for you, Rondi! That would be so much fun, I wish I could help. But I know that you can, Rondi. You'll just need a bodyguard with you all the time. But Efran will permit that, Racheal. Tell her what she needs to do."

Hopefully, Racheal asked Rondi, "Can you just show up here tomorrow morning, early? At eight of the candle?"

"Yes!" Rondi cried.

"Then I'll be thrilled to have your help," Racheal said.

Not only did she have a job lined up—for which she had a new wardrobe—Rondi was able to wear one new dress out of the shop, as well as the boots, which were better for riding. Minka split up the remainder of the packages between Jehan and Coish. "They're very reliable and versatile men," Minka reassured Rondi, who had no qualms about their carrying her clothes.

They rode west over the new northbound road, then continued past Froggatt's and Lowry's on the left and Twombly's and Coghill's on the right to emerge on Main. Minka fretted, "Oh, it's so close to noon, Firmin's is already full up. Oh, but Avene's has enough space for us in the outdoor area, it looks like. And they have pie. Let's sit here, then." While Mathurin took the horses around back, Minka sat Rondi and their pets to order tea, ale, pie, and fried cheese balls for all of them.

As they were sitting and talking, eating and drinking, Stourt suddenly lurched to a stand. An instant later, the rest of the bodyguard did likewise, saluting. Efran pulled up on Kraken with a vague smile of accomplishment. Joshua, on his leg, screeched a greeting to everyone. "How did I know you were here?" Efran asked rhetorically.

Jehan reached out for Joshua, who fell into his arms so that Efran could dismount.

“Should I take Kraken around back, Captain?” Stourt asked.

“No, I’ve paid for enough broken stalls this week,” he muttered, dismounting. “He’ll wait here.” Kraken spread his lips at him.

Mathurin pulled up another chair for the Captain to sit beside his wife, who grinned at him in victory. “Rondi got the most adorable things. And some of them will fit her for years, so we won’t break the Fortress budget.”

Efran raised his face in a silent laugh. “As if you ever had a budget. DeWitt won’t even keep track of what you or Ella spend. So he won’t bother with Rondi’s spending, either.” He turned to accept an ale with thanks while Rondi sat with heart pounding to be included as a member of the Captain’s family.

“What’s more,” Minka said in a teasing tone, “she got a job.”

“Already?” Efran asked, glancing between Minka and Rondi.

The thirteen-year-old smiled in confirmation. “I’m going to be helping Racheal plan the Autumn Faire! And I need to be at their shop at eight of the candle tomorrow morning. Is that all right?” she asked in sudden anxiety.

“Yes. Take a bodyguard,” Efran said, taking a swig. Rondi looked off, full at heart.

Late that afternoon, Lady Barrueta’s carriage arrived safely at Crescent Hollow, which fact was noted by the Abbey Lands bodyguards who had accompanied them there. But they did not go with the women to their house.

After two of the four bodyguards switched clothes with the two Abbey scouts who were already in Crescent Hollow, those two stayed so the previous scouts could return to Featheringham with the rest of the bodyguards and make their report. (Is that clear?)

Meanwhile, Lady Barrueta and Colletta unpacked wearily and looked around the empty house. “I’m hungry. There’s nothing to eat here,” Colletta complained.

“Well, we have plenty of money. Let’s go to Hufnagle’s,” Barrueta proposed.

“Yes, let’s. It’s right around the corner here, anyway,” Colletta said.

So they freshened up and changed clothes, then set out in the early evening toward the lighted eatery in the nobles’ district. “I’m so glad to be home,” Barrueta said dully.

“Yes. Away from all those nasty Polonti,” Colletta sighed.

“Here we are.” As they were about to enter Hufnagle’s, Barrueta looked once, then again at a couple on the sidewalk dressed in heavy mourning. “Why—that’s Windish. Lord Windish and his wife—what’s her name? Malaga. Yes. Yoo-hoo! Lord Windish! Oh, my goodness, what has happened?”

The man turned to her dolefully while his wife pressed a black handkerchief to her face. “We’ve lost our child, Lady Barrueta.”

“What? Who?” Barrueta asked, clueless.

“Rondinelli, who had been Regent for only weeks,” Windish said darkly. “We don’t know how she died, either by fire or troll, but she is gone, gone.”

“Oh, no, Windish! Not at all!” Barrueta said. He narrowed his eyes at her and she said, “She’s at the Abbey Lands, Windish! Colletta and I just left there, trying to get her to come back home. But there’s someone she’s in love with there, so she wouldn’t.”

Malaga swiveled toward her, almost ripping off the black veil. “What? Rondinelli is at the Abbey Lands? Are you sure?” she cried, and not for joy.

“Yes! I tell you, we saw her! Both of us!” Barrueta said almost as angrily. She did not like being contradicted.

Colletta nodded agreement. “Yes, she seemed right at home,” she added with a little sneer.

Windish looked at his wife, and she him. He uttered, “We’ll see about that.”

And the following morning, September 4th, Windish and Malaga set out in their carriage on the eastbound road to the Abbey Lands.

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Chapter 18

It was a long, tiring ride to the Abbey Lands from Crescent Hollow, but Windish and Malaga kept up their spirits by speculating how Rondinelli wound up in the heathenish Lands. The last they had heard was that the Abbey lord, a Polonti, had eaten something at dinner that made him so angry, he set the whole of Plumtree on fire.

They first thought she perished in that fire, but then word came that Grand Councilor Zollicoffer, in the course of chastising the Polonti for the fire, had been set upon by trolls. This his driver and footman solemnly swore to, after barely escaping with their lives. They claimed that no one was in the carriage with the Councilor when the savages lit upon it, but still, rumors swirled. And what a commotion it would create when Windish brought back the Regent to place her back upon the throne of Crescent Hollow! Then all Polonti and troll savages would be put down by Hollowans united in vengeance.

While outrage sustained the couple through the hours of travel, it nonetheless drained them, so that by the time they reached the gates of the Abbey Lands in early twilight, they were exhausted. So when the gate guard called, “Where’re you from?” Windish bumped retribution to the next day.

He called back, “Sightseeing from Eurus! Looking at all the new construction!” He had no idea that traffic from Crescent Hollow was being restricted; it was just his second nature to lie.

And although he tried to emulate a Eurussian accent, the guard never noticed. “All right, pull on in. I think Croft’s is full, but Firmin’s has maybe got a room.”

“Very good; we’ll check there,” Windish said.

The guard waved. "Pull your rig down that second road, driver; stables beyond the pond, there."

"Thankee." The driver tipped his hat to the guard, who opened the gates wide.

After dropping off his passengers and the footman with their luggage, the driver took the carriage back to the stableyard as directed. Windish and his wife then found themselves in a clean, comfortable room with wash water and feather pillows. When they fell into bed, they heard the faint heavenly strains of a woman singing. And they knew that their mission had been divinely ordained.

Early the following morning of September 5th, the moment Ryal unlocked the door of his shop, he found two out-of-towners waiting on his step. Surprised, Ryal said, "I apologize; I had no idea anyone was here yet."

"No harm done; we were just enjoying the view. Rather nice little place here. Are you the notary?" Windish asked.

"Yes, I am Ryal. Please come in."

They walked over to the counter while Ryal went behind it. Giardi came out from the back smiling; but when her eyes lit on the visitors, her smile vanished. Ryal said, "Now, what can I do for you?"

"I am Lord Windish of Crescent Hollow; this is my wife Malaga. We are here to reclaim our child Rondinelli."

Ryal blinked, then said, "I see. Please come to the back room where we can sit while I take your statement."

"Thank you," Windish said. With a hand at his wife's back, they followed the notary to the other room. Giardi stood at the counter, looking out the window.

An hour later, Ryal sent a written message to Efran at the fortress. Javier found him in the second-floor workroom to hand him the sealed message. "From Lord Ryal, Captain," the boy said.

Efran sat up in surprise. "Oh? Thank you, Javier." As he broke the seal to open the letter, he slowly stood. Estes and DeWitt watched warily. Efran pressed his lips together, then said, "Javier, tell the courtyard guards to send someone to The Lands Clothing Shop to bring Rondi back to the fortress." (Because Racheal was so pressed with Faire preparations, Efran had permitted Rondi to skip Law class just for today.)

"Yes, Captain." Javier saluted and ran out.

Efran raised stony eyes to his administrators. "Her uncle is here to claim her." They sat back, exhaling. Efran asked, "Where is that letter he wrote Zollicoffer about her?"

Estes stood to scan the shelves behind him, then Efran added, "Bring it to the small dining room, please. That's where Ryal wants to hold the hearing." Unconsciously crumpling the letter, Efran turned out to descend the stairs at a trot.

Looking into the library where Law class was underway, Efran said, "I apologize for interrupting, Soames, but I need Minka for a moment."

"Yes, Captain," Soames said, his face tightening in concern. She rose watchfully to join Efran in the corridor.

Shortly, another messenger came from Ryal asking Soames to bring his note-taking materials to the small dining room. So Law class was postponed until after the hearing.

Soon, the chairs around the oval table in the small dining room began to fill: Ryal at one end, Efran on the other. In between were Minka, Estes, and DeWitt on Efran's right hand and Soames, Windish and Malaga on Ryal's right. They were all silently waiting for Rondi.

When she appeared at the doorway, her face went blank. Efran stood. "Rondi, sit over here between me and Minka, please." She complied without a word.

Ryal inhaled. "Rondi, I'm sure you recognize your aunt and uncle. They are claiming you as their lawful dependent, and they want you returned to their care. I have already interviewed them as to their claims, and now I would like to interview you. Is that all right?" She nodded.

"Thank you, Rondi," Ryal said. "First, I must administer an oath. Rondi, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Thank you," Ryal repeated. "Now, Rondi, I have before me the notarized statement of your uncle's guardianship of you that was effected June the twenty-second of eighty-one forty-seven. Do you remember that?"

She barely squinted, shaking her head. "No, I was—very young. Five. I don't remember much of anything about my parents' deaths, only that—they weren't there anymore, so I went to live with Windish and um, Malaga."

"I see. How did you enjoy living with them?" Ryal asked.

She thought about that, then said, "I . . . don't remember much about it."

"Weren't you living with them until you became Regent?" Ryal asked.

"Yes," she said.

There was a moment of silence, then Ryal asked, "How did you spend your days at their house?"

"I . . . was tutored in language and mathematics, history, art, music, and rhetoric," she said.

"Sounds admirable," Ryal said. "Were you tutored in a class with other children?" She shook her head, and Ryal told Soames, "That's a 'no.'" Soames nodded. His scratching quill was the only other sound in the room besides Ryal's quiet questions and Rondi's hesitant answers.

"What did you do in your free time, Rondi?" Ryal asked.

Windish instructed, "You will call her by her given name, sir."

"Please do not interrupt again, Lord Windish, or I will have the prerogative of dismissing your complaint," Ryal said, not looking at him. Windish raised up as though outraged, but kept quiet.

"Your free time, Rondi?" Ryal gently repeated.

She looked off, thinking. "I . . . read books, and drew pictures, sometimes."

"Did you play with other children?" Ryal asked.

She looked around uncertainly, then said, "Not very much."

Ryal waited a moment for Soames to catch up, which didn't take long. Then he asked, "Did they feed you regularly?" Malaga began an indignant reply, but Windish gripped something hard under the table so that she bit it back. She only shook her head of short black hair in disgust.

"We had good food," Rondi said.

"Did you have clothes for all seasons?" Ryal asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Did they hurt you?" Ryal asked.

She looked off as though trying to interpret that, then said, "No."

By this time, the Landers were looking at each other aghast; Minka was shaking, though dry-eyed.

Ryal was silent for a while, then asked, "Do you want to go with them, Rondi?"

She stared at him blankly for a moment, then asked, "Do I have to?"

Ryal hesitated, then said, "I am asking if you would rather go with them or stay here."

She looked down at the table and barely whispered, "I want to stay." At that, Minka began to pour silent tears.

Ryal was silent for several long moments, then said, "While I believe that you would be happier here than returning to Crescent Hollow with your aunt and uncle, the Law is very specific about what grounds I must have to rule their guardianship invalid. Abuse, denial of basic needs, forced activity detrimental to your health or well-being—those are the only grounds by which I may revoke a legitimate guardianship, especially one that has been in effect for eight years."

"Ryal, may I speak?" Efran asked quietly.

"Yes, Efran," Ryal said, lifting his head.

Efran gave a letter with a broken seal to Minka, nodding to Ryal. She got up to walk the letter around to him. Efran waited until Ryal had read it. When he had done so, and looked up, Efran said, "He attempted to use her as a political pawn, and forced her into a situation in which she was set up to be killed."

"That's a lie!" Windish cried.

"She was given poison soup at the dinner supposedly to welcome us to Crescent Hollow. The only reason she is alive now is that I pretended to be poisoned so that we could get her out and away," Efran said in a slow, hard voice.

“I had no knowledge of this,” Windish said, trembling.

“You handed a thirteen-year-old over to wolves,” Efran said through gritted teeth.

“It was the opportunity of a lifetime for her,” Windish said.

“She’s a minor; she can’t even make her own decisions about where she’s going to live. And you would make her figurehead of a corrupt body?” Efran asked in barely controlled rage.

Windish’s jaw jutted out, but he looked to the notary. They all looked at Ryal, and Efran’s face drained to see him put aside the letter.

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Chapter 19

In the dense silence, Ryal said, “The way that events took shape was unforeseen. It may have been unwise for him to propose such a position for his ward. But I see nothing in the letter to indicate a nefarious purpose. Biological parents make unwise decisions for their children all the time, and we do not take away their children for it.”

“Ryal,” Efran whispered involuntarily.

“Efran, I have bent over backwards in previous trials to accommodate you for the sake of the Lands. But I cannot see how to circumvent the clear language of the Law in this case. They were obviously cold, unloving, calculating guardians, but those are not the criteria by which I am charged to judge,” Ryal said.

Minka whispered, “She wants to stay, Ryal. Does that count for nothing?”

“It counts for a great deal, Minka,” he said kindly, almost brokenly. “And were she fifteen, it would be compelling. But the chance to have friends, or young men who pay attention to her, cannot rise to the force necessary to break a legal document.”

His eyes red, Ryal looked at Efran. “Against my will, but according to the Law, I rule in favor of Windish and Malaga.” To them, he said, “You are instructed to take your ward Rondinelli home with you. And I suggest you do that soon.”

Lips pursed in vindication, Windish and his wife rose fussily. “Come, then, Rondinelli,” he ordered. Head hanging like a condemned prisoner, she stood and walked over for Malaga to grip her upper arm tightly and hustle her along.

When they had left the room, Ryal stood to tell Soames, “When you have recopied your notes, bring them down to me.” He also walked out.

DeWitt pointed to the door guard. “Have Lord Ryal escorted down; see him safely into his door.”

“Yes, Administrator.” He lit off after the notary.

Estes, Minka and DeWitt looked at Efran. He was glassy-eyed, trembling slightly, jaw tight. He slowly stood, then wheeled to pound the wall with the side of his fist. He walked out, leaving an indentation in the stone.

Taking the notary’s advice literally, Windish and Malaga had their bright green carriage brought out in front of Firmin’s to begin loading up their luggage. The first piece that went in was Rondi, unresisting.

Estes came out to watch with Minka, then he gestured to Detler, “Have four bodyguards mount up immediately to go with that carriage, armed with clubs. Windish may not know about the trolls.”

Faster than Minka thought possible, four armed riders came pounding from the stables down the switchback. They drew up to the carriage on Main just as Windish was about to board it. He jumped down from the step, shouting at them to back off and leave them alone. Passersby looked on in curiosity as the soldiers tried to tell them about the trolls in the woods along the highway while Windish accused them of wanting to kill him and his wife so they could take Rondinelli back.

Their contention rose to such a level that nearby shopkeepers stepped out to see what the brouhaha was about, including Ryal and Giardi. Shortly, Commander Wendt emerged from the barracks to cross the street and mediate between Windish and the soldiers. That resulted in an even larger audience.

After listening to both sides, the Commander ordered the riders back up to the hilltop and told Windish, “Good luck.” Then they were free to leave unencumbered. The would-be bodyguards walked their horses back up Main to the switchback, shaking their heads. Their audience dispersed, and with a pat on Minka’s shoulder, Estes went back inside the fortress. Ryal had gone into his shop to help a customer, but Giardi remained on the front steps.

Brokenhearted, Minka watched from the courtyard as the carriage departed the wall gates and disappeared over the old stone bridge. Turning in resignation, she was startled by a figure that loped out of the fortress and out the courtyard gates around her. It was Nibor, the girl troll, who had secluded herself in a corner of the library to write what she had seen of the Abbey’s history in the Hall of Memories.

Stunned, Minka watched Nibor go straight down the switchback as Efran had done a few times, only, she looked like water flowing from level to level. And she loped up Main on all fours like a greyhound. The wall gate guards were so surprised by her speed that they couldn’t get the gates open in time. So she went over them like—like—wind flowing over an obstacle in its path. Having seen her run like that before, Minka turned thoughtful as Nibor galloped over the old stone bridge, as well.

Thinking hard, Minka went back inside to look for Efran. She looked in their quarters, on the back grounds, in the dining hall (where the midday meal was underway) and in the second-floor workroom. Not finding him anywhere, she got a little frightened—until she remembered the last thing he’d done. Then she went down the corridor to the doctor’s quarters.

There, she found Efran sitting on a raised bed while Leese wrapped his hand with a bandage that she would then cover with plaster. He turned his eyes to Minka to mutter, “I broke my hand.” Actually, it was just one bone in his hand, but it felt like the whole thing were cracked.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“That’s all right,” he sighed, leaning his head back against the wall to close his eyes. “In three years, she’ll be free to come back to us . . . if she’s still alive.”

“Efran,” she began tentatively, “when they were getting their carriage ready to leave, Estes tried to send bodyguards with them. Windish wouldn’t let them come, so Commander Wendt sent them back up hilltop. And—”

“They already left?” he asked, scowling. “They left this late in the morning? To guaranty they’d be driving at night?”

“Efran, Nibor followed them,” she said.

“What? Nibor? The girl troll? She left the library to follow—the carriage?” he asked in deep confusion.

“Yes,” she said.

“Why?” he asked.

“I don’t know. But something is going on, Efran. Ryal made a judgment he didn’t want to make because he had to follow the Law. I don’t know what that means, except that she’s going to be all right,” she said.

“My Minka,” he murmured, holding her with his left arm.

Faintly sardonic, the doctor’s wife said, “Your Leese will do a better job on this hard bandage if you’d be still.”

“Sorry, Leese,” he said, withdrawing his arm. Minka smiled as she waited with him.

When Leese had plastered the bandage, she said, “You must hold your hand still while that dries. It will only take a few minutes.”

“Yes, Leese. I’ll hold off pounding any more walls,” he said listlessly. She smiled sympathetically, then began clearing away the materials.

Routh swung into the room with a salute. “Captain, Lord Ryal is packing up his things in his shop. He’s summoned Soames to come down and take over as notary.”

Minka went pale and Efran raised up, breathing, “What?”

“He says he’s retiring, Captain. He and Giardi are going to move—elsewhere. I don’t know where,” Routh said.

Minka looked at Efran in despair, and he said, “All right. This is my doing; I’ll go do my best to undo it.” While Leese watched suspiciously, he got up carefully around his bandaged hand.

Following him out of the doctor’s quarters, Minka asked, “Can I come?”

He thought about that, then said, “As long as you don’t try to rescue me.” She frowned deeply at him, but followed.

He went out to the courtyard to tell the saluting gate guards, “I’ll be down at Ryal’s. Which will continue to be Ryal’s.”

As he began walking down the switchback, both he and Minka turned at the hoofbeats behind them. Holding up

his bandaged hand, Efran told Kraken, "I can't get up on you, and I can't lift Minka up. Follow if you want." Kraken snuffled the bandage so as to get plaster on his nose that he couldn't get off. Minka wiped it away as best she could. He snorted on her in gratitude.

Efran entered the notary's shop to see Soames standing despondently at the counter. He nodded toward the back, from where they heard murmuring and things shifting. So Efran went to the bedroom door to look in. Minka came to stand behind him, and Soames followed as far as the back interview room. He had to keep an eye on the counter.

Ryal and Giardi paused at Efran's appearance. He looked around at the packing in progress, then said, "Ryal, Giardini. Please don't go. Please."

Giardi looked back at her husband. Ryal picked up a shirt which he folded in determination as he said, "Efran, up till now, I've been able to balance the—interests of the Abbey with the demands of the Law. It's been dicey at times, but I've managed. Until today. Today, I was boxed into a corner, and forced to rule against my desires for the Abbey. It was the only right course, but it caused great pain to you, Minka, and to that young girl."

Looking up with red eyes, Ryal said, "I never want to do that again, Efran. I want to retire with what conscience I've got left. Soames is a good man; he'll serve you well."

After a moment of working his jaw, Efran said, "Yes, Soames is a good man, which is why I awarded him the Meritorious Cross. But he's young, Ryal; he doesn't have your experience. More than that, though—" He broke off, struggling.

For a little while, he was silent in the effort of bringing out the truth. Ryal was compelled to watch as Efran steeled himself to go on: "More than that, Ryal, you are the *only one here* who will defy me to my face. If it weren't for your iron will to rule according to the Law, I would become a tyrant. I would force anyone else to rule according to what I wanted, and—that would mean the end of the Abbey, Ryal; it would crumble. My will is not a sufficient foundation for it to stand on. Don't you see?" he laughed, tears running down his face. "You and Minka are my last defense against becoming a despot, and I can run over her when I really want to. You—you won't be moved."

He stood silently in the doorway, plastered hand hanging, watching through his tears. Giardi looked at Ryal with a slight smile of agreement. Minka, out of sight behind Efran, barely sighed. She could feel what was about to happen.

Ryal tossed the shirt he was trying to fold back down to the bed. "And you know me well enough to appeal to my vanity," he muttered. Efran stopped crying. Glancing up at him, Ryal said, "Still, the fact remains that I broke that girl's spirit with my ruling. I saw her go dead inside, Efran. And I don't know how I can live with that."

Efran scanned the ceiling. "Someone once told me—I don't remember who—that all we can do is follow our conscience to the best of our ability, and leave the outcome to God. Who said that?" he turned his head to ask Minka.

Coming up to slide her arm around his waist, she murmured, "Someone very wise" as she smiled at Ryal.

Soames glanced to the front, then said, "Someone at the counter, Lord Ryal."

"I'm coming," Ryal said. Efran stepped out of the doorway for him to advance to the front.

But they found a soldier, Kaas, who said, “Captain, Racheal at The Lands Clothing Shop is asking after Rondi.”

Efran nodded listlessly. “Tell her that Rondi’s guardians have taken her away.”

“I’ll come help them with the Faire,” Minka said, coming out from around the counter.

“After we finish Law class, Lady Minka?” Soames asked, hurt and dismayed.

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Chapter 20

Blinking at Soames’ wounded face, Minka assured him, “Yes, of course. What was I thinking? After Law class. Weren’t we going to resume? Let’s go up.” She took Soames’ arm authoritatively and they left around Kraken, who was practically blocking the door. Kaas was already trotting up Main with his message to Racheal.

With a last glance of gratitude around the shop, Efran backed out to take Kraken’s halter with his healthy left hand and walk him up to the courtyard. From there, Efran took him around the western side of the fortress to the back grounds, in case Tourjee needed him for hauling.

There, Efran was surprised to see the children milling around. They ran over to him as soon as they saw him. Toby had a question, but Efran asked first, “Why aren’t you in class?”

Toby replied, “The tutor is taking a minute to cry.”

Efran looked up to the heavens and plopped onto the bench. Kraken lay down to roll in the dirt. Joshua wasn’t out here yet. Toby asked, “Did Rondi leave, Efran?”

“Yes,” he said. “Her guardians came and took her away.”

The children looked at each other in alarm. Toby asked, “Did she want to go?”

Efran said, “No. But Ryal judged—rightly—that they were allowed to take her. They had taken good care of her up till then, and she’s only thirteen.”

“But she didn’t want to go,” Toby repeated. Efran shook his head. “Then anyone can make us go,” Toby said, with the other children wide-eyed in fear behind him.

“No,” Efran said quickly. “Rondi’s case was very different. No one is taking you.”

Hassie said soberly, “You told Rondi no one would take her.”

The accusation stabbed him through the heart. “She’ll come back,” he blurted. “Watch. She’ll be back.”

Since he had already made a declaration that proved to be untrue, they drifted away to dig in the dirt, or gather up fallen leaves, or watch the frogs in the cistern lined with reeds.

So today, Fortress life went on. The children were safe, as long as no one came with papers to prove they could take one of them away. With Minka gone helping Racheal on plans for the Faire, which no one cared about anymore, Efran just walked with Joshua through the hilltop woods. Pia and her Polonti came over to greet them, then went about their own work. And Efran looked over the earth toward Crescent Hollow, where a young girl was to live with a broken promise he had made to her.

The following day, September 6th, proved much like yesterday, although Efran rallied to answer questions from DeWitt and Estes about new establishments. Choules' group in the eastern Lands was building their section into a remarkable industrial area, greatly supplementing the other businesses who quickly became dependent on the metal workers, leather workers, wood workers, glassblowers, and other specialized artisans. Weber the tanner sent a constant supply of tanned hides to the saddler, shoemaker, boot maker and other craftsmen in the area.

These, in turn, supplied the clothing stores. When Tisi and Reinagle vacated their small houses, one especially proficient leather worker, Eavenson, bought them and tore them down for the lumber to build his own large store of leather goods behind Elvey's complex (which flummoxed her people, as they sold their own shoes and purses at a high markup, but there was nothing they could do about it).

Anyway, Efran's answer to all of DeWitt's questions about this group was to do what he felt should be done.

Late that afternoon, Efran was summoned to Barracks A to hear a report from scouts at Featheringham. This made him wary, but he promptly sent for Kraken to carry him.

So with Kraken waiting in the courtyard, Efran began trying to climb up on his bare back with some difficulty, as he couldn't do anything with his right hand, still very sore and covered with a hard bandage. But Kraken lowered himself to his knees to help Efran get on, which was worse for his morale than just about anything else. Nonetheless, they made it down the switchback and up Main at a gentle lope.

Sliding off the bare back at the barracks, Efran walked in for Captain Towner to point him to the conference room. There was now a collection of lead weights in his stomach as he sat with Wendt and the scouts, Cyneheard and Verrin. They stood to salute him, and he said, "Just sit down and give it to me straight."

They sat, and the lead scout, Verrin, said, "Yes, Captain. Late yesterday afternoon, almost twilight, we—Cyneheard and I—were standing guard at the entrance to Featheringham when we saw a carriage approaching from the east. It was bright green, as is the popular color for Crescent Hollow carriages right now. The horses were tired; they were just going at a walk. When they were just about even with us, we saw a troop of five trolls run out from the woods in front of the horses." Efran closed his eyes in dread.

Verrin continued, "We rang the alarm right off and ran out with clubs, but the trolls had opened the carriage door and pulled out the girl. We could only watch them carry her off into the woods."

Efran, heartsick, looked to the wall. Wendt asked, "What about her aunt and uncle?"

"They were screaming up a storm, Commander, but appeared to be all right. The driver and footman were never in danger, except if the carriage were overturned, which it wasn't. After the trolls had disappeared into the woods with the girl, the—the uncle reached out to shut the door, and, the carriage went on toward Crescent Hollow," Verrin said.

"Did you follow them?" Wendt asked.

Verrin replied, “No, Commander. Ah, Gate Commander Barr thought it unnecessary, but had us leave this morning to come make our report to you.”

“What did you see of the girl? Was she hurt?” Wendt asked.

Verrin frowned, looking to Cyneheard, who said, “I glimpsed her face, Commander, and she did not look afraid. In fact, her shoe came off when they carried her out, and she made them stop and pick it up.”

Efran looked back at him, then, and Wendt asked, “She ‘made’ them? How?”

“She said something, and one of them stopped to pick up her shoe, Commander. Then they proceeded to carry her away,” Cyneheard said.

There was a silence, then Efran said, “It was a new pair of shoes that Minka had bought her at The Lands Clothing Shop. She was wearing a new dress from there, as well.”

“So she had the presence of mind to keep her shoes on her feet,” Wendt said.

“And make the trolls retrieve one for her,” Efran noted. He rested his plastered hand on his head, as raising it helped alleviate the pain.

“Interesting,” Wendt said. To Verrin and Cyneheard, he added, “Thank you for your report. Go get your grub; check with Captain Stites as to your duties tomorrow.” They stood to salute again and went out.

Wendt and Efran sat where they were, then Wendt said, “I wish I could say that was encouraging, but—”

“Minka saw Nibor run after the carriage,” Efran interrupted.

“The troll girl?” Wendt asked.

“Yes. Minka watched her follow the carriage over the old stone bridge, which is as far as she could see from the courtyard,” Efran said, head down.

“Huh,” Wendt said.

A moment later, Efran stood. “Excuse me, sir, I need to. . . .”

“Dismissed,” Wendt said quietly. And Efran walked on out.

Kraken was waiting at the barracks steps, which did make it awkward for others who were coming and going. Efran stroked his neck with his left hand, then turned to start walking back up Main. Kraken followed at his shoulder.

Efran stopped again at the steps of the notary shop. “Don’t block anybody else wanting to come in,” he told his buddy. Kraken laid his head on Efran’s shoulder, which he did when his human was hurting.

Efran went up the steps, pausing at the bell tinkling above his head. Ryal, reading his face from behind the counter, waited quietly for whatever bad news was forthcoming. And Efran told him, “Scouts from Featheringham saw a troop of trolls stop Windish’s carriage and take Rondi.”

Ryal closed his eyes in distress, but Giardi looked off thoughtfully. Efran added, “She accidentally dropped her shoe and made one of them pick it up.”

Giardi laughed, so that Efran and Ryal both looked at her—one hopefully, the other sharply. Efran demanded, “What do you know, Giardini?”

“That God speaks in the details,” she said.

“Minka saw Nibor following the carriage yesterday,” Efran said almost defiantly.

“I did, too,” she said.

Ryal held on to the counter as if trying to keep his balance. “Do you—could you possibly mean—”

Lovingly, she said, “All I know is that we do the best we can and then wait.”

Efran almost groaned when he turned away. He hated waiting more than almost anything.

The rest of that day was difficult, as Efran had to wait for Minka to get back from The Lands Clothing Shop before he could tell her what happened to Rondi. He did stop by the library to poke his head in the door. “Ah, hello, Librarian. Is Nibor . . . ?” Looking over to the partition, Efran saw the shadow of her gnarly hand moving the stylus in the lamp light.

“Yes, Lord Efran, she is at work,” the librarian replied.

Nodding, Efran leaned on the corridor wall to wait for Minka. When she finally arrived, it was almost dinner time, so they had to go into the dining hall and sit on the back bench.

The children were still snubbing Efran, mostly, although Toby did come over to pat his shoulder. Efran smiled at him, but couldn’t possibly tell him the news, which he merely whispered to Minka as they received their plates from Wardly. The boy was crushed not to see Lord Justinian tonight, but Ricci was keeping a sharp eye out for the big tipper, just in case.

Minka listened to Efran’s whisper, then remarked, “It sounds like Rondi was more agreeable to the trolls’ company than that of her aunt and uncle.” Ella looked over quickly, then engaged Quennel in a whispered debate, which they broke off to eavesdrop more on Efran and Minka, who forgot to whisper.

“These trolls were human eaters,” he said.

“We don’t know that,” she countered. “Look how many different kinds of trolls there are; how do we know what kind this troop was? And what kind the trolls were that Marguerite sent to take Solace as their queen? And *Nibor*, for heaven’s sake?”

“That’s a good point,” Efran admitted, leaning back before he remembered that he was on the bench. Then he discovered that he couldn’t grasp the edge of the table with his right hand in a cast, so Minka and Ella had to grab his arms from either side to keep him from falling off backwards. When they got him upright again, he found out that he couldn’t hold a fork in his right hand, either.

The following day, September 7th, was worse than any before because of the tiniest hope that Rondi survived.

And if she survived, there was a small chance that she might get back to the Lands. But if she returned to the Lands, her uncle was sure to find out about it and come for her again. So Efran was walking up and down a figurative seesaw between hope and despair all day long—

Until the early afternoon. Efran had just taken Joshua to the nursery for fresh wraps when he heard the courtyard alarm bell clanging. Because it was his job to do so, he ran to the courtyard to see whom he needed to fight off with a broken hand. At first, all he saw was regular traffic going in and out the wall gates. Then he focused on the tin man, who had to stop his cart of tin wares for the number of people gathered around it, trying to talk to his passenger—

Kraken was right beside Efran, as usual, so he got the horse to kneel again for him to jump on his back with only one good arm. He kept his left hand wrapped in Kraken's mane while he loped easily down the switchback, emerging from between the faerie trees (which desisted teasing the horse, for once) to ride up the middle of Main.

He drew up to the cart to see Rondi look over placidly. Mathurin was there to help her down from the cart seat, so Efran nodded, "Bring her to Ryal's shop."

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Chapter 21

"Yes, Captain," Mathurin said, saluting. Rondi looked to be fine, though a little mussed and tired. Mathurin walked her up the street followed by a growing crowd. Efran rode before them to fall off Kraken at Ryal's steps, then stumbled up them to open the door and lean in. "Rondi's coming," he said to Ryal's stare. Giardi, beside him, let down with a relieved smile.

Efran held the door open for Mathurin and Rondi, then glanced over the crowd. They could not all fit inside the shop. So Efran said, "I'm going to close the door. Mathurin will tell you all about it." Some of them left in a huff; some had work to do, but good number of them waited for information around the steps—which Kraken solely occupied.

Ryal had already opened the door to the back room. "Come sit," he ordered. Efran and Rondi followed him into the back room while Mathurin stood at the doorway. Giardi placed Ryal's quill set and note-taking papers on the table, then stood beside Mathurin to listen while watching for anyone who actually had business for the notary.

Seating the girl at the small table, Ryal asked, "How are you, Rondi?"

"I'm fine," she said. "Can I stay this time?"

"Yes," Efran said vehemently.

"We're going to discuss that," Ryal said, a stickler for order. "First, as this is a formal hearing, I must put you under oath. Rondi, do you swear on your soul to tell only the truth in this hearing?"

"Yes," she said almost eagerly.

“Very good,” Ryal said. “Now, the last we heard, a troop of trolls had taken you from your uncle’s carriage. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Then what happened?” Ryal asked. He held his quill ready over his papers.

She brushed disordered hair (with a little forest moss) from her face. “One of them carried me a great long way through the woods, running, while the others ran alongside. They were taking me back the way we had come in the carriage, following the road to our right. They must have run with me for—hours, I don’t know, because I fell asleep. I woke up later all by myself in the dark woods, in a—kind of bed of grass and leaves. Since I couldn’t see anything and couldn’t go anywhere, I went back to sleep.

“When I woke again, it was morning. I looked beyond the woods to see the same road running by. So I started walking down it east, toward the sunrise, and about an hour later the tin man drove up, told me he was going to the Abbey Lands, and offered to carry me. So can I stay now?” she asked him and Efran again.

“Yes,” Efran said again.

“What about when my uncle comes for me again?” she asked.

Still writing, Ryal said, “We are addressing that now. Giardi, the good parchment, please.” When she brought his formal documents parchment to the table, Efran and Rondi withdrew their arms and elbows to give him room to spread out.

After inscribing a heading across the top of the parchment, Ryal said, “Now, many people saw you ride through the wall gates with the tin man. Didn’t you, Mathurin? Efran?”

“Yes, sir.” “Yes, Ryal,” they said at the same time.

“Very good,” Ryal said, writing. He added, “The tin man is here, but since so many people witnessed Rondi’s arrival with him, interviewing him is unnecessary.” Although unsure what Ryal was leading up to, Efran was filled with satisfaction to see him so happy about it.

“Now. What I am doing, Rondi, is writing up an account of your experience with the trolls. I am going to send this to your uncle, and tell him that you are here,” Ryal said.

Her head began sinking down in that attitude of blank despair. Ryal went on, “I am required by Law to do that when I inform him that his guardianship of you has been rendered null and void.”

When she absorbed that, she looked up. “He can’t take me again?”

At the same time, Efran asked in great interest, “Why is it null and void, Ryal?”

“No, he can’t, Rondi. The reason, Efran, is because the primary responsibility of a guardian, as you well know, is to protect his charge from danger. Now, the threat of trolls along that road has been well established, in that Grand Councilor Zollicoffer was killed by trolls at almost the same location where they accosted her uncle’s carriage.

“Before that family left the Lands day before yesterday, I myself watched mounted soldiers ride up to offer

protection on their return trip, knowing the danger. I witnessed her uncle, in high dudgeon, refuse that offer so forcefully that Commander Wendt had to withdraw it. Her uncle's act of foolish pride directly enabled the attack in which she was taken. With this demonstration of Lord Windish's unfitness to have charge of her, I am withdrawing that privilege from him and placing it in the Abbey instead," Ryal said, all thrillingly official.

"So he can't take me again, ever," she said, her eyes shining.

"No, Rondi, he can't. But so that he won't keep trying, I have to send him a formal notification," Ryal said, writing.

He paused to tell Efran, "As it turns out, my original ruling in Windish's favor was the best thing I could have done for her. Had I ruled as you wanted, and I wanted, in your favor, he would have had the option of appealing the judgment to another notary—probably the one in Crescent Hollow, Culliton. And it's entirely likely that Culliton would have voided my judgment and entered one in favor of Windish. Aside from the fact that it's a terrible blow to a notary to be overruled, that would have been the end of the road for securing Rondi's release so that she could live here.

"But my affirming his guardianship gave him the opportunity to lose it. Now, he can still appeal this judgment to Culliton, but the offense is so clear and egregious, I strongly doubt that any notary would risk his position to overturn it. Therefore, once Windish receives this notice, it's the end of his options to keep her," Ryal finished. Efran lifted his face in comprehension.

"Besides which," Ryal said to Rondi, "they are probably very much anguished over your fate. It is the right thing to do to let them know that you are alive, well, and happy."

"Thank you," she said, leaning over to hug Ryal's neck while he patted her. Sitting back, she said, "But—I don't understand why the trolls did that! Why would they take me and carry me almost all the way back here?"

"Nibor," Minka said from the doorway, and they turned to look at her devious face. "Nibor told them to. That's why she ran off. She's back at work in the library now," she told Efran. He crinkled his eyes at her.

"Ah. That's interesting," Ryal said. "Now, then, I have a lot to get done here, so you might better want to get settled in again," he told Rondi.

She turned to Efran with hopeful fingers at her lips. "Are my clothes still in my room?"

"Of course. Minka wouldn't let anyone touch a thing," he said, glancing at her in the doorway with Mathurin.

"Let's get you something to eat so you can come help with the planning of the Faire!" Minka said.

Rondi jumped up, but Efran said, "She can have a bite in the fortress, but then there are some people she needs to see." Rondi looked questioning, so he told her, "The children were very disturbed at your being taken when you didn't want to go. They need to see that you're back, and that no one can take you again."

She smiled, nodding.

When they exited the shop—or attempted to—they directly encountered Kraken, as the horse was preventing anyone from storming the door. Efran got him down off the steps so Mathurin could tell everyone what had transpired. Also, a customer could finally get in.

Since Efran couldn't lift Rondi to Kraken's back, he made the horse get down on his knees for her. Everyone watched in admiration while she sat sidesaddle on his broad bare back. When she saw Efran's bandaged hand, she demanded, "What happened to you?"

He debated an answer in front of Minka, then said, "I wanted to hit your uncle, but the wall got in the way"—which was quite honest, for him. Smiling, Minka went to Rondi's side as Kraken stood with her. Efran took his halter on the other side (which Kraken allowed, just for show) to walk their new permanent resident up the switchback.

Meanwhile, Minka chatted about all the amazing attractions they were going to have at the Faire in October. Half listening, Rondi rode on the great black horse in wonder and disbelief, looking over the Lands. Turning her gaze down Main, she saw all the people watching her ascend in satisfaction. With them, Mathurin lifted a hand to her. When she waved to him, a dozen people waved back.

As they entered the courtyard, the guards greeted her like royalty, and she grinned. Efran and Minka just walked Kraken with her around the fortress to the back grounds. The children looked over, then gasped and cried, "She's back!" "That's Rondi, here again!" "Rondi, do you get to stay now?" They rushed to her while she was still on Kraken's back, but he did not step on any little feet.

Efran helped her slip down so that she could greet them all. "Yes! Yes, I'm back for good, and I get to stay, because the Notary and the Captain outsmarted my uncle," she laughed. The children clapped and cheered.

Chastising, Toby turned to them. "Now, aren't you ashamed for being so mean to Efran?"

They hung their heads with murmurs of apology. Efran said, "Thank you. I appreciate that. But now let Rondi tell you about the trolls kidnapping her from the carriage."

They stared at her with wide eyes, screeching, "What?" "Yes, tell us!" "Oh, weren't you terribly frightened?" This last question was from Jera.

Rondi said, "No, I wasn't frightened at all. I don't know why, except that I knew at once they weren't going to hurt me. And they were nicer than my aunt and uncle!"

The children fell on each other laughing, and she sat on the bench under the walnut tree to tell them about her adventure. Meanwhile, Efran sent a man to the kitchen to get her a plate and a ginger beer. Minka sent a second man in after him to get a basket of snacks for the other children so that Rondi could eat in peace.

While Henris brought out Rondi's early dinner, and Lund a basket of jerky for the children to pass around, Martyn came out with Joshua in fresh wraps. "Papapa," Joshua said, reaching for his father, and Efran took him on his left arm.

Martyn told them, "I checked on Nibor, and she is back in her corner working. But she must be getting tired of everyone peeking in at her, because she had her head covered with a large sheet of parchment."

Efran winced and Minka laughed, "Well, that's what she gets for playing the hero."

"But how did she know? And how was she able to catch them?" Efran murmured.

Minka said, "You didn't see her running up Main after the carriage, did you?" He shook his head. She added, "She looked like a—a wolf running. On all fours. Anyway, someone told her to tell the trolls what to do. We'll

ask the Librarian, but I'm guessing that it was our Atticitian, Sir Nomus. He's the one who brought her up to the Hall of Memories to begin with."

"Minka being right, as usual," Efran muttered with a sidewise glance at her.

At that time, the courtyard guard, Ellor, trotted around the west side of the fortress to run up to Efran, saluting. "Captain, thought I'd better tell you that the hydra came out of his hole, and, is looking poorly. He's stretched out on his nest, seems to be sick."

The children cried out in dismay, and Efran breathed, "Oh, no." The hydra, Jonguitud, ate the snobbles and the eelfish in the caverns, and if anything happened to him, there was no other effective means of controlling these dangerous pests.

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Chapter 22

The children thronged Efran, demanding to go down and see Jonguitud. He groaned, "I suppose we have to. But you all must stay on the road. If he's feeling bad enough, he may bite anyone who bothers him." And Jonguitud had very sharp teeth in all three of his heads.

"We'll mind you, Efran. Won't we?" Toby said, turning a stern eye on the other children, even Rondi. They all quickly promised to do as instructed. Martyn then brought Joshua's cart over so that Efran could free up his usable arm and Minka could pull the toddler along with them. Efran had to accept this.

"Let's go, then. No one pets him," he said, barely avoiding a glance at Minka, who arched her brows at him.

So, Ellor and Kraken led the way, flanked by Efran, Rondi, and Minka pulling Joshua. Eleven children clustered around his cart as they all began walking down the old switchback. Shane fell in with them. They could see the hydra's nest most clearly from the third bend on the west. He was certainly stretched out in it, and one head lifted up briefly to wave, then sank down again. Minka murmured, "Oh, he's sick."

"Let's hurry!" Hassie urged, and the children began running ahead.

"Whoever falls gets taken back up to the courtyard," Efran said. The children immediately slowed to a walk. In an orderly manner, they exited the switchback to take Chapel Road west. Well past Main Street, they came to a stop directly below the hydra's nest. But it was so far up the hillside, they couldn't discern anything.

Glancing around, Efran said, "All right—Ellor, you and Shane come on up with me to have a look. Spread out." The hidden weak spots in the northwestern hillside could give way to treacherous cavern waters below.

As the three began ascending the rocky, sandy hill, Kraken followed. Efran turned around to order, "Back! Get back. You stay there to watch the children." Kraken obeyed, but on backing up, his left rear hoof shot through the ground. The children cried out, but he extracted it without difficulty to regain the road.

Noah wondered, "Why doesn't the hydra fall through? He's almost as big as Kraken."

Pointing to the hydra's fishing hole, Toby replied, "He did. But Hawk said that his big, flat feet help spread out his weight when he wants to stay up top."

"That sounds right, Toby," Minka said, praying as she watched the three men work their way up to the nest. Joshua pointed, grunting, but she shook her head at his demand to go up with them.

Soon, the men were standing around the nest talking to Jonguitud, although no one on the road could hear what was said. When the hydra's head waved again, Efran patted it. Then the men began to work their way down while those on the road watched anxiously.

The men arrived without mishap for the children to cry, "Well?" "What did he say?" "How is poor Jonguitud?"

But Minka lowered her chin to murmur, "And why was it fine for *you* to pet him?"

Kraken snuffled Efran thoroughly as he laughed, "I used my right hand. He can't bite through the cast." They all thought about that, trying to remember whether they saw him pet with the cast or not. Nonetheless, Efran went on: "Jonguitud will be fine; will probably be back to fishing the caverns by tonight. He had to take a break to lay two eggs."

There was a stunned silence followed by a chorus of questions and general exclamations. Ellor and Shane were laughing as Efran raised his hands to explain, "He insists he's male, and that it's possible for male hydras to lay eggs when they have a lot to eat. So—we all learned something new today."

Minka said, "Yes, that Jonguitud is really Jonguitette, and likes to tell tall tales as much as any male."

All the men laughed again, and Efran grabbed her around the waist with his good arm. "Who asked you?" he grinned down at her.

"Minka's probably right, Efran," Toby said, mildly corrective.

Efran turned to him. "If Minka's right, Toby, that means there's a male around. Where is he?"

Minka answered, "In the caverns. Why can't he have come at night?"

"Why doesn't he come up top to bask?" Efran countered, holding her close. Joshua stood in the cart to bang on his leg.

There was a sudden rumbling, and they all glimpsed rocks moving above them. "Landslide!" Ellor shouted, so the men began herding the children east on the road. Kraken reared and snorted.

But the rumbling ceased, except for a great whooshing and whomping. Everyone looked as the rocks rose in the air on wings, with great clawed feet and one horned head on a long, sturdy neck. As they all watched, transfixed, the coloration of the wings, body, feet, neck and head began changing into the blue of the sky and the white of clouds, which rendered all of it invisible again. Then there were only the faint intimations of movement in the sky as the dragon flew off.

They all stared silently at the empty sky until Toby said, "Minka was right, Efran. The hydra is a girl."

Efran laughed in acknowledgment, "You're right. That's Jonguitette." Minka bent to hug Toby fiercely, then Efran reclaimed her again.

Rondi said, "Such amazing things to see here! I want to see something else!"

"The hut!" Alcmund urged. "Efran, it's been weeks and weeks since we've been to the hut, and Rondi hasn't seen that, yet."

"It's too late in the day; almost time for dinner," Efran objected, glancing up again.

The children all cried in objection, and Calix said, "We don't have to play today, Efran; we just want to show it to her."

With all their beseeching eyes on him, Efran groaned, "All right. Just to look. We'll walk you to the gates for bodyguards."

Shane and Ellor saluted to return to their duty hilltop, and Toby took the cart handle to pull Joshua along. Efran still had his good arm firmly around Minka.

They had to extend their ranks to walk down Main on the sidewalk. Efran led with an arm around Minka and Kraken to his right (on the street); Toby followed pulling Joshua in the cart, and the rest of the children came behind him. But Rondi brought up the rear holding hands with 6-year-old Acy and her brother, 4-year-old Pim. Looking back to see that, Efran nodded in satisfaction.

They arrived at the wall gates for Efran to request bodyguards to help him and Minka keep all the children in line going to the hut. Three men presented themselves at once, so the guards opened the gates for them.

As they were about to head out, Wendt came up. "Can I catch you a moment, Efran?"

"Of course, Commander," Efran said. But since the children were all waiting, he said, "Go on out; I'll catch up with you. Fennig, you walk with Minka, please; Willis and Melott bring up the rear. Thank you." Efran watched to see that the children did not attempt to break ranks in their excitement. As long as they were out, the gates would remain open. Shifting from foot to foot, Kraken watched them, but stayed with his human.

When the children had crossed the old stone bridge and turned west toward the new bridge over the Passage, Efran gave Wendt his attention. "Yes, Commander?"

"What do you know about the trolls that took Rondi?" Wendt asked.

"From what I understand, they were acting on orders from Nibor—our Historian. The troll who's sitting in the library writing out the history of the Abbey since the time Minka and I came," Efran said.

"You mean, they're . . . friendly trolls?" Wendt asked cautiously. This was unheard-of.

"I don't know," Efran said, absently stroking Kraken's nose. "Rondi considered them friendly. She said she knew at once that they weren't going to hurt her. And you remember the famous episode of her shoe—she made them pick up the shoe she dropped when they took her out of the carriage."

Efran tightened his lips in further thought, then said, "She told us they carried her east until she fell asleep. She woke up late in the night in what seemed to be a—a bed they'd made for her in the woods. She went back to sleep; woke up later in the morning to find that she was right on the road, and began walking toward the Lands until the tin man stopped his cart to pick her up."

Wendt said, “So, you believe it’s possible they were actually following instructions to rescue her?”

“I can hardly conceive it, but that’s what Rondi believes. And Minka,” Efran said. “In fact—” He glanced westward and stopped dead. Kraken’s head shot west, his ears standing straight up, then flattening.

“Excuse me, Commander.” Efran grabbed Kraken’s mane with his left hand to leap up and lie across his back, shouting at the gates, “Clear the way!” Despite objections from oncoming drivers trying to enter the Lands, Kraken wove around them until Efran kicked him to gallop over the old stone bridge.

“Mount up!” Wendt shouted. He didn’t have to know what Efran had seen in order to send him backup. Wendt paused to note Barr peering west, as Efran had been. Turning, Wendt searched the horizon, then said, “Is that—?”

“Smoke, Commander. It looks to be in the area of the play hut,” Barr said.

“Get me a horse!” Wendt shouted.

As Kraken ran over the new bridge and slowed (by necessity) at the path in the woods leading to the play hut, Efran listened hard for fighting or screams, but heard nothing. Thirty feet ahead, the playground gates were standing open, through which he glimpsed movement. The halter Kraken was wearing gave Efran no means of stopping him other than gripping with his legs, which he was already doing—or crying, “Stop!” which he did.

Kraken, alarmed at the sight before him, stopped so abruptly as to sit. Without a saddle, Efran slid right down his haunches to hit the ground.

Immediately he was surrounded by concerned young faces that cried, “The Captain fell off!” “Oh! Are you hurt?” “Poor Kraken!” “Poor Kraken”? Efran’s the one who fell on his bum!” “Here, let me help you up.” “You’re not helping!” “Get out of the way!” “Don’t pull on his broken arm!” “Can’t you see the cast?”

Finally, 4-year-old Pim took Efran’s face in his hands to ask, “Did you hurt your bum?”

Staggering up, Efran said, “No, thank you, I’m all right.” He looked around as Minka came up to take his arm, evaluating his state at a glance. Kraken was standing off, shaking himself. Toby brushed dirt from Efran’s backside as the others watched in mild anxiety. Standing with them were four or five interested trolls. The smoke Efran had seen was rising from what looked like a cooking fire, with a pot hanging over it.

“Trolls don’t cook their food,” he blurted, as if they should know better.

Rondi came over with a bright smile. “Efran, these are the trolls that got me out of the carriage! When we came up, they were fixing this big hole in the hut!”

Efran glanced at the evidence of repairs to the jagged hole that Kraken had made in the wattle and daub. Then Efran focused on the trolls. They had the stocky build, the big noses, the wiry hair, and the little black eyes, but they were looking at him almost intelligently. While they evaluated him, and he them, the Commander and a dozen men rode into the play area. The occupants stopped to watch Wendt dismount.

Rondi went on, “I think I can give you their names.” Pointing to the one beside her, she said, “This is Krug. He’s the one who carried me.” He nodded violently, his springy hair bouncing all over his shoulders. Rondi continued, “And these others are, I think, Irtz, Urpèd, Sheuf, and . . . Schuchard?”

The fifth-named troll earnestly corrected her pronunciation to something that sounded like chewing with an open mouth. She tried to get it right a few more times, till he finally shrugged and waved.

“Anyway, I think they want to use the hut for a little while, if that’s all right. That’s why they’re repairing it,” Rondi said.

Efran opened his mouth but Toby turned to the other children. “Since they rescued Rondi from her mean uncle, I think we should let them use it. What do you think?”

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Chapter 23

Alcmund asked, “What about when we want to play here?”

Toby looked at Rondi questioningly, and she turned to Krug. “They still want to play here.”

Krug’s face drooped in the effort to understand, so Hassie said, “PLAY. Lah lah de lah lah.” She began singing and skipping around. The other children then quickly enacted their favorite games.

Krug’s face brightened. “Da plahy! Da, da! Plahy!” He replicated Hassie’s song and dance, and the other trolls skipped around and bonked each other on the head.

“Wait. Do you know Nibor?” Toby asked.

“Nibor!” “Da Nibor!” the trolls said excitedly, their wiry heads bouncing.

“That’s a big point in their favor. Well?” Toby asked the children.

They expressed general agreement, but Calix said, “I think we should know whether they want to eat us or not.”

“Oh, yes.” Toby turned back to Krug to sternly demand, “Are you going to eat us?”

Krug squinted at him, and all the trolls turned in earnest to Rondi for a translation. She looked conflicted, then took Toby’s arm and pretended to bite it, then said angrily, “No!”

Their eyes grew large and they waved fervently: “Nah! Nah nah nah! Nah eat!” Krug opened his mouth wide, pointing to his teeth, and Rondi studied them.

She turned back to Toby to announce, “They have regular teeth, not human-eater teeth.”

Irtz intervened with the clear statement: “Bestest fud pygmy hog.”

And the other trolls almost swooned. “Ooooh, da, da.” “Pygmy hog.” “Ummmm.”

“Oh! That’s good then,” Calix said.

“So, is everyone all right with the trolls staying for a while and letting us come play when we want?” Toby asked around. All this while, Efran, Minka, the Commander, and the soldiers were silent.

“Yes!” “Yes.” “All right!” “That sounds good.” “We’re fine with that.” “Anh!” (which was Joshua voting yes).

Toby told Rondi, “We vote to let them stay.” And he held out his hand to Krug. The troll peered at it, then leaned down to sniff it.

But Rondi took Toby’s hand to put it in Krug’s gnarly hand. She explained, “You shake on it.” And Toby pumped Krug’s hand up and down.

“Shek!” Krug said happily. He then shook Irtz’s and Urpèd’s hands, and they shook each other’s hands, and their own hands, as well as Sheuf’s and Schuchard’s hands. So the children rushed among them to shake their hands, so that the handshakes would be binding on all parties.

With that, Noah cried, “Hooray! Our very own trolls who won’t eat us!” And the other children congratulated each other on their fun new acquisitions, shaking each other’s hands.

Mildly incredulous, the men watched. Then Efran wiped his mouth and said, “Well, that’s good. I’m glad you got that worked out. Ah, I believe the dinner bell has rung, so, let’s leave Krug and his friends to their, ah, dinner, and, let’s get back to the fortress.”

“All right,” Toby said, “Goodbye Krug, and Irtz, and Urpèd, Sheuf, and Schukchuraredaredlup.” Schuchard smiled broadly at Toby’s competent pronunciation of his name.

All the children waved goodbye to the trolls, who waved happily back. Toby took up the handle of Joshua’s cart and the children began filing out of the playground behind Minka and Efran, with Kraken walking beside him. When they were out, the soldiers then waved goodbye to the trolls, who waved at them while they left as well.

In examining the play hut, the trolls found the burlap bag of royals which Toby had stuck into a pot and then forgot all about it. Fortunately, they knew just what to do with it. They took the bag of royals out to the woods to bury it for the leprechaun who’d lost it.

The children were still chattering happily over their new thing when they passed through the gates into the Lands. Efran turned to say something to the Commander, but couldn’t think of what. Wendt, however, extended his hand to Toby. “My congratulations on your astute negotiations, Toby. You and the other children here have proved, again, that you are the Abbey’s greatest asset.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Toby said soberly. Then Wendt went down the line of children to shake all their hands, including Joshua’s.

Returning to Efran, Wendt patted his shoulder and went on into the barracks. His men congratulated the Captain and the Abbey children likewise, then the wards proudly walked down Main toward home.

That evening in bed, as Efran was trying to be intimate with his wife, he couldn’t help notice her grunting and shifting more than she should. “Am I hurting you?” he whispered.

“Yes!” she said.

He raised up, appalled. “Wha—?”

“Efran, next time you get angry, would you just pound the table instead of a stone wall?” She pulled his arm with the cast out from behind her neck.

He sagged on her, groaning, “I’m sorry. I’ve had a rough day.”

“I know,” she said, generously sympathetic despite the ridiculous assertion. “Let’s try this another way.” She shoved him onto his back, and he smiled.

The following morning, September 8th, Efran went up to the doctor’s quarters. Wallace was gone again, as he had so many patients, so Efran asked Leese piteously, “Can you please take off the cast and just bind up my hand with a regular bandage?”

“How long has it been on? When did you break your hand?” she asked, looking toward her calendar.

“It was—a week ago,” Efran hazarded. (In fact, it had been three days.)

She winced. “Can you leave it on just a few more days?”

He crinkled his eyes at her with a face of extreme suffering. So she groaned, reaching for the shears, and he cheered right up. But once she had the cast off, she replaced it with another tight bandage. Efran thanked her, left the doctor’s quarters, then stood in the corridor to unwind the bandage and refasten it just a little bit looser.

Also that morning, Ryal sealed the official notification of the revocation of Lord Windish’s guardianship of the minor Rondinelli. As Ryal had stated, it was based on Windish’s extreme negligence in his duty to protect her by irrationally rejecting a bodyguard, which resulted in the abduction of the child by a troll troop. Ryal had written, “While we were extremely grateful to God to find her alive and whole, that does not mitigate your shocking failure to accept protection at no cost to yourself that would have entirely prevented the incident. Therefore, I am accepting the petition of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea to take Rondinelli into their care under the terms of their charter.”

Soames walked this sealed letter down to Barracks A, where it was put into a pouch and handed to Caswall who, along with Chilcott, rode out at once to Featheringham, arriving in the late afternoon. Caswall handed the letter to Gate Commander Barr, then Caswall and Chilcott had a decent mess hall dinner. There, they entertained their brothers in arms with the entirely true narrative of how the Abbey children agreed to share their play hut with the troll troop who had kidnapped the recent 13-year-old Regent of Crescent Hollow.

The next morning, September 9th, Caswall and Chilcott were sent back to the Lands with reports from Barr to Commander Wendt. Also that morning, Barr put the pouch containing the letter to Windish, along with a receipt board, into the hand of Teschner. Then he and Serrano set out in good Hollowan clothes to make the delivery.

Upon entering Crescent Hollow, the pair stopped to look over the announcements board. Seeing a highly visible notice about the appointment of a new Surchatain, Serrano glanced around, then tore the announcement off the board to stuff it in an inner pocket. From there, they stopped at a tobacconist’s shop to ask directions to the house of Lord Windish.

The tobacconist said, “Oh, yes. Oh, dear, oh dear. To have been in mourning once for their daughter, only to find

that she was alive, only to lose her again to trolls, such a tragedy, such a tragedy.”

“I agree completely, dear sir, and we have condolences to deliver. Can you tell us where he lives?” Teschner had perfected the bored Hollowan accents so perfectly as to approach parody.

“Oh, yes. Right down this street to the first cross street, then take a left onto Pavilion Road. It’s the second house on the right, with the great black wreath, again,” the tobacconist said sadly.

“Thank you, sir,” Teschner said, tipping him a royal. The man glanced up astutely at Teschner and his companion, to lock them in his memory as gentlemen of standing.

The Abbey men found the house quickly, dismounting at the door for Teschner to raise and lower the heavy brass knocker three times. While waiting, he pulled out the letter and receipt board. Serrano held the horses’ reins.

A maid answered the door. “Sirs?” she said, affronted that strangers would have the audacity to knock on a door of mourning.

“Pardon the intrusion, dear lady,” Teschner said, bowing as though she were mistress of the house. “But I have an important message for Lord Windish that must be signed for.”

“Oh, well, I’ll take it.” She extended her hand.

Teschner replied, “Dear lady, although I would be delighted to favor my hand with the touch of your own, I regret that the letter must be delivered straight to the hand of Lord Windish.”

When she hesitated, Teschner was afraid he might have layered on the Hollowan snobbery a little too thickly, like phlegm instead of honey. (Tutored by Tourse, many Abbey soldiers were becoming proficient in Impersonations and Impostorizations.)

She murmured, “One moment,” before drawing back and shutting the door.

While waiting, Teschner whispered, “This one might be delivered wrapped around a rock through a window.”

Serrano gurgled in his throat, then had to cover it with a cough when the door flew open to reveal a highly vexed red-faced man. “What?” he shouted.

“Pardon, Lord Windish, special delivery,” Teschner said, holding the letter in view. When Windish reached for it, Teschner held the receipt board over it. “Sign for delivery, please.”

Windish growled in his throat, but dashed off an illegible signature with the wrapped charcoal stick on a string. “Thank you, sir,” Teschner said, handing over the letter.

Windish took it and slammed the door in his face. “We’re done ’ere, mate,” Teschner said with the lilt of a career criminal. Serrano laughed, patting the pocket with the announcement of a new Surchatain. Then they rode out of the city again.

An hour later, they stopped at Featheringham to change into their uniforms and show the announcement to the Gate Commander. Once he had seen it, he returned it to them with instructions to take it and the receipt to Commander Wendt. They were gone again within minutes.

Back to Windish: Before breaking the seal of the letter, he looked at the hand that had written, “Lord Windish, Crescent Hollow.” There was something familiar about it. He muttered, “It had better be very sincere condolences to disturb the grieving.”

When he had opened it and read its contents, his black face took on a tinge of purple. “Blast them! She survived!” he shouted.

His wife came bustling up. “What? She’s alive? But—but we—”

“I know,” he groaned, half crumpling the letter. “Let me think,” he breathed, loosening his grip on the parchment.

She took the letter to read it. “Oh, well, that notary was just appeasing the Abbey lord. Polonti are despicable. Did you see the way he was looking at me?” She put a hand to her fashionably low-cut bodice.

“Now, then,” he murmured, eyes searching the far wall. “I know how to work this. Yes. Culliton will get this revocation reversed for us; we’ll get her back and. . . . Yes. No fear, dear Malaga; this will not thwart us in the slightest. I’ve got to take a purse with me, though—that thief of a notary won’t lift a finger unless you pay up front. Now, there, cheer up and go buy yourself a new hat.”

“Yes, Ennemond has some wonderful new designs. But I’ll need a dress to go with it,” she purred.

“Get two,” he said with a pinch on her pointy little chin. So they both departed on their separate errands.

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Chapter 24

Shortly, Windish arrived at the notary’s office. As he entered, he looked around at the dead, dusty space, with unused ledgers leaning listlessly on the shelves and a cobweb claiming one corner. With a touch of impatience, he rang the bell on the counter. “Hello? Culliton?”

“Back here,” a slurred voice said.

Windish brushed past a dusty curtain into the back room. He looked down in faint disgust at the sozzled man, greasy head leaning back in the same deep chair that he had inhabited almost without interruption for the last three days. “What can I do for you?” Culliton muttered, bottle in hand. A collection of empties lay piled around the chair.

“Can you still do anything?” Windish asked with a touch of pity.

“If it pays enough. Haven’t I always come through for you?” Culliton said with sudden clarity.

“So far, yes,” Windish said, handing him the letter. “I need you to get this revoked. I need to get Rondinelli back.”

Glancing over it, Culliton smiled. “Old Ryal. He still alive?”

“Enough to wreak havoc. Can you do it?” Windish asked.

“Easily,” Culliton snorted. “Fifty royals.” He took another drink.

Windish handed him the leather purse. “Here are thirty. When I have her back, I’ll bring you another fifty.”

Culliton shifted his red eyes to appraise him. “Anyone but you, I’d turn ’em away. But you do always pay. Especially for the nasty jobs.” His smile had a tinge of blackmail about it. “Of course, if you prefer, you can go to the new notary. Everyone else has.” He took another drink.

Windish shifted uncomfortably, deciding right then that this was his last request of the dissolute notary. But because Windish urgently needed it done, he was willing to risk this last crucial job to him—which Windish was quite certain that the new notary would never touch. “And I will pay again when I receive your results.” He turned out of the shop.

For a moment, Windish stood on the sidewalk at a sudden crossroads. Something inside him urged that he go reclaim the letter and the purse, and face the consequences that would be forthcoming, for Rondinelli was beginning to remember. They had discovered in the aborted carriage ride back to Crescent Hollow that she was beginning to remember what she had seen as a very little girl. But another part of him recoiled in abhorrence at the murders becoming known. His brother deserved to die for the wealth he had accumulated, but his brother’s wife had never been anything but kind to him.

“No,” Windish exhaled, looking off. “If I play the piece well, I will survive, as I always have.” So he went home.

Culliton, in his shop, sat up to read the letter thoroughly. “Oh, ho,” he laughed. “No wonder he’s anxious to get the child back. Enough people were suspicious of how they died; all she has to do is start raising questions for it to all come out.”

He looked back at the signature and stamp. “Old Ryal, scourge of usurers in Westford,” he sighed. “Lord Ryal,” he noted. Peering, he read off the entire title: “‘Ryal, Lord Commander of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.’ So the old man’s stubborn integrity has won him a title in this new settlement we all laughed at . . . this place that threatens to usurp the grandness of Crescent Hollow.”

He looked at the seal and the signature fondly a moment, then raised his eyes in clarity. “Why should it depend on a child to speak up, when there are others who know what happened? Why should the burden rest on her shoulders?”

Culliton deliberately put the bottle down beside the chair, then rose to walk himself unsteadily to the front counter. Here, he pulled out parchments and quill, inkwell and sealing wax. Stirring the long-unused ink, he dipped his quill and began in a shaky script:

“To Notary Dileonardo

“From Notary Culliton

“My dear Sir:

“I am dying. The physicians cannot treat the malignancy that is wasting my bones, therefore I find it essential to unburden myself of my crimes while I have breath.

“Please see the enclosed letter from Lord Ryal of the Abbey Lands to Lord Windish. You may remember that he inherited the guardianship of young Rondinelli from his brother when he and his wife perished in a terrible fire. I know the truth of those circumstances, which I now swear to you as my dying declaration. . . .”

After completing a multi-page letter, Culliton signed and stamped it with his notary seal before blotting it, sealing it up with Lord Ryal’s letter, and addressing the whole. He took a couple of royals with him to stand on the sidewalk, scanning for one of the couriers in green sashes who constantly passed this way.

When one appeared on horseback at the corner, Culliton waved the letter over his head. The messenger rode up and paused his horse to lean down, whereupon Culliton shakily handed him the letter and the royals. “This is crucial correspondence that must be delivered at once.”

“Yes, sir,” the man replied. He took both payment and packet respectfully, seeing death in the man’s face.

Watching him go, Culliton inhaled his first deep breath of fresh air in weeks. Then he returned to his back room to take up a full bottle and the almost-full purse of royals.

With these in hand, he walked past all the disdainful Hollowan stares to the edge of the city, to a crest overlooking the valley where the old Goadby’s/new Seger’s brewery squatted. Sitting on the high crest, he opened the bottle to drink slowly, tossing royals over the cliff one at a time, just to see how far they would go.

And when the bottle had been emptied bit by bit, Culliton lay down on the edge of the crest and closed his eyes.

Late that afternoon, Teschner and Serrano arrived at the Lands. Before going to the barracks mess, they reported to Commander Wendt, handing him the signed receipt board and the announcement. Saluting, Teschner said, “Lord Ryal’s letter delivered to Windish’s hand, Commander, and, Serrano here filched the announcement from the notice center.” He directed a gaze of disfavor on his partner, who grinned.

“Ah. Job well done, then,” Wendt said, eyes on the announcement. “Dismissed.” They saluted and left, then Wendt said, “Gabriel.”

“Yes, Commander.” Gabriel put his list on the desk to stand before Wendt’s desk.

“Send someone up for Efran, please,” Wendt said, laying the announcement thoughtfully before him.

“Yes, Commander.” Gabriel stepped out to whistle at a rider.

Within minutes, Gabriel opened the door again, and Wendt leaned back in his chair at the sound of loping hoofbeats. Then he heard Efran say, “Complain all you want; if you’re going to drop at the first sight of trolls, you’re going to wear a saddle so I can stay on, at least.” There was a snort, and Efran said, “I was just as surprised as you, but I didn’t fall off by myself.” Breathing in exasperation, Efran walked in to salute: “Captain Efran reporting as summoned, Commander.”

Standing, Wendt glanced at the halfhearted bandage on his hand, then nodded. “Come to the back room, Efran.”

“Yes, Commander,” Efran said, eyeing the wrinkled paper.

They sat at the conference table in their usual chairs: Wendt at the head with Efran to his right. First, Wendt placed the receipt board in front of him. “Supposedly, that’s Windish’s receipt of Lord Ryal’s notice.”

“Ah. Yes,” Efran said. “Since he signed it with a wavy line, whoever delivered it has to take it to Ryal and swear that this is the receipt for it.”

“I should have realized that,” Wendt said. Leaning back, he called out the open door, “Gabriel.”

The Second appeared at once. “Commander?”

Wendt extended the receipt board to him. “Teschner needs to take that to Lord Ryal to swear that this is the receipt he received for the letter.”

“Ah,” Gabriel said, taking it. “Right away, Commander. Captain.”

“Don’t salute me,” Efran said as Gabriel left.

Wendt then laid the announcement in front of him. “And this he took from the Crescent Hollow announcement board today.”

Efran picked it up to read aloud: “‘Notice to all Hollowans: On this glorious day of September the seventh, in the year eighty-one fifty-five from the creation of the world, the esteemed Council of Crescent Hollow proclaims their member Councilor Purewal to be Surchatain of Crescent Hollow by a unanimous vote.’ Good luck and a long life to him,” Efran quipped and Wendt smiled.

Efran noted, “Oh, there’s more: ‘In addition, the Council has named as Councilor Purewal’s replacement on this body—’” Efran gagged, then resumed, “‘the esteemed Lord Windish, now in mourning for his beloved daughter, previous Regent of Crescent Hollow, murdered by bloodthirsty trolls. May her star shine brightly in the heavens.’”

He scanned the rest of the announcements, which were irrelevant. Then he sat back, folding his arms across his chest to scan the ceiling. “What does this mean for her, and for us now?” He abruptly looked back down at the announcement. “September seventh. Obviously, he and his wife were back in Crescent Hollow by then, but didn’t know that she survived. As of today, they know. So what are they going to do?” He looked at Wendt.

“Try to get her back, again,” Wendt said, taking up the announcement.

“Why?” Efran demanded. “According to Ryal, it’s impossible now. And since we slapped down their last two attempts to annoy us with their buff-colored uniforms, how is he going to convince the Council to try again?”

“Interesting questions, especially in view of your certainty that her soup was poisoned at dinner,” Wendt murmured.

“Yes, it was, without question,” Efran insisted. “They were trying to kill her then. They’re still trying to kill her. But what can a young girl have that’s such a threat to them?”

“Nothing but . . . knowledge, perhaps. What does she know?” Wendt mused.

“About Windish?” Efran proposed. “Should I ask her?”

Wendt considered that, wincing. “Whether she knows something or not, probing for it would be painful. I would rather not do that unless it became absolutely essential.” Efran silently agreed.

That evening at dinner in the fortress, Rondi sat across from Efran while he had Ella on his left, Joshua on his knee, and Minka on his right, as usual. Rondi and Minka had been helping the ladies at The Lands Clothing Shop with Faire planning all day, and they were both giddy with excitement. Rondi told everyone within earshot, “We’re going to have acrobats, and jugglers, and magicians! There will be musicians, of course—Minka and I listened to the most amazing auditions from musicians who want to come!”

“Yes! I never heard anything like them!” Minka said, gripping Efran’s arm while he was trying to eat and feed Joshua. He nodded helplessly. “Of course, Xander’s orchestra is wonderful, but his musicians don’t play any of the instruments we heard today,” she added.

“Like what?” Ella dared to ask.

Rondi said, “Well, there was one man playing a tenor cornett, which is a horn shaped like a snake. It has a woody, foggy sound, like something you hear at night across the lake.”

“Oh, I like that description!” Minka agreed. “In a way, the ocarina sounded like that, too—it’s a vessel flute, and it had such a pure, airy tone, so dreamy.”

“Oh, and the singing tree!” Rondi said.

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Chapter 25

“The singing tree!” Minka agreed, almost knocking over her lager. Efran righted it.

Ella asked warily, “What is the singing tree?”

“It pours out the songs of the wind!” Rondi said in excitement.

“How?” Efran asked.

Both Minka and Rondi started explaining at once, then both stopped talking to let the other explain it, then they both started talking again, until Efran had his head down almost in his plate.

Then one man passing behind them said, “It’s just a set of pipes, of wood or brass, with slits cut in them. They’re set in the ground at certain angles to make sounds when the wind blows through them. But it takes skill to place them right.”

Everyone was silent, studying him. He was not a soldier; he wore an apron like a cook, though none of them recognized him. He could have been part Polonti, with long black hair that he wore tied back. Efran asked, “Who are you?”

“My name is Nevares, Captain. I’m the son of Rollo’s brother Hime. Madea invited me down from Deneau, village north of here.”

“Rollo,” Efran said. “Madea’s husband?”

“Yes, Captain,” he said. Rollo had been hanged by Surchatain Lightfoot for making a derogatory comment.

Wardly came running up. “Whenever yer done here, Nevares, Mum asks that yer marinade the meats for tomorrow.”

“Yes,” he said, moving off.

But Minka said, “Can you build us a singing tree?”

Nevares turned to say, “I’m not good at it; not like my father.”

“Can he build one?” Minka asked intently.

“Yes,” he said.

She turned to Efran, fingers at her lips. “We need at least one singing tree on the Lands.”

He looked her over, smiling, then asked Nevares, “Can you get your father down here to look at building one for us? He’ll be well paid.”

“Yes, Captain. Thank you,” Nevares said, ducking his head. Then he went back to the kitchen.

Efran asked Minka, “How were you able to hear one?”

“A man came down with a small sample tree built on a board. He had to move it around to get the wind to hit it right, but when he did, it was like nothing I’ve ever heard,” she said. Rondi nodded. Minka added, “But he was unacceptably vague about when he could actually build one here. He wanted to know how much we’d pay him, first.”

Efran nodded. “Let’s hear from Hime.”

Three days later, on September 12th, Hime was walking the Lands with Minka, Nevares, and the Fortress’ structural engineer Thrupp, who was interested in the acoustic properties of the pipes that made the strange sounds, and which wood or metal worked best. (The building engineer Gerard was also interested, but was closing in on what looked to be a successful prototype of a life-sized, self-moving cart based on Froggatt’s mechanical toy.)

By late afternoon, Hime had narrowed down ideal locations to two: the far eastern edge of the hilltop, and anywhere around the old stone bridge. He, Minka, Efran, Nevares, and Thrupp were on the bridge, evaluating the best locations around it to build a tree.

“There’s something about this bridge,” Hime mused. “It seems to create vibrations from thin air.”

“Can’t wait to see what the faeries would do with a singing tree, then,” Efran added idly, thinking about the chapel trees.

“Shh!” Minka hissed, wide-eyed, and he grinned at her. Rondi joined them fresh from Faire work at The Lands Clothing Shop, so Minka pulled her aside to update her on Hime’s findings.

Minutes later, a lone messenger in a buff-colored uniform rode past them over the bridge to the open gates. Recognizing the uniform as Hollowan, Efran promptly began walking over to him.

The young rider looked to be trying to go straight up Main, but Conte, on the wall today, took hold of the horse’s bridle and said, “Give your message, son.”

“It’s for Rondinelli’s eyes only, from her uncle. A matter of life and death,” the boy said, per his instructions.

Gaining the horse’s side, Efran raised a hand. “I am her guardian. Give it to me.”

“I can’t—” he began desperately. Before he knew what was happening, he was dragged off the horse, his pouch opened, and the letter handed to the Captain.

As Efran broke the seal, he glanced up at the panicky, exhausted young man. He said, “If I don’t return with her answer before daybreak tomorrow, I’m a dead man.”

Efran nodded to Conte, “Take him to the mess for dinner.”

“Yes, Captain. Up, boy, on your feet,” Conte instructed. The young man complied in despair. Another man took his horse to the barracks stables to be groomed and fed.

Efran opened the letter to read:

“My dearest Rondinelli:

“I do not know what all you told the Council, nor how you could possibly remember all the Events of that terrible Night. But I swear to you, my dear niece, that it did not go as you claimed. I had nothing to do with the outrageous Robbery that preceded the Fire, though it was certainly on my Instructions that you were saved from the Blaze. So, it is true that you owe your life to Me.

“Now I am asking that you make good on that Debt. For, upon your remembrances, false as they are, I have been put up on charges of Murder. Yes, MURDER. The Council has suspended Judgment of my Fate until they have your word. If you retract any of these terrible Accusations, they will suspend the Death Sentence. But they must have your word before the Council reconvenes at Daybreak on September the 13th. Yes, the 13th—a Day of harrowing Judgment for us All.

“I am trusting, my dearest, sweet Rondinelli, that you will remember the Kindnesses of your Aunt and I in providing the best Instruction for you, and feeding and clothing you, for all these Eight Years since your parents’ passing. Now, dear Rondinelli, your poor Uncle is waiting behind Bars, looking toward the Sunrise, looking for your word of Clemency to avert this terrible Wrong that is about to befall Me.

“Remember, my dear: ‘Be Merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful. Judge Not, and you will not be judged; Condemn Not, and you will not be condemned; Forgive, and you will be forgiven.’ That is from the Bible.

“Yours in Love,

“Uncle Windish”

Efran glanced up to see the Commander come out of the barracks after noting the distraught messenger taken in for dinner. So Efran walked over to salute, extend the letter to him, and whisper, “Please burn it after you read it, Commander. Let’s put the messenger in a cell overnight, then find a place for him anywhere in the Lands. He can’t go back to Crescent Hollow.”

“Ah,” Wendt said, opening the letter.

Marguerite had come to his side in time to hear all that, and Efran muttered, “Don’t crinkle your eyes at me, Auntie.” She laughed silently. Wendt was reading the letter with drawn brows.

Efran walked back over to slide an arm around Minka’s waist. He asked, “Well? What have we decided?”

“Rondi wants a singing tree here *and* on the hilltop,” Minka said in her lieutenant commander mode.

Efran looked attentively to Rondi, who cried with shining eyes, “Is that wrong?” For she had just spotted Mathurin walking over to greet them.

“No, that’s good,” Efran said, looking off to the west. “It’s all good.”

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on September 12th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

NOTES:

[The Singing Ringing Tree](#)

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Minor Regent*
(Book 25)

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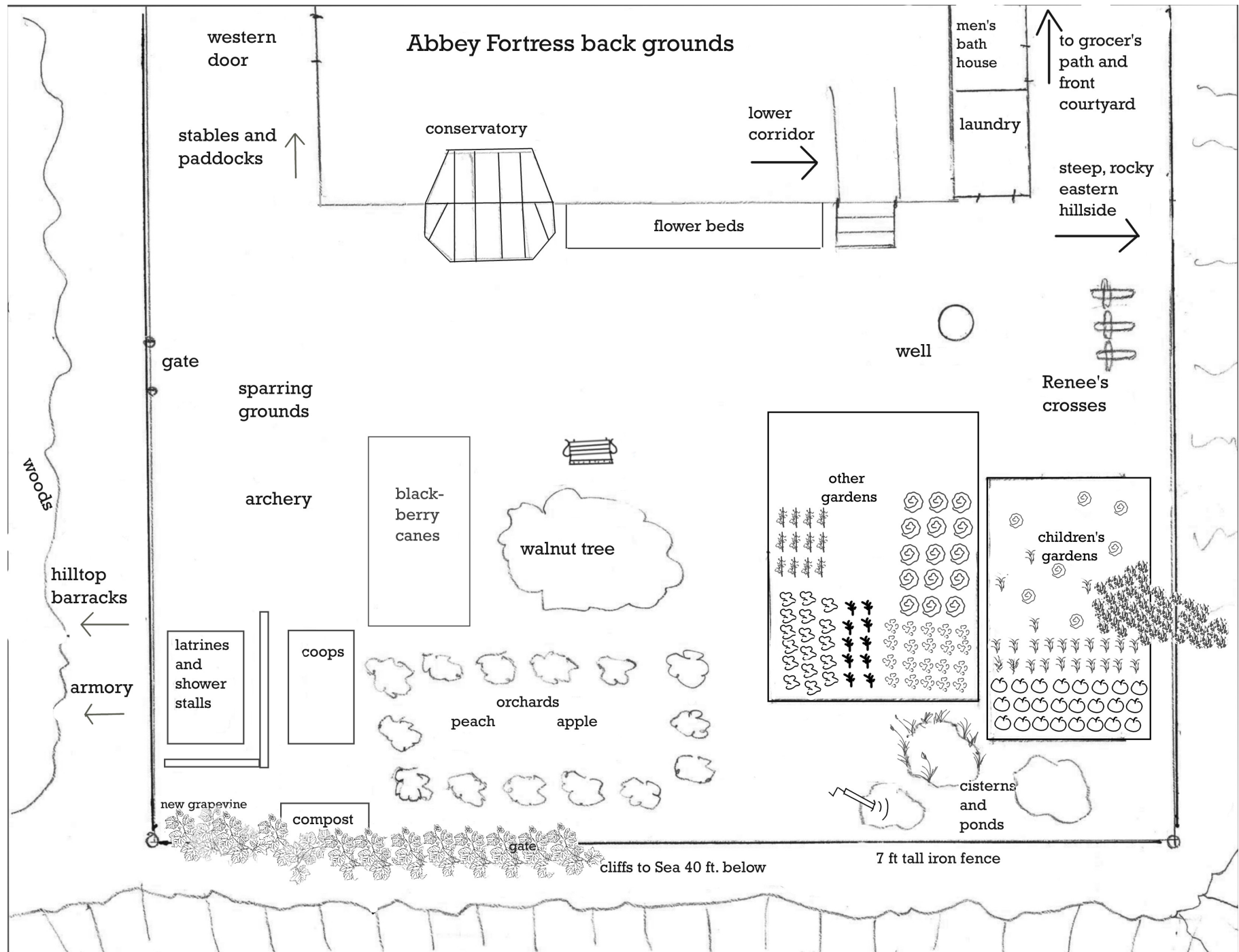
Aceto—ah SEE tow
 Alberon—AL ber on
 Allyr—AL er
 Ares—AIR eez
 Atticitian—at eh SISH un
 Auber—aw BER
 Averno—ah VURN
 Barrueta—bare ooh ET ah
 bonhomie—BAHN uh mee (easygoing friendship)
 Bourguignon—bore GEE nyun (hard g)
 Bowring—BOWE ring
 Brogna—BRONE ya
 Bullara—bu LAR ah
 Calix—KAY lix
 Campari—kam PAH ree
 canapés—KAN ah payz
 Capur—KAH pir
 Challinor—CHAL en or
 Chaudoin—sha DOE en
 Clough—chloh
 Conte—cahnt
 Culliton—CULL eh tun
 Cyneheard—SIGN herd
 Delano—deh LAN oh
 Deneau—deh NO
 dénouement—day noo MAHN
 Dileonardo—dee lee on ARE doh
 Dolivo—doh LEEV oh
 Dominica—dah MIN ee ka (the Lord's day)
 Eavenson—EV en sun
 Efran—EFF run
 egregious—eh GREE juhs (outstandingly bad)
 Elvey—ELL vee
 Ennemond—EN eh mund
 Estes—ESS tis
 Eudoxie—you DOX ee
 Eurus—YOUR us
 Eurussian—your uh SEE un
 ewer—YOU er
 Fiacco—fee AH koh
 Flodie—FLOW dee
 Gaea—GAY uh
 Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
 Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
 Goadby—GOAD bee
 Goss—gahs
 Goulven—GOHL vin (hard g)
 Goyne—goyn (hard g)
 Graeme—GRAY em

Hartshough—HART soh
 Hereward—HERR uh wuhd
 Herzogl—HURT zog uhl
 hors d'oeuvres—awr durvz
 incognito—in kog NEE toh
 Ionadi—ee YON ah dee
 Javier—JAY vee er
 Jehan—JAY han
 Jonguitud—JONG kwit udd
 Justinian—jus TIN ee un
 Kaas—kahs
 Kelsey—KELL see
 Koschat—KOS chat
 Kraken—KRAY ken
 Leila—LYE la
 Leneghan—LEN eh gan
 Lilou—LEE loo
 Lowry—LAHW ree
 Madea—mah DAY ah
 Malaga—MAL ah gah
 Marguerite—mar ger EET
 Mathurin—mah THUR in
 Melchior—MEL key or
mele—MAY lay (a Singer)
 Melott—meh LOT
 meritorious—meh reh TAW ree uhs
 Minka—MINK ah
 Minogue—men OGE (hard g)
 Moises—MOIZ ez
 Nesse—ness
 Nevares—neh VAIR ez
 Nibor—NEE bore
 Nierling—NEAR ling
 Nomus—NO mis
 Nyarko—nuh YAR koh
 ocarina—awk ah REE nah
 Oloroso—oh lir OH so
 Ori—OR ee
 Pia—PEE ah
 Piniello—pen YEH low
 Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
 Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
 reconnoiter—re kuh NOY tur
 Reinagle—REN ah gull
 Ricci—REE chee
 risqué—ris KAY (indecent)
 Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee
 Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
 Sampey—SAM pee

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Minor Regent*
(Book 25)

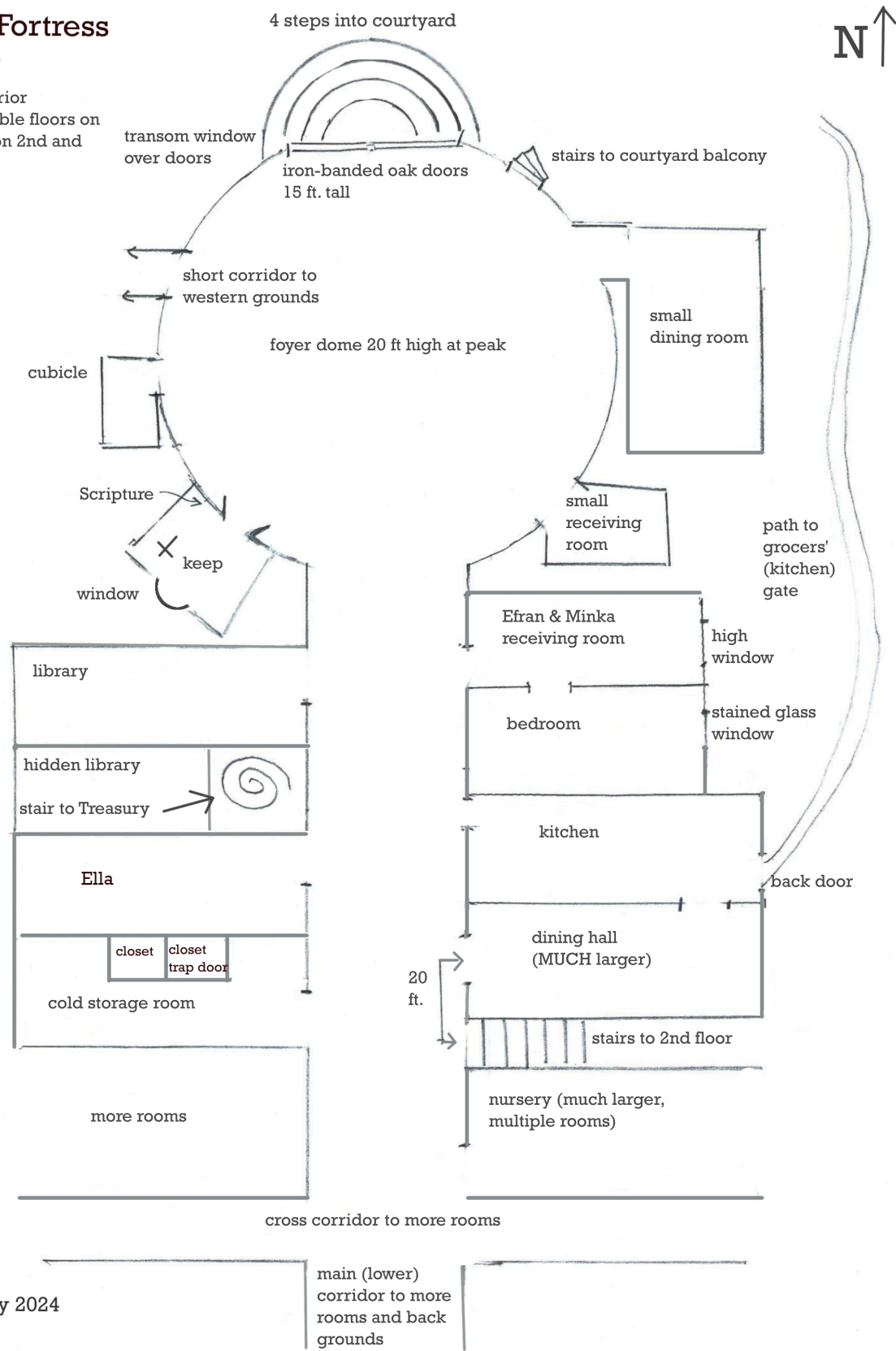
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Sasany—SASS an ee
Schuchard—SCHUK chur ared ARE dlup
Seger—SEE gur
Serrano—suh RAHN oh
Sosie—SO see
Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Stites—stights
Suco—SUE coh
Sughrue—SUE grew
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Teschner—TESH nur
Tiras—TEER us
Tisi—TEE see
tivoli—TIV uh lee
Tomer—TOH mur
Tourjee—TUR jee
Trina—TREE nah
Ure—YOUR ay
Verrin—VAIR en
Viglian—VIG lee en
Voge—vogue
Webbe—web
Weber—WE bur
Whately—WOT lee
Windry—WIN dree
Wystan—WIS tan
Xander—ZAN der
Zollicoffer—ZOLL ee cof er



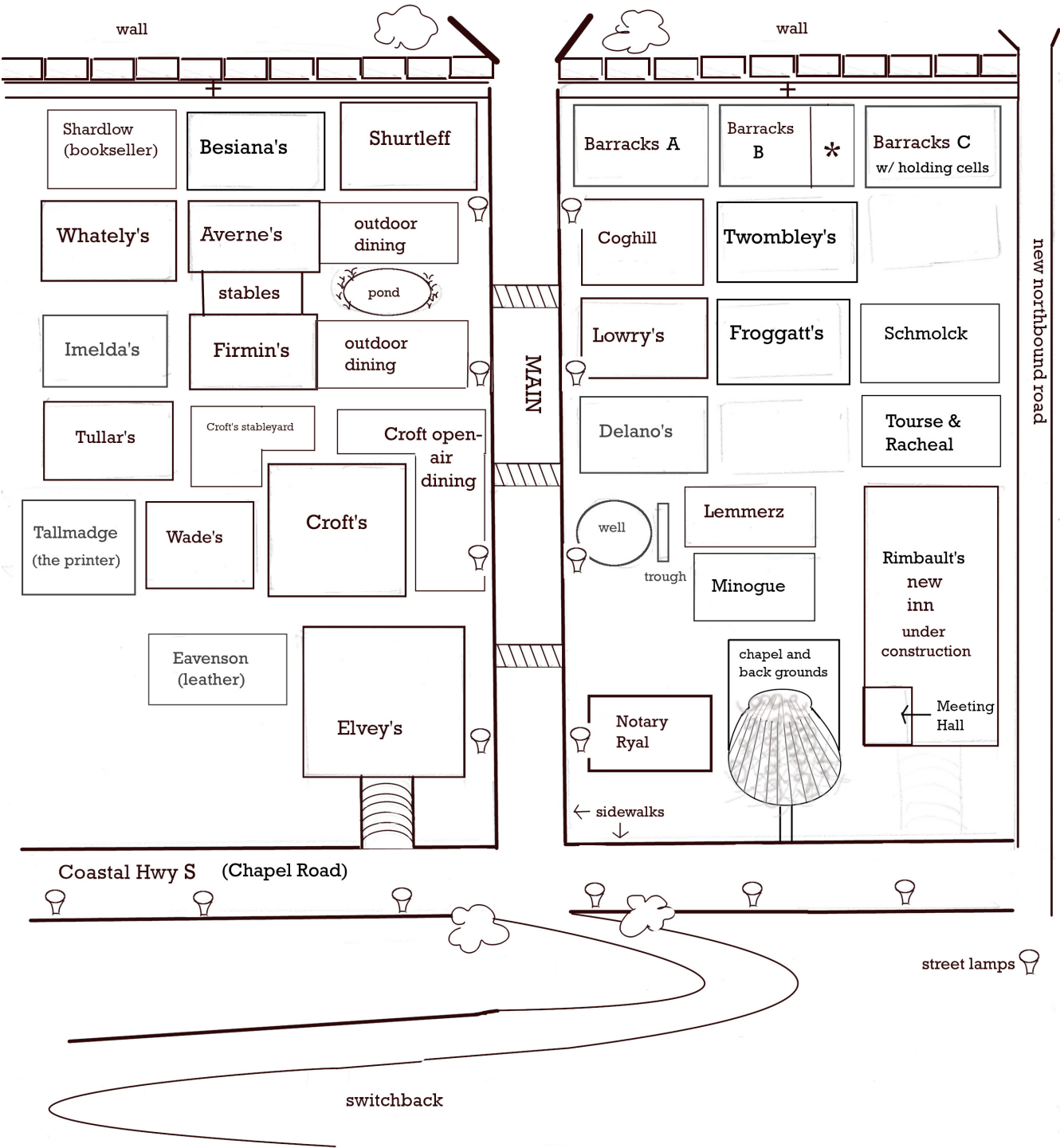
Abbey Fortress Interior

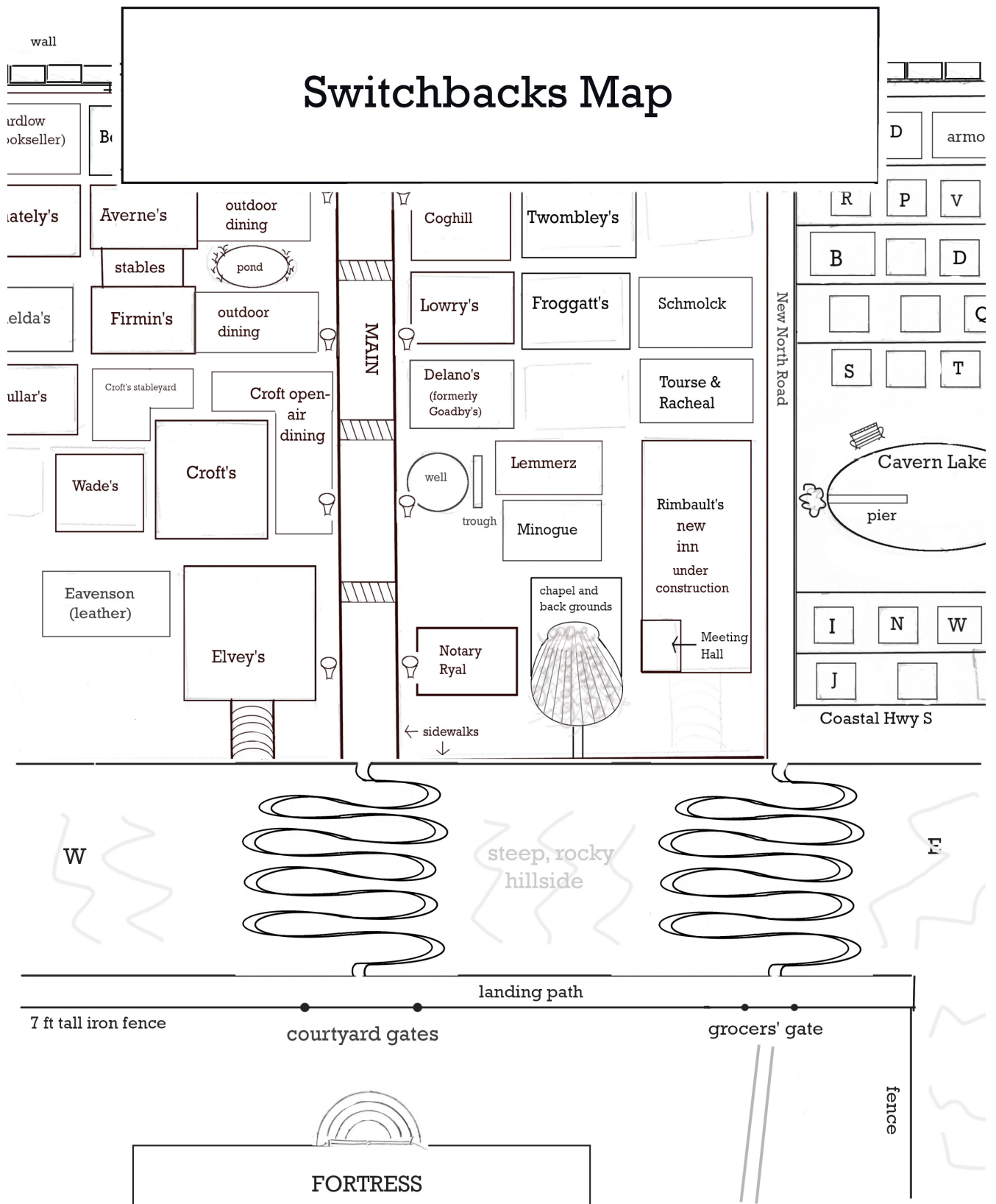
white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors

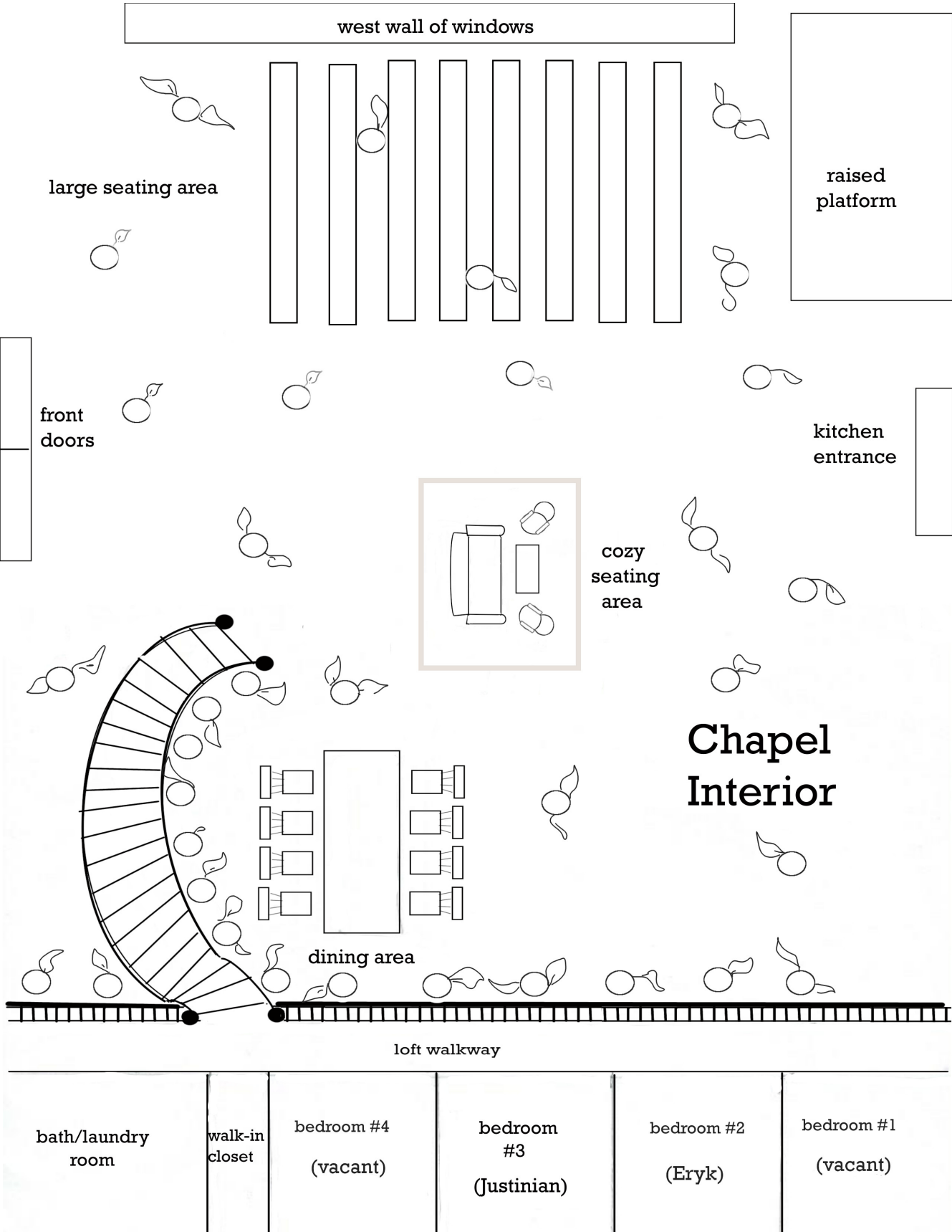


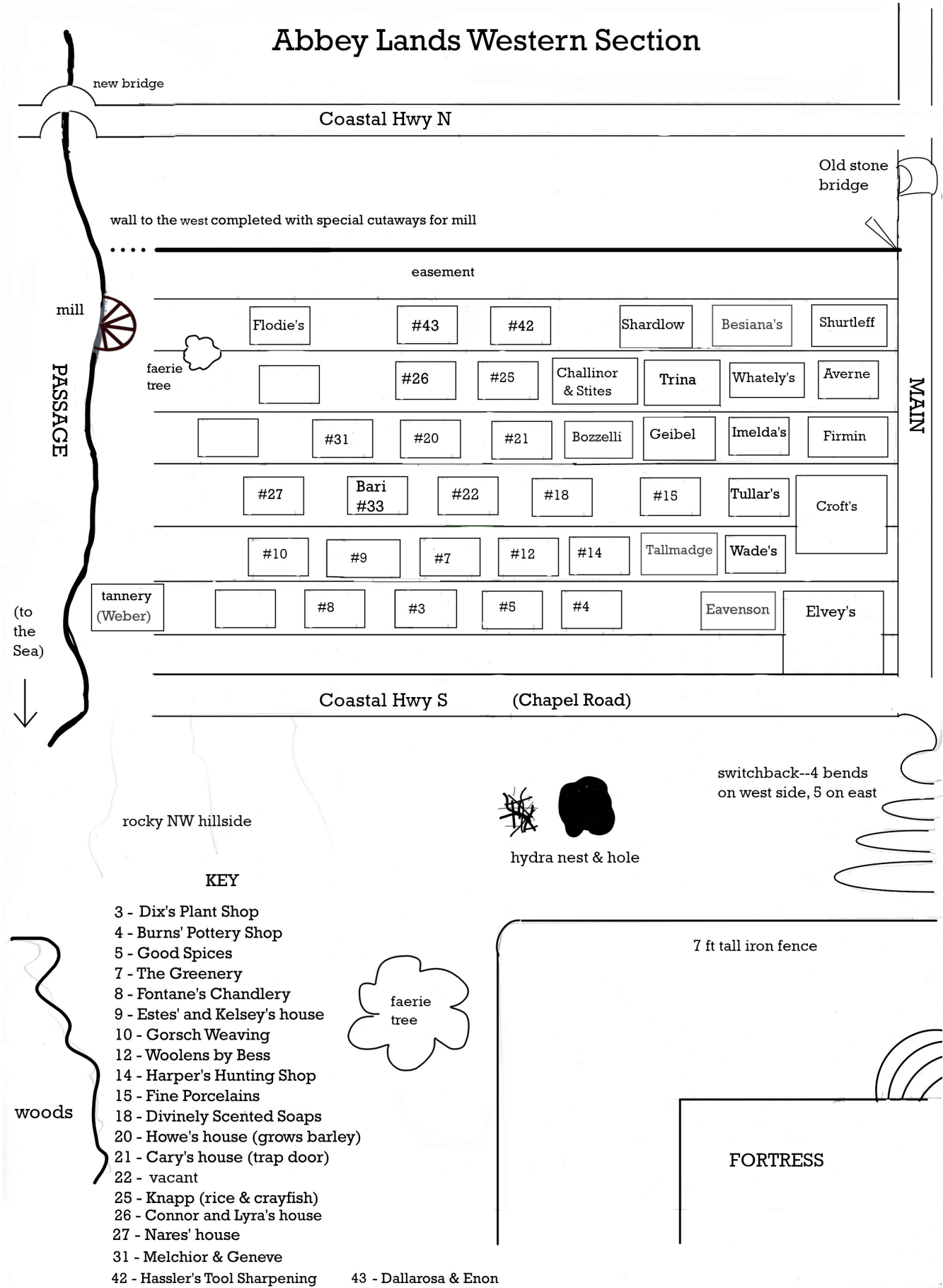
Abbey Lands Main Road

- * infirmary and mess kitchen
- + easements



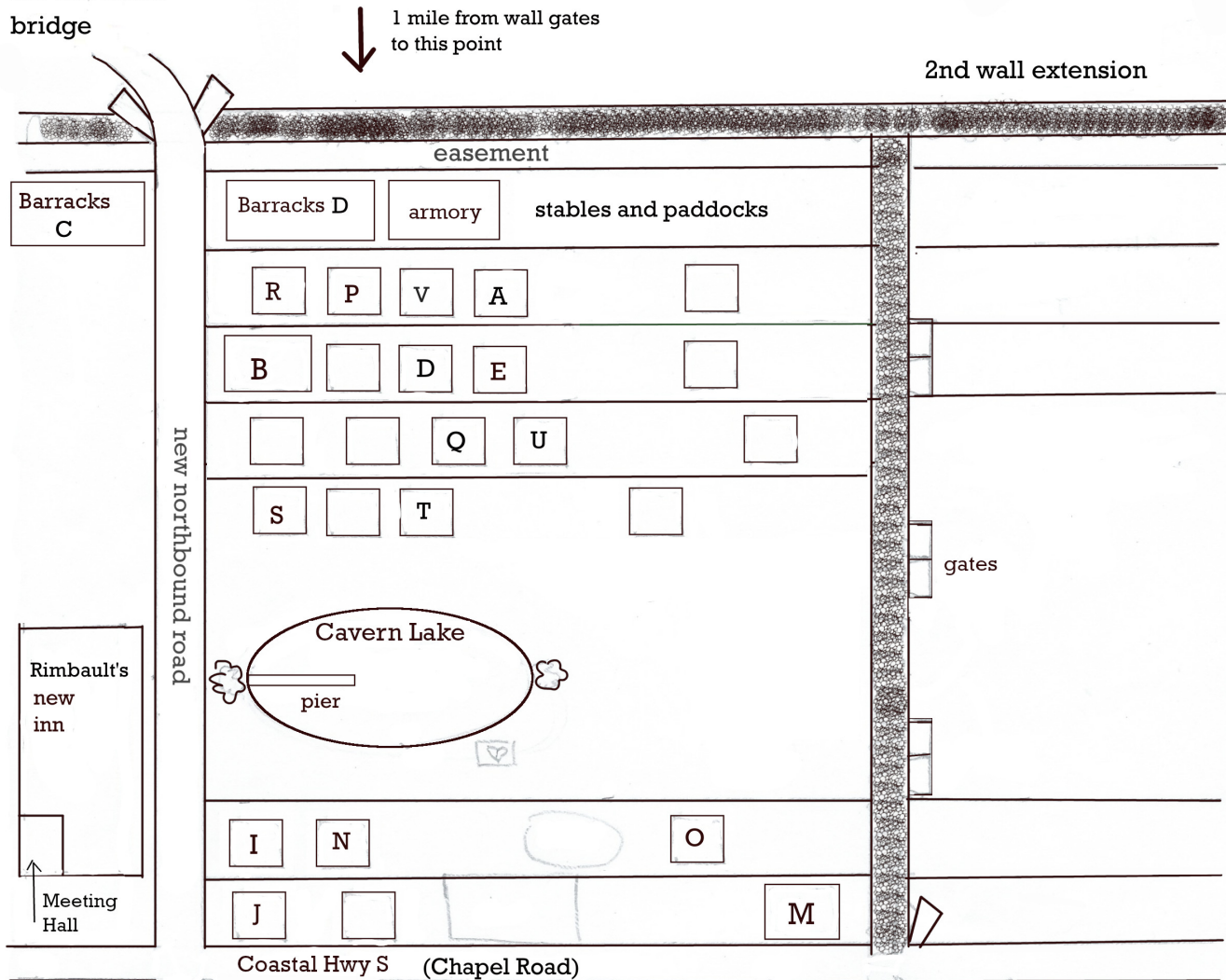






road curves to
intersect Main past
the old stone
bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

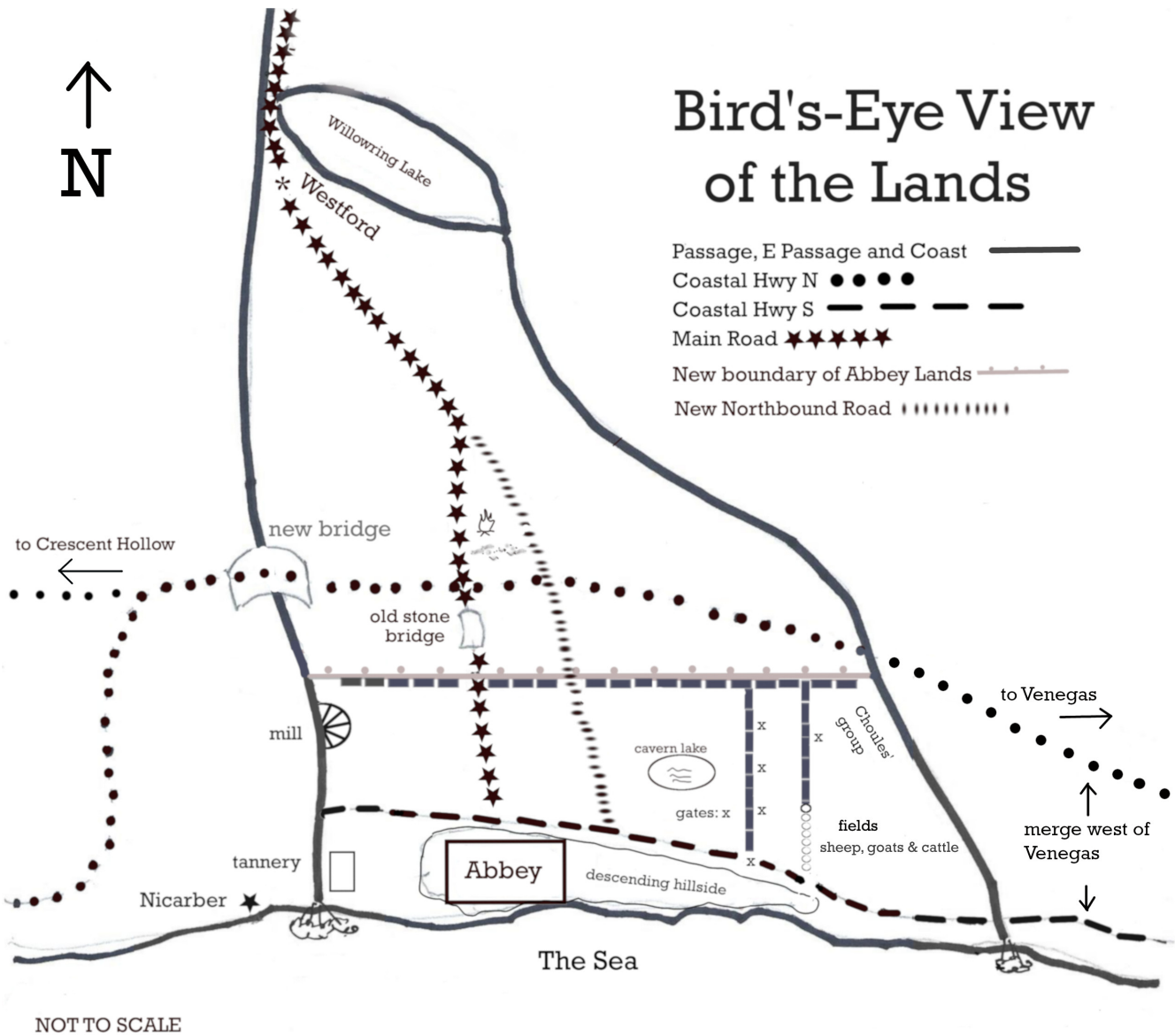


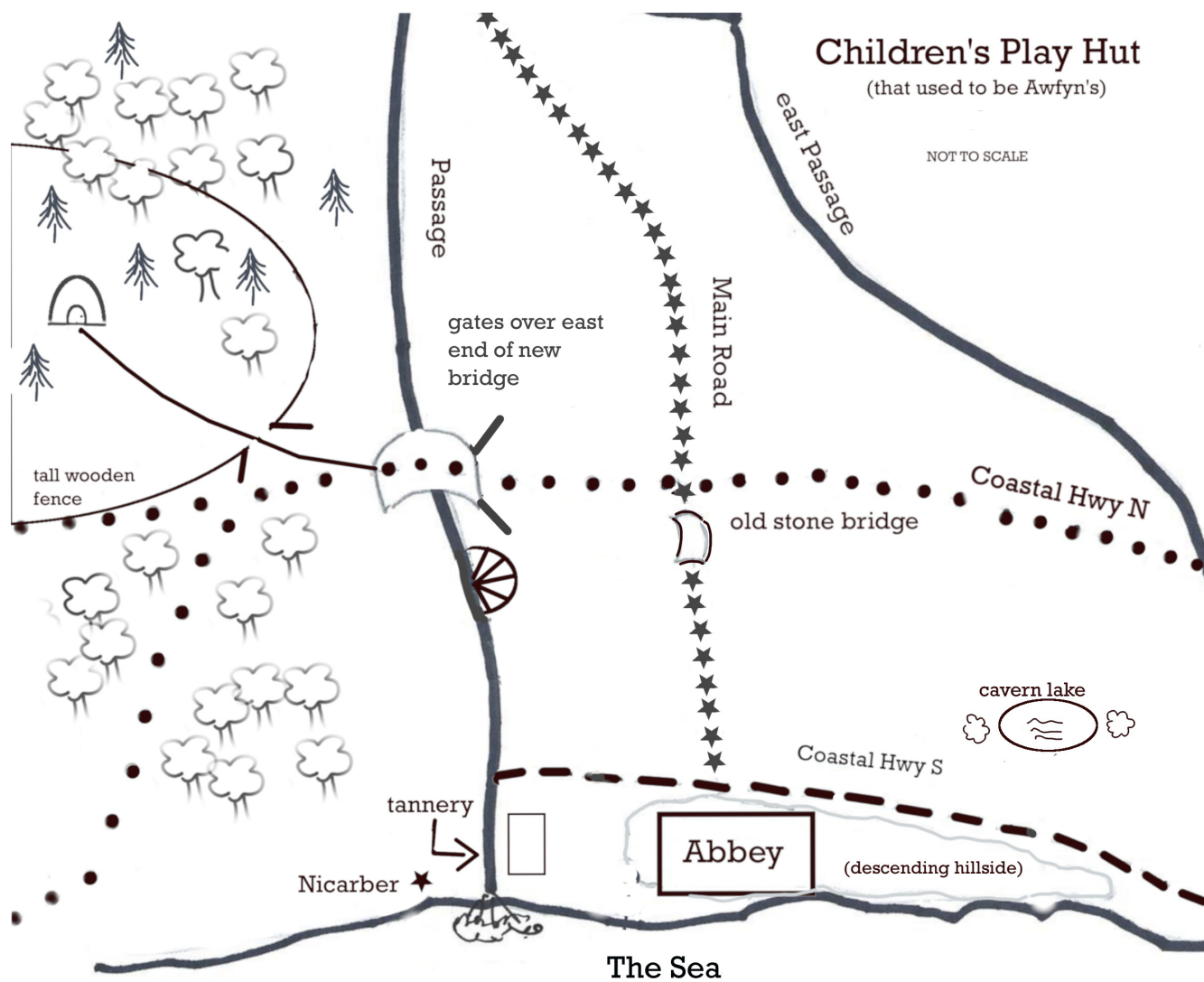
new switchback

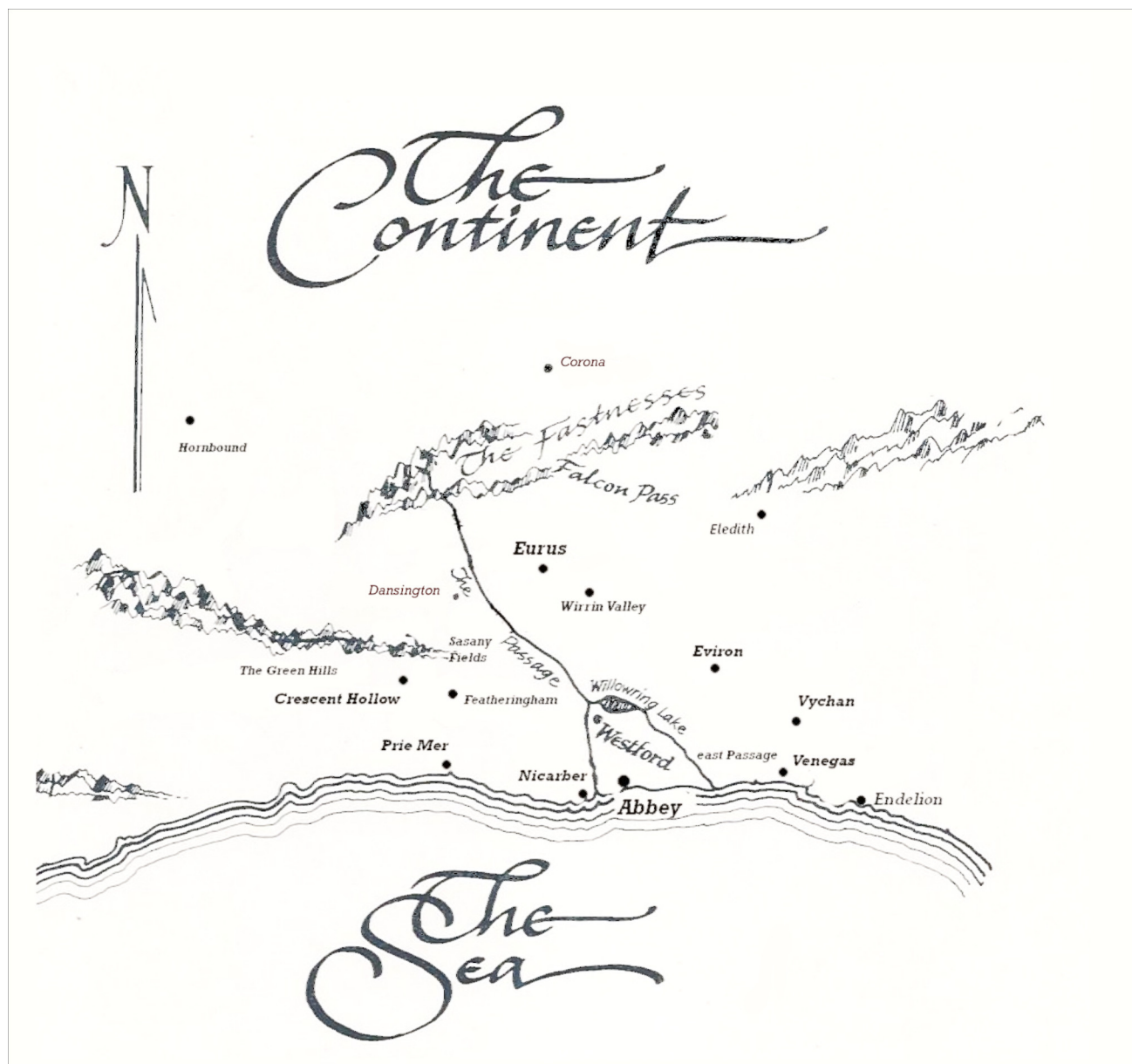
to
courtyard
gates

- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Folliott's house (#61)
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring's House
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office

- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry & Eryk







Windish and Malaga Get Rondi (Book 25:
Lord Efran and the Minor Regent)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



The fabulous backdrop for this confrontation is the [Palace of Monserrate](#)¹ in Sintra, Portugal. The AI-generated tabletop came from [here](#)², and the parchments, quill and ink (which the Fortress supplied to Nibor) came from [PickPik](#) and [Klipartz](#).

[Rondi](#)³, standing at the head of the table with [Ryal](#)⁴, is looking out the window at a [Mt. Rainier](#)⁵ sunset for comfort (see below). He is carrying a book that looks suspiciously like Estes' Polonti *Code of Justice*. I had to tuck it under Ryal's arm to cover up the laptop. To his left is [Windish](#)⁶, and beside him is [Malaga](#)⁷, who is wearing designer clothing, of course. Across the table from her, [Minka](#)⁸ is wearing her devious face, for some reason. She must know something. And leaning his chair on its back legs against that gorgeous wall, [Efran](#)⁹ is working up to a glassy-eyed rage.

Robin Hardy
June 2, 2024

PS. I am claiming no copyright on my illustration.



1. Photographed by [Rodrigo Tetsuo Argenton](#) and uploaded to Wikimedia Commons as part of the Cultural Landscape of Sintra
2. Created by [Minty](#) on rawpixel
3. Photographed by [Thomas Kelley](#) on Unsplash
4. On freepik
5. Photographed by [Troy Mason](#) on Wikimedia Commons
6. Photographed by [Styves Exantus](#) on Pexels
7. Photographed by the [Aveda Corp](#) on flickr for the Aveda Hellessy Backstage Fall Winter 2017 Collections New York Fashion Week. I made minor changes to accommodate the setting.
8. Photographed by [FollowingNYC](#) on Pexels
9. Photographed by [Leonardo Hidalgo](#) on Pexels