

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

Book 5

Lord Efran and
the Graetrix

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Efran and Estes sat in Estes' new workroom on the second floor of the Abbey Fortress. Estes was tapping a quill thoughtfully on scrap parchment while Efran was staring off in contemplation. Finally, Efran exhaled, "All right, what do we have so far?"

Clearing his throat, Estes raised the scrap to read, "In response to his demand of one hundred cases of Goadby's Best Ale, we're sending Loizeaux one case plus a special discount price list for that ale and his other offerings."

"Who made the discount price list?" Efran asked suspiciously. "Is it genuine?"

Estes replied, "In a way. It's just Goadby's regular price list that we're making special."

Efran laughed lightly. "Loizeaux would find that funny if he knew."

"I find his whole list of demands funny," Estes said without smiling. "He's sent two armies against us, both of which we turned away by the grace of God, so I don't know why we should have to appease him with anything."

"And the Passage flooding wiped out his entire army, over a thousand men," Efran murmured, recalling that deliverance of almost five months ago. "So it's not likely that he can muster another army against us for failing to provide him enough ale."

"Then—excuse me—why are we doing this?" Estes asked, exasperated.

Efran studied him languidly. "That's the angriest I've ever seen you. Are you feeling the need to flesh out your new title?" Efran, deciding that Estes' work merited a higher status than the vague title of "administrator," had named him Steward of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. This came with a considerable increase in salary and the gift of a nice big house on a western Abbey plot, now under construction. This title also made his wife "Lady Kelsey." She was six months' pregnant.

Estes eyed him. "I don't trust Loizeaux and don't see the need to accommodate his demands."

"As you told me," Efran said, smiling. "But trust has nothing to do with it. I want to make him regard us as a potential ally rather than a treasury ripe for picking. So if a case of ale will do that—" he broke off. "What else did he demand? Dresses for his courtesans?"

"Oh, yes," Estes said, referring to a long list on rumpled parchment. "One hundred dresses for his courtesans, who are all apparently the same slender size."

Efran smiled again. "Battle dress? If he were to send them out to fight, they could actually incapacitate our men, depending on how they were dressed."

Estes threw up his hands. "You don't take it seriously, either."

"Let's just say that I see your point of view. However, if we simply ignore it, I will be lying awake at night wondering what he's planning in retaliation. Sending him *something* at least keeps the messengers going back and forth," Efran said.

Estes nodded. "Now I am beginning to understand. So let us send a few sample dresses from Elvey as well." He wrote on his scrap parchment.

"Yes, let's use this as an opportunity to promote Abbey businesses," Efran said, stretching. "Speaking of which, Elvey has been pushing for a tannery. She gets a lot of requests for leather goods."

"I know that a tannery is necessary, but they foul the water so much," Estes muttered. "We're already getting complaints about the noxious runoff from the tannery in Westford."

Efran considered that. "If we had one south of the mill, the discharge would go straight out to the Sea." Brows raised, Estes nodded.

Ellor, who had been standing as sentry, approached the open door with a sealed message in hand. "Excuse me, Captain. From Lord Rinkart. His messenger is in the receiving room off the foyer." He approached to hand the message to Efran, then stand back for orders.

"Thank you." Efran took the message, pausing to eye Estes. "Rinkart . . . ?"

Estes glanced up. "Wasn't he the one who gave Lord Blature's family refuge when Lightfoot had confiscated their estate after the lord's death?"

"Oh, yes," Efran said, breaking the seal. He opened it, gagged slightly as he read, then told Ellor, "Go tell the messenger that I will have a reply for him shortly; invite him to help himself to the refreshments. And ask Lady Minka to join us here. She is probably in the gardens out back."

"Yes, Captain." Ellor saluted and disappeared.

"What . . . ?" Estes began, and Efran tossed the letter to him.

Within minutes Minka appeared, wind-blown and smiling. She wore a work dress of linen and a sling over her shoulder in which Joshua, now three months old, rode snugly to explore the gardens with her. Efran stood to advance on her, wrapping up her and the baby as he bent his face to hers. "I can never tire of seeing you happy," he whispered.

"Have you seen Garrett's perennials?" she asked in awe. On the hilltop in early April, they were blooming profusely.

He admitted, "No. I must come look soon. But . . . we have news from your sister." The joy went clean out of her face, replaced by blank caution. He turned to say, "Will you read out the message, Estes?"

Estes picked up the creased parchment and read: "To Lord Efran of the Abbey Fortress, from Lord Rinkart. Sir, we have welcomed your sister Adele in our home for three days now, and she expresses a desire to return to you. Therefore, we are looking for your arrangements to transport her to the Abbey Fortress with all dispatch. Our family remains your grateful servants."

"Oh, no," Minka breathed. "What happened with Awfyn?" It had been about seven weeks since Minka's older sister had gone to live with the Polonti criminal, a one-eyed giant and friend of both Minka and Efran.

"I know nothing beyond that message," Efran said. "But I had probably better go talk to her. Would you come with me?"

“Of course,” she whispered.

Efran bent further to kiss the small black head snuggled on her chest. Then he looked up to Doudney at the door. “Tell the messenger in the receiving room that I and my wife will be coming to speak with Adele shortly.”

“Yes, Captain.” He saluted and was gone again.

As Efran and Minka turned to leave, Estes said, “If it’s helpful, Ryal has a list of available houses and plots in his notary shop.”

Absorbing that, Efran paused and Minka said, “Thank you, Estes. It may be.” He nodded.

Minka took Joshua to the nursery, where two reliable caregivers had charge of seven infants and toddlers, including Joshua, when Minka had other obligations. All of these little ones except Joshua were orphans, as the Abbey’s primary responsibility was to house unwanted children. Leaseholders who adopted Abbey orphans were given discounts on their rents, but most preferred to adopt older children who could work. Joshua’s nursemaid Bethune was needed only occasionally now to feed him and express her milk into bottles which were kept in cold storage for him.

Minka returned to the quarters she shared with Efran to change into a riding skirt. She had a mirror but hardly ever looked in it, considering her toilet accomplished for the day if she was clean and had brushed her hair and teeth. She was quite possibly reacting to Adele’s preoccupation with her appearance, given that she had always been the beauty of the family. But as Minka approached her seventeenth birthday next month, more Westfordians (and all Abbey residents) were coming around to Efran’s opinion that he had married the beauty of the family.

Finished with her dressing, Minka entered the foyer, where Efran smiled at her approach. Placing a hand at her back to walk her out to the courtyard, he murmured, “I should tell you now that whatever we do with Adele, or don’t do, will be up to you. I am leaving that decision entirely in your hands.”

“Oh, no,” she whispered, stopping beside the mare brought out for her today.

Efran also paused beside the bay gelding, Trud, that he lately favored. (With so many horses available now that did not buck or bite, Efran seldom rode Bastard. As long as he was supplied with carrots, he did not destroy his stall. So Greves, the soldier in charge of stable maintenance, saw that Bastard got his own daily allowance.)

“I don’t trust my own judgment regarding Adele,” Efran said. “I’ll either accept her out of guilt or refuse her out of anger. It’s going to be your decision.” And he mounted, nodding to Towner and Gabriel, their bodyguard. They saluted.

Breathing out a groan, Minka mounted by herself, as she preferred (for now) with the assistance of a mounting block. Then they two rode out of the gates with their bodyguard following.

As they rode, Minka remembered that Rinkart was the nobleman she originally came to Westford to find in mid-February, when she happened on Awfyn instead. And the meeting she had with him resulted in his promise to resolve their problem with Adele. He had sent a carriage for her the following day, and the Abbey had heard no more from her until two weeks ago, when she and Awfyn had come for a visit—and left together, apparently happy.

Oh, what am I to do, dear God? Minka thought.

Efran located Rinkart's house in the same affluent area as Blature's estate, which Minka's father Lightfoot and his clerk Graduliere had seized after the lord's death. Rinkart's gates were standing open in apparent anticipation of a carriage, so the four rode on through.

At the door, Efran and Minka were brought in while the soldiers were asked to wait outside with the horses. When Rinkart came to meet them in the foyer, Minka recognized him, but he looked neither as composed nor thoughtful as she remembered. He was a slender, graying man with a nervous air.

"Ah! Lord Efran, Lady Minka, I am very pleased to see you. I know that Adele is anxious to see you as well. Shall I bring her out to you?"

Efran glanced around. "If you would show us a room where we might speak in private, we would appreciate it, Lord Rinkart."

The nobleman looked disappointed. "Yes, of course. Come to the study, here." Turning, he led them a few steps down a broad corridor to a side door, which he opened. "I will have her sent down."

Efran said, "First, please tell us how she came to be here."

Rinkart turned with a look of hapless dismay. "She just—showed up and, expected accommodation. We—attempted to meet her expectations, but—as we have no idea of her present—situation or prospects, we simply couldn't see—how to—" He waved his hands in frustrated exhaustion.

Efran sighed, "Yes, I understand. Yes, have her sent in, please." Rinkart quickly left.

While they waited, Efran and Minka regarded each other. He checked her face to see that after the first few moments here, the anxiety faded and the adoration resurfaced. He soaked it up, determined to never take it for granted. Her love and Joshua's very existence were the greatest comfort he had.

Minka, drinking in her handsome Polonti Captain, eyed his hair. After the last drastic cut Detler had given him, it was growing out so as to be a good length to play with in about a week, she estimated.

The door opened and they both turned toward it. Adele flounced in. "Oh! Finally. Well, why are we standing here? Let's go." She looked relatively normal, compared to the last time they had seen her two weeks ago. The dress she wore today was silk, but slightly soiled and not quite as opulent as the one she had worn then. Without all the layers of silk, she also did not look quite as heavy. Her face was clean and her hair sedately braided.

Pressing his lips together, Efran turned aside. Minka told Adele, "Here, come sit down for just a minute." Minka went over to a settee; Adele, exhaling, followed reluctantly. Efran stayed where he was.

Minka asked, "Adele, what happened to Awfyn?"

Peeved, Adele said, "Oh there was some kind of emergency, and he and all his men had to gather up and leave right away, and he told me the name of some place—a village, I think—where I was supposed to go, but I had no idea what he was saying—"

"Deneau?" asked Efran.

Adele turned to him. "What? No." Then she turned away. "Anyway—"

“Gerdts? Stuteville? Craghead?” asked Efran.

“No! Will you shut up?” Adele said. “Anyway, you can take me back to Justinian now.”

“Dearest,” Minka said quietly, “Justinian divorced you after you left with Awfyn.”

Adele shrugged, “So? I’m back now. Oh, wait. There’s Monsell, too. All right, I’ll go to him.”

Efran gurgled deep in his throat and leaned on a nearby sideboard. The extreme measures to which he had been forced when Adele refused to honor her betrothal agreement with Monsell might have had something to do with his esophageal distress right now.

Minka said, “He’s no longer available, Adele. And with all the marriages we’ve had among Efran’s officers, we’re running out of suites in the fortress. About the best we can offer you is a small house on a plot.”

Adele sighed in her oppression, then said, “Well, if that’s the best you’ve got, then I suppose it will have to do. I require rugs throughout, stained-glass windows, oak furnishings, silver dinnerware and flatware, a cook and a maid. And approval of the menu, of course.”

Efran, still leaning on the sideboard, was quietly shaking in laughter. Minka glanced at him, then said, “Adele, if you come stay with us, you won’t have the luxuries that Awfyn provided. There are so many people we’re responsible for, we live very simply. If you can remember where Awfyn told you to go, they can probably accommodate you much more to your liking. If you can’t, and you still want to come with us, you’ll just have to make do until Awfyn comes for you.”

Efran lifted up from the sideboard to regard his young wife in admiration. Adele drooped. “This is outrageous. But I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“Not if you want to come stay with us,” Minka said sympathetically.

“All right,” Adele sighed, a martyr to necessity.

“Wonderful. Go get your belongings,” Minka told her.

“I don’t have anything here,” Adele said off-handedly.

Efran watched with a slight smile as Minka stared at her. “You didn’t bring anything of yours when you left Awfyn’s?”

“No, why should I? I’m always given things; why should I cart them around?” Adele asked.

Minka looked at Efran to ask, “Will you see if we can borrow a horse for her?” He nodded, opening the door to go out.

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Chapter 2

“I am not riding a horse,” Adele said, hands up in refusal. “I require a carriage.”

Minka turned to her with a gentle smile. “I’ve seen you ride. You’re an excellent horsewoman.”

Lifting her silk skirt, Adele observed, “This is not riding apparel.”

“True. But Rinkart doesn’t have any and you didn’t bring any. So I’m afraid you ride in what you’re wearing,” Minka said, shrugging at the unavoidable. Adele eyed her sullenly.

Efran opened the door again to lean in. “They’re bringing a horse for her to the front.”

“Oh, good. Thank you,” Minka said, standing. She went to the door, where she and Efran looked back at Adele still on the settee. “Rinkart is not keeping you another day, dearest,” Minka added in a murmur. Slapping the seat in exasperation, Adele rose.

In the front courtyard, Rinkart shook Efran’s hand heartily and then rushed back into his house, inadvertently slamming the door. Face lowered, Efran turned to wait beside Gabriel and Towner with the horses. Minka and Adele stood slightly apart.

In another minute, a sedate gelding was brought around front. After a glance, Efran told the stablehand, “He’s perfect. We will return him directly.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” the man nodded. He bowed to Minka, but apparently did not see Adele standing beside her.

As the stableman departed, Efran turned to Adele, intending to help her mount. He had to wait beside the horse while Adele debated whether to cooperate or not. Heaving a sigh, she went over to grasp the saddle and lift a foot to the stirrup. As her skirts fell back on her thigh, she ordered, “Turn your head away.”

He muttered, “I’ve seen that and a good deal more of you” as he grabbed her waist to heft her up to the saddle. His men were very sternly looking anywhere else and definitely not smiling.

While Adele was getting settled, Minka got up on her own horse. Efran glanced to see that she was seated properly, then he swung up on Trud, turning his head easily with the same motion. Watching him, Minka exhaled. Her secret aspiration was to become as proficient with a horse as Efran was.

He led the women out of the courtyard into the road at a gentle lope with the bodyguard following. Carrying an extra thirty pounds since she had last ridden, Adele was bouncing uncomfortably. But she made sure to glare at the men along the road who paused to smile at the show of leg under her silk skirts blowing back in the wind.

The three turned down the road leading south to the Abbey Lands. Soon, Minka was exulting again at the vista of plots, houses, cultivated land, and little farms clustered around the road leading to the switchback and hilltop fortress, bright in the midday sun. As they loped down the Abbey road, she pointed aside at Ryal’s shop on the corner, and Efran nodded. Estes had reminded them that Ryal had a list of available houses.

Efran and Minka slowed their horses to turn aside at the notary’s door, and Adele’s horse followed. They

dismounted, Efran managing to catch Adele as she fell from her saddle. They entered the shop to the tinkling of the bell. The soldiers waited outside with the horses.

When they had waited a few minutes and Ryal did not appear, Efran looked in concern to the door leading to the back rooms. But it finally opened, and Ryal came out. Efran immediately saw that something was amiss; the old notary seemed disturbed. Ryal looked up and said, "Ah, Efran. It's good to see you. Hello, Minka. Adele."

"What's wrong?" Efran asked.

"Well, Efran," Ryal began, uncharacteristically perturbed, "I do have a problem. My assistant Mote was called home a few days ago to tend his mother in Westford who has the fever. I failed to realize how much I was depending on him to read cramped lettering for me—the old eyes are getting bad. I've sent for stronger spectacles from a shop in Eurys, but it will be weeks till they're ready—"

Efran's head jerked up, and his eyes glassed over with an expression that even Minka found hard to read. It was the determination on a particular course regardless of the obstacles. The last time she had seen it, he was gathering his gear to go clear wolves from the road to their safe place—this fortress—and her impulsive move to kiss him, distracting him greatly, elicited a stunning outburst of anger. But the last time it had crossed his face was when he had stepped off the stairs to kill his friend Pindar for abducting her.

With this almost inhuman blankness, he told Adele, "You will stay here and help Ryal read. If you won't, I will put you back on that horse and drop you in front of the Porterhouse in Westford."

The other three stared at him in varying degrees of astonishment or fear. After a frozen moment, Adele sniffed, "If you insist."

Efran lowered his head, regaining his general demeanor. Then he looked at Ryal to ask, "I suppose she can stay in Mote's room?"

"Yes, Efran, I will make room for her. Thank you," Ryal said cautiously.

He nodded, then turned to Minka. "Can you send down some—lady things for her?"

"Yes," she said, and Efran paused to evaluate the new look in her eyes. It wasn't fear, or adoration, or surprise. He couldn't tell what it was.

Vaguely concerned that he might have overreacted, he took her elbow to move toward the door, then glanced back. "I will check on you, Ryal."

"Yes, thank you, Efran," Ryal said, watching him.

With a hazy nod, Efran led Minka out to their horses, then stood over her to study her again. She wet her lips and said, "That was brilliant. Awfyn crushed her; Ryal will humanize her."

He leaned down to gather her to him. "As long as you still love me."

She chortled. "You can't be lord of the fortress without scaring a few people now and then. I don't know anyone else who can terrify someone with a reasonable request. I respect that."

He almost fell back into Trud laughing. She used to adore him; now she respected him.

With a sigh, Efran collected himself to ask Gabriel and Towner to take the borrowed horse back to Rinkart. While Minka watched Adele and Ryal through the window, Efran dug a royal from his pocket for the loan of the horse and quietly told the men about Adele's new position. They listened with laudably blank faces, then headed north with the horse, discussing what she would do to the old man.

Efran collected Minka from the front of the shop and took their horses' reins. Unable to ignore her struggles to remount, he lifted her to the saddle, which she permitted. After they rode up to the fortress, she went in to gather some clothes and toiletries for Adele while Efran went up to brief Estes.

Down in Ryal's shop, he and Adele studied each other. "Would you like something to eat?" he asked.

"That would be lovely," she said tentatively.

So he sat her down in the interview room and brought her a bowl of Madea's beef stew with a bottle of ale. "Efran always has the kitchen send down whatever they have prepared," he explained.

"That is convenient," she agreed.

While she ate quietly and without complaint, he searched out a cup for the ale and brought it to her apologetically. "I have lived alone for so long, only recently acquiring my assistant Mote, that I have no idea how to accommodate a young woman. I hope you will educate me."

She glanced around the room of shelves, parchments, ledgers, record books, and writing supplies. All these left barely room for the small table at which she sat. "A harpsichord is essential," she said.

They stared at each other for a moment, then broke out laughing.

Shortly thereafter, Arne pulled up in a cart and began unloading "lady things" for Adele—clothing, bedding, towels and washcloths, dishes and utensils (pewter, no silver) and food that could be stored, such as flatbread, compotes, preserves, and herbal teas. Ryal was overwhelmed by the supplies, but packed them away in his bare little kitchen.

Then Ryal began moving all of Mote's things out of his room. He told Adele, "The least I can do is give you this room as your own. I suspect that Mote may be taking care of his mother for a long while, but if he comes back and you are still here, I will put him in the shed with Serena. My horse." She laughed in appreciation.

She began arranging her room, and Ryal even found a rack on which she could hang her dresses (made by Elvey, selected by Minka, and sure to fit Adele, some being maternity dresses). After getting the most essential things put away, Adele paused, fidgeting, then went out to the front counter where Ryal was squinting over a record book. "Show me what you need done," she said, twisting her hands.

He looked up hesitantly, then said, "I would greatly appreciate your copying these lines from this document into the record book here. Read them to me as you do, please." She looked over to see the information in question, then read aloud the fact that Buell had wed Nageli yesterday, April 3rd, and were now residing at house number 12 in the western Abbey section. This she also copied in his ledger on the appropriate lines, then found herself surprised by the sense of accomplishment from this simple action.

Copying a dozen more entries over the next hour cleared away the backlog. Meanwhile, a customer came in who requested information about the status of a certain plot. Ryal found the relevant folder, then Adele was able to

scan the sheets for the information required. The customer paid for the service and departed.

“I should give you this,” Ryal said, handing her the silver piece. “You got him the surveyor’s notes; I merely supervised,” he added humorously.

Adele looked at the silver piece thoughtfully. “I’ve never actually earned money for doing anything,” she murmured. “A lot of men have wanted me, but no one ever needed me to do something.”

“Ah. Well, I have mixed feelings in welcoming you to the working class,” he said.

She studied him. “You know Efran well, don’t you?”

“After today, I would say not as well as I thought I did,” he replied honestly. “Efran is unquestionably a good man, but he has some dark places.”

“Don’t we all,” she murmured.

“Now that you mention it, yes,” he said wryly. He turned to begin reshelving the ledgers that they had been using.

She watched idly, then said, “We slept together.”

He glanced back at her. Rather than tell her that he knew this, and that Efran was periodically tormented by the fact, he asked quietly, “Does it bother you now?”

She struggled with this for a moment. “Yes, because now he is out of reach.”

“Ah,” he said quietly, continuing to arrange the ledgers on the shelves.

“Have you ever been in love?” she asked in a whisper.

He half turned to her. “Oh, yes. I married a very beautiful girl who was my world. She has been dead for almost fifty years now, and I still miss her.” He did not mention that she had died delivering a stillborn child.

“Couldn’t you love anyone after she died?” Adele asked with moist eyes.

“I didn’t want to,” he admitted.

“That is how I feel about Efran,” she said.

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Chapter 3

Ryal nodded, but his brows drew together in consideration of a discrepancy. So he told Adele, “I understand that you led a EurAsian army against him.”

“I did!” she laughed, the tears dropping from her eyes. “He—made me so angry with his smiling indifference. He refuses to believe that I would not have allowed anyone to kill him. I had agreed to give Loizeaux the Abbey Treasury; I wanted Efran for myself. And now—I can’t accept that he’s beyond my reach.”

After a moment of quiet, he said, “I understand. That is how I felt after my wife died. I could not believe that she was dead, cold in the grave. Now I know that she has merely gone on to another life. It may be best for you to view Efran as . . . gone on to another life.”

She gazed at him, then fell on him to cry. He patted her back. “Yes, losing someone you love, no matter how it happens, is just like grief, and it’s all right to mourn.”

After she had cried herself out, Ryal found a few more stray sheets of information that needed to be transferred to ledgers. Following that, he helped her finish arranging her room. He showed her the garderobe, which he kept clean and sweet-smelling, and he brought in water from his own well for her washstand.

By that time, a soldier delivered dinner for two of tender beef, garden greens, and butter rolls, with orange fool for dessert. Ryal and Adele ate by candlelight in the front of the shop, now closed, so as to watch the sunset beyond the western Abbey plots and the mill.

Then he said goodnight to her, checking again to make sure that she had everything she needed, and she gave him a prim goodnight kiss on his cheek. She lay down in her nice little bed with clean sheets and soft feather pillows. And she thought about everything that had happened today.

In his own room, Ryal smiled as he considered the very satisfactory solution to his bad eyes that Efran had dictated. Ryal doubted it would last—a beautiful young woman like Adele would grow weary of an old man for company—but he hoped she would stay long enough to keep the workload down for Mote when he did return. And early spring evenings on the Abbey plots were very pleasant, much warmer than in Westford.

All the way around, it had been a good day, he mused, drifting off to sleep.

All at once his thin mattress shifted, and he awoke with a start. A voluptuous young body was pressed up to his old skinny one, and Adele complained, “It’s cold in Mote’s room.”

“Oh, no, my dear,” he protested.

“Shut up,” she said, snuggling into him.

Early the following morning, April 5th, Efran opened his eyes and listened. Yes, there was a tapping on the outer door. Minka was pressed into his side, still asleep. He reached a hand to feel Joshua in his crib, breathing through a slightly stuffy nose. Then Efran carefully extracted himself from Minka, sliding off the mattress to not wake Joshua. In the outer room, Efran pulled pants on over his breeches before opening the door to the corridor.

The man standing there, Nyarko, said, “Pardon, Captain, but there’s a wolf at the gate.”

A wolf at the gate. That had happened before. Efran slipped out, softly closing the door behind him. “I will come look.” Early April mornings on the hilltop were chilly, and Efran was shirtless and barefoot, but he followed Nyarko through the foyer out the front door into the courtyard.

Coming to the gates, he saw the large wolf just outside it stand and turn, looking back for Efran to follow. Efran knelt to study him. “Canis.” The wolf bobbed his head, approaching. Efran saw that he was covered with the dust of travel, and there was a line of matted blood along his back.

While kneeling beside him, Efran concentrated hard, trying to determine the problem. He caught flashes of the great wings of a predator, and wolf howls of pain. But without Pia to help him understand words, that’s all he could discern. Efran stood, telling Canis, “I will be right back.” The wolf sat again to wait. Glancing to the east, Efran saw sunrise just commencing. Canis had probably arrived some time during the night.

Turning back to the courtyard, Efran told Nyarko, “Get him meat and water. A lot of both.”

Nyarko look startled, but saluted. “Yes, Captain,” he said, and ran toward the kitchen.

Entering the foyer, Efran gestured to the new man, Willis, who hurried up to him. Efran raised his eyes to the arched ceiling of the foyer, thinking. “I need Gabriel . . . Barr . . . Lyte . . . and Goss. Barr is in a room on the second floor; I believe he’s got his name on the door. The other three should be in the barracks. I need them to eat a good breakfast, and then gear up for a long ride. They’re to arm up as well, and pick their favorite horse. I’ll see to provisions from the kitchen. Have you got all that?”

“Gabriel, Barr, Lyte and Goss. Yes, sir,” Willis said.

“All right. Have them meet me in the courtyard when they’re ready,” Efran said.

“Yes, Captain.” He saluted and sprang away.

Efran went to the kitchen to get breakfast for himself, request breakfast for the four men coming, as well as four days’ travel provisions for the five of them, plus water bags. When done with that, he returned to his quarters.

Minka had wakened, and was now feeding Joshua one of Bethune’s bottles. “Did I wake him?” Efran asked guiltily.

“No, I don’t think so,” she said sleepily. “He’s an early riser. Like you.” She smiled.

“Well. I had a visitor at the gates,” he began, digging out work clothes and a riding jacket. “Remember Canis?”

She paused, withdrawing the bottle slightly as Joshua sucked too quickly and choked. “Canis. Wasn’t that the wolf pack leader that you made the peace agreement with? He was at the gates? But I thought the wolves had left the area.”

“Yes, and he had traveled a long way to come get me. He’s also been injured. So, whatever it is, I’m taking a small group of men to have a look,” he said, pulling on a shirt.

She opened her mouth, partly rising, and his eyes shot to her. “Don’t ask to come, Minka. Please don’t. I don’t know how long we’ll be riding; I don’t know what we’re facing, but whatever it is, I won’t be able to deal with it unless I know that you are here, safe, with Joshua. All right?”

“I know,” she said, mildly offended. “But—how do you know it’s so important that you have to ride out somewhere unknown?”

“Last time this happened, it was to take care of a problem that was as much a threat to our leaseholders as to the wolves, so . . . yes, I need to go check it out. I don’t want to disturb Estes this early, so I’m depending on you to tell him.”

She was not happy about trying to explain to Estes why Efran had to ride off like this, but kept her mouth closed. He finished dressing, then went to ransack his personal weapons closet.

He strapped on his sword and his knife, took up his bow and quiver, then looked down on her holding his son to her chest. Inhaling, he murmured, “This sight alone will carry me until I get back.”

“Make it quick,” she pleaded. Dropping his bow and quiver, he leaned over to kiss her good. Then he picked up his weapons again and left.

Minka looked down at the baby contentedly finishing up the bottle, then put him on her shoulder. “I can’t wait to explain this to Estes,” she murmured sarcastically. Joshua let out a rumbling burp.

That same morning, Adele was up early. She had a light breakfast from Ryal’s stores, made her barely slept-in bed, and went out to the front room to unlock the door, open the blinds, and tidy up the front counter.

Ryal shuffled out, blinking in the morning light, and she went over to kiss his cheek. He turned red. “My dear, please—be discreet.”

“Of course, Ryal,” she said happily. “Show me what to do before the customers come.” So Ryal opened the books to show her the most common forms he dealt with, which right now were marriage licenses, plot leases, adoption papers, and birth records.

She looked out the front window, then, at Efran riding by with a group of men following a large gray dog. He reflexively looked toward the shop, and she fluttered her fingers at him. Seeing but not responding, he faced forward again as they went on by, and Adele looked lovingly at Ryal.

Efran and his men followed Canis a short distance up the northbound road at a trot, then the wolf departed on a course almost due east, directly into the morning sun. Here, riding through meadows, the men’s selection of horses showed their wisdom. Holes and burrows in long grass were a constant hazard that the horses themselves knew to watch for. And when one animal did step in or near a hole, it would shy in a way that signaled the danger to the other horses. Canis did not attempt to run anyway, conserving his strength. Efran thought they probably had at least a day’s travel ahead of them. But it turned out to be only half that.

The men he had selected were quick thinkers, good in negotiating the unexpected. Two of them, Barr and Goss, were Polonti; Gabriel was a Westfordian and Lyte a native Eurussian. Not knowing what lay ahead, Efran wanted a diverse group. They also carried diverse equipment: Lyte carried extra water, having been on marches that lasted far longer than their water supply; Goss carried extra arrows, because when they were needed, there were never enough; Barr carried a long length of rope, the uses of which were endless. Efran also had rope, but not one as long as Barr’s.

They trotted most of the time; then Canis came upon a stretch where he started running, so the men were able to lope in sparsely covered, slightly rocky ground. The men constantly scanned their surroundings; Efran decided that Canis was running here because of the abundance of snake dens.

About an hour into their ride, they came upon the east branch of the Passage, which was the eastern border of the Abbey Lands—although they were now north of the Lands' northern boundary. Here they paused to let the horses drink. Canis also flattened himself on the bank to drink, then swam across, as it was slow-moving and shallow.

When Canis began to noticeably tire after about four hours of travel, Efran called a halt to rest and eat. They watered the horses and let them graze; Efran filled a water pan for Canis and opened his own pack of meat that the kitchen had prepared. After only a few minutes' rest, Canis sprang up again, urgent.

Shortly after resuming their ride, they crossed the north-south road connecting Venegas to Eviron, as the city was a major destination of Monsell's lumber. Here they also started coming across young oaks. Another hour brought them into larger, thicker stands of oaks.

"Captain!" Efran turned at Gabriel's call behind him. He was pointing at something among the oaks. Efran trotted back to look, and the other riders clustered around him.

Gabriel was pointing to a young oak with a diameter of six inches that had been splintered and broken about five feet up from the ground. It looked as though something large had knocked against it. Another tree some ten feet away showed similar damage without being completely broken.

"The leaves aren't entirely wilted," Lyte observed. "This must have happened no longer than a few hours ago."

"Look around for more," Efran said.

The men separated to scan the trees; immediately Goss called, "Here! A trail of them." All of them rode over to see what he saw: five or six oaks in a row that had been bent or damaged. The men followed these to a circle of broken trees. And in the middle of them—

"Bones," said Barr. "Piles of bones."

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Chapter 4

The men studied the scene. Within a circle of ground about 30 feet in diameter, all the trees had been broken and the debris swept to the outer ring of the circle. The interior had been dug into a shallow bowl. And within that were scattered various bones. The men dismounted to look. "Keep your bows and quivers on you," Efran said.

Gabriel and Lyte descended into the shallow pit to pick up bones and study them. Gabriel said, "No wonder Canis came after you, Captain; I see a number of wolf skulls."

"Here is the whole skeleton of a horse," Lyte said. "It's been picked clean of flesh, even cartilage. And it's relatively fresh—can't be more than a few days old."

Efran was looking at the number of feathers scattered around the pit. Some were downy, but several were obvious pinions—very large, at that. Taking up one by the quill, he studied the metallic-looking flight feather that was almost three feet long. Then he raised his eyes to the sky.

“Captain,” Barr said. His voice was strong but flat, and they all looked at him on the far edge of the circle. “Here are human remains, but they are unfinished. Whatever it is will be coming back.”

“Fall back! Fall back to the trees!” Efran cried. The men scattered for shelter as the sky darkened above them. Getting behind the largest oak he could find, Efran whipped his bow off his shoulder, nocked and aimed for the center of the vast wingspread bearing down on him. He released, and the ensuing screech of rage made him duck.

The top of the tree above him shattered. Efran rolled out from under falling branches, glimpsing talons the size of cart wheels. He scrambled to another tree, hearing an incessant *poing* from bowstrings around him. The second tree under which he fell was likewise demolished in a tremendous implosion of breaking wood. The enraged shrieks continued as Efran was thrown on his back to be buried in shredded oak debris. Massive talons stabbed through the debris, searching; Efran felt them pierce the canopy of foliage around him, but he couldn’t move in any direction.

He heard the repeated *whomp* of arrows hitting their target as the screeches grew weaker. Great drops of blood penetrated the crumpled branches to splatter him. Finally, seeing a huge shadowy mass hovering directly above him, Efran squirmed desperately between two heavy limbs to roll onto his stomach and drag himself through crushed branches away from the tottering mass above.

It fell with a resounding crash near him, a wing pinning him in the debris of the treetop. Efran looked over his shoulder at the shadow of the wing above him. As the echoes of its fall died away, he could hear the men calling, “Captain!” “Captain, are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m here; I’m pinned under a wing! The right wing!” he shouted.

Shortly, his prison of branches was lightened by the lifting of the wing, then other debris fell away from him. He reached out to shake a massive limb in front of him. “Move this and I can get out!” he shouted.

Crunching foliage, the men stepped carefully around him, and he listened to Gabriel direct someone else to another part of the broken limb. When it was raised and carried away, Efran was able to crawl through the green tunnel toward the light beyond.

His men grasped his arms to help him out, then let him stand on his own to look him over. “It’s a miracle to see you whole after that pounding, Captain,” Lyte remarked.

“Minka prays for me every time I set foot outside,” he murmured. Then they all turned to look at what they’d brought down.

It was clearly avian, resembling a great eagle about fifteen feet long from the head to the tip of the tail, and a wingspan of at least forty feet. “I’ve never seen a bird this big,” Gabriel whispered.

“What’s this?” Goss muttered. He began lifting one wing, then sucked in his breath and jerked his hand away. Instead, he used a stick to lift the wing and expose an appendage underneath: a simian-like forearm sprouting from the base of the wing, ending with a fingered hand. All of it was covered with the bird’s downy skin. Using branches, the men turned the carcass farther to expose the companion limb under the other wing.

They were speechless for a moment, then Efran inhaled, looking around. “Goss, can you find the horses? Lyte, you and Gabriel figure out how we’re going to take this thing back with us. Barr, help me drag it out to the clearing. Cover your hands.”

As it turned out, all five of them were needed to carry the great predator out to the clearing. Despite the fact that it could fly, it still weighed several hundred pounds, spread out in a mass of wing and body. The head was also large—the size of a millstone—and the neck was thick with muscle. “This thing is more like a great lizard than a bird,” Gabriel grunted. After discovering the small gashes that resulted from merely touching it, they had quickly learned to wrap their hands with whatever they could find.

“The skin is scaly on its underside,” Barr observed. “Our arrows pierced only under the wings. And someone got through on the throat here.”

“That’s why we need to take it back: to study it. There are probably more,” Efran muttered. He glanced around to confirm that Canis was gone.

Goss had gathered the horses, so they sat to freely eat from their packs, discussing how to transport the monster. Everyone congratulated Barr on his prescience to bring a long rope.

After considerable experimentation, they laid the creature’s head back over its wings and bound them to its body with the middle of the rope, the ends of which were dallied to Barr’s and Lyte’s saddles, as they would ride in front. Gabriel and Goss used their own empty quivers as hauling tack, drawing one end through the rope on the monster’s body and holding the other end close on each side. Efran elected to carry the tail, using the rope he had brought.

Thus they started back with their burden in the late afternoon. It was slow going, for they had to walk, and unless they synchronized their movements almost perfectly, someone lost hold. Also, there were constant stops to redistribute the weight more evenly among the horses. Eventually, however, they fell into a rhythm which enabled more consistent travel.

Still, it was almost morning before they arrived back at the Abbey Lands. Here, they decided to deposit their burden at the northeastern edge of the plots, where there was no building activity and no traffic. Efran sent the men up the switchback with the weary horses; Gabriel was instructed to wake four soldiers to come down and stand watch over their prize.

Efran waited below, walking around the still-bound creature just to stay awake. In the early light, he checked it again to make sure it was dead, and found the carcass to be stiffening. At that point, he picked up one of the long pinions that had fallen from a wing and carried it with him, again by the quill only, for study later.

When the four selected sentries arrived, Efran greeted them with a short explanation as to what they were guarding. Then he trudged up the switchback and entered the fortress. After telling the door sentry to have Estes wake him whenever he was up this morning, Efran went to the keep to drop at the foot of the crucifix and pass out.

And when Estes rose about an hour later, he heard the sentry’s message, but decided to let Efran sleep a while longer. Likewise, Minka, hearing that her husband had returned, crept quietly to the keep to see for herself (though it was quite dark this early). She kissed him, lightly caressed his hair, then left again without seeing the long feather underneath him. Both she and Estes thought that Canis’ need had turned out to be insignificant.

But not too long after Estes had settled down to work, another sentry, Cudmore, came to his door. "Excuse me, sir, but have you seen what the Captain brought back last night?"

Estes studied him. "No."

"You might want to come look, sir," Cudmore advised with raised brows, so Estes got up.

About that time, Ryal was opening his shop, looking even more disturbed than he had been when he couldn't read cramped script. He got down ledgers, then couldn't remember what he needed, so he pulled out forms to collate them properly and then wondered what in the world he was doing.

He was reduced to tapping his fingers on the counter, gazing out the window at morning life on the Abbey plots, when Adele wandered out sleepily, luxuriously, with her nightdress hanging off one shoulder. "My dear!" Ryal hurried her to the back room.

"Yes, darling Ryal?" She hung on him lovingly. "I enjoyed last night," she murmured.

"Adele." He took her hands as firmly as a man in his eighties could take the hands of a provocative 21-year-old. "This is wrong, dear. We can't continue this. You must sleep in your own bed."

"But I don't want to," she murmured. "I want to sleep with you."

"Dearest, this is ridiculous. I'm at least sixty years older than you are," he said firmly.

She smirked. "Yes, it's *amazing*, isn't it?"

"No, dearest, it's scandalous. The gossip will be—ruinous," he said with feeling.

"Oh. Well, then we should get married," she said.

"What?" he exclaimed, wondering if he were going deaf, as well.

"Yes!" she laughed. "We're right here in the notary shop! We can get ourselves married!"

"You can't be serious. Besides, we—we'd need a witness," he said, faint at the thought.

She contradicted him, "No, we wouldn't. I checked. All we need is to put our names in your little marriage ledger there," she cooed, leaning on him.

"You can't mean that," he said sternly.

"Oh, but I do." She leaned over to pucker at him, then went to the front part of the shop again. "Now, where is your marriage ledger?" she asked, turning her half-draped back to the window to look at the shelves. The baker Avere, passing with his cart, stopped to stare in the window.

Ryal urgently dragged her to the back room again. "If you really mean it, I'll get the book. But you must not go out front again unless you are fully dressed."

"If you say so," she pouted, toying with his shirt.

Trembling, he went to get the marriage ledger from its shelf while the stonemason Ernst joined Avere at the window to watch Adele lean on the door casing between the front and back rooms, her nightdress hanging off one shoulder. She withdrew to the back room again before Ryal turned around with the ledger in hand.

“Efran. Efran.” He opened bloodshot eyes. Estes went on, “I’m sorry to wake you, but a lot of us would like to know something about the thing on the northern plots.”

“Yes, I suppose you would,” Efran murmured. Inhaling, he sat up, stretching. “What I want to do first is have—oh, good morning, Minka.” Looking at her, he put a hand down to feel for the feather, which had slipped into a crevice in the platform.

She came up with a mildly reproving glance for Estes. “I thought we were going to let him sleep.” As she turned to Efran, she saw his shirt. “Is that blood?” she asked in alarm.

“Not mine,” he reassured her.

She was still studying him. “You’re—covered in scratches! And your shirt is all torn and grass-stained. Efran, what happened?”

“If you’ll bring me a plate from the kitchen, I’ll tell you,” he said innocently.

Eyeing him, she turned to run to the corridor, and Efran proceeded to tell Estes the worst parts which he hoped to leave out of the version he would give her. He ended with, “Get Wallace down there as soon as possible—I want him to cut it open and examine it. Be sure to tell him about the—the limbs under the wings. I have a feeling that we need to burn it soon, and I’ve got to know more about it before we do that. Oh—and send scouts back out to where we shot it down to see if there are more—Goss, Gabriel, Lyte or Barr can lead them.”

“Right,” Estes said, standing. While he went out, Efran lifted up to retrieve the three-foot-long pinion feather from the crevice in the platform beneath him. After regarding its unnatural glint in the morning light, he quickly hid it behind the crucifix upon hearing voices in the foyer.

Estes was giving instructions to a sentry on his way to the front doors as Minka hurried up with a plate of ham and eggs for Efran, who was still sitting under the crucifix.

“Thank you,” he said appreciatively, gulping the breakfast. She sat before him, studying the sweat-streaked grime on his face, hands and chest, the dried blood, and the tears in his shirt.

When he put the plate down, she said, “Talk.”

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Chapter 5

So Efran told Minka about the huge bird that ate wolves and horses that Efran's men shot down from the shelter of the trees. "The bird fell into the top of the tree that I was under, and it came down around me. Hence the scratches. But all that shielded me from the bird finding me, so that worked out well."

She listened, knowing instinctively that she was getting a redacted version. Then she said, "I want to go down and look at this bird."

"Of course. Just take a man with you. I would like to get cleaned up." He glanced over to see Wallace going out the front doors with a sentry. "Ah. There goes the doctor. You can go down with him. Where is Joshua?"

"Bethune is feeding him," she said, standing. "She'll take him to the nursery when he's done."

"Good." He stood as well, kissing her lightly on the forehead. "I'll be in our quarters," he whispered. Whether he would or wouldn't be there, that's where he wanted her. She nodded, turning to the front doors.

As he was about to leave with his plate, he glanced up at the engraved lines on the wall across from the crucifix, that were indented from the left to the right. At this time of the morning, the lines

He only is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
On God rests my deliverance and my credibility;
my mighty rock, my refuge is God

were illumined by the light from the window. And Efran realized that they were arranged like that in order to receive the sun's illumination as it progressed across the sky each day. Each morning, the light would start at the top of the Psalm and progress down and to the right until the last line was illumined at the end of the day.

Mulling that over, Efran left the keep with the plate, handing it to Eustace at the doors. "Take that back to the kitchen. And whenever Wallace comes back up, find me. I want to talk to him."

"Captain." Eustace saluted and ran off with the plate.

Efran went tiredly to the men's bath house on the east grounds as Minka jumped up on a horse in the front courtyard, declining the sentry's offer of help. She turned the horse to ride down the switchback with Wallace and two men. She and the doctor greeted each other cordially as they began the descent.

When they reached the road and passed Ryal's notary shop, Wallace commented, "There's a lot of business for the notary this morning, I see."

Minka glanced aside distractedly at the line of men extending out of the door and down Ryal's front steps. It gave her qualms, but she had no time to check on him right now. She would have to do that on the way back up.

She and Wallace saw the thing long before they got close. She gasped, and he said, "Oh, my." People thronged around it while a ring of soldiers attempted to keep them away. When Wallace dismounted and walked over with his escort, the soldiers opened a way for him, then closed ranks against the unruly crowd.

Minka stayed to look at it only briefly, hardly able to take in the huge head, the fierce beak, the enormous wings, the massive curling talons. Her eyes watered, and she thanked the God of heaven that Efran came away only scratched from an encounter with this monster. "You cover him so wonderfully," she whispered.

As she was returning to her horse, she heard a cry go up from the crowd around the creature. Turning, she saw smoke billowing from somewhere beside it. The crowd watched in silence as the smoke dissipated. Minka stood breathlessly rooted for a moment, then leaned weakly on her horse.

Composing herself, she got up in the saddle to ride back to Ryal's shop.

After Efran bathed, he realized that he had forgotten to bring clothes from his quarters to the men's bath house. So he wrapped a towel around himself to gather his filthy clothes and drop them beside the laundry house nearby. (The laundresses had firmly advised Estes that they would not enter the men's bath house for any dirty laundry.) Then Efran, still in his towel, trudged up the corridor to his quarters, ignoring the maids' sidelong glances.

He dressed in work clothes before going out to the keep to retrieve the feather. This he took to his quarters to examine. Sitting with it before the receiving-room window, he looked closely at the glint, which seemed almost metallic. He stroked the feather before quickly withdrawing his fingers, as it was like stroking a group of tiny, sharp blades.

Exhaling, he tossed it on the glowing embers in the fireplace, then fell back at the eruption of sparks and popping that ensued. As he waited for the fireworks to subside, he began to grow concerned about what he had brought onto Abbey land.

He smothered the fire completely, then called in a man, Ellor, and told him, "Clean this out and dump the ashes over the cliff into the Sea. Be careful not to touch them."

"Captain," Ellor said, saluting. He knelt before the fireplace, drawing aside the firescreen and taking up the shovel and ash bucket.

"Thank you," Efran said, patting his shoulder. Then he stopped to think about the defense of the fortress against one or more of these creatures. He went to the third floor, then to a stairwell which gave access to the crenelation that ran completely around the fortress, topping the walls. Walking along the four-foot-wide walkway behind the crenelation, Efran saw this as a logical point of defense.

However, it was not the highest point on the fortress. From a distance, he had often seen that the highest point was the bell tower. Leaning backward over the crenelation, he could not even see the bell tower from here. So he reentered the stairwell, but found no access to the tower from it. Returning to the ground floor, he found two other stairwells to the crenelation, but neither of these provided access to the bell tower.

So he returned to the crenelation walkway to look for exterior steps or other doors to the interior. Finally, he found the latter: a door that opened to a narrow stair which led up only. Trotting up these steps brought him to a door which opened to the bell tower, centered in a circular space about forty feet in diameter. The tower itself was small, about ten feet in diameter, so the walkway all around it was about fifteen feet wide.

Efran looked into the doorway of the slate bell tower to see steps leading up to the wooden platforms, bells and ringing apparatus. No one here now knew anything about bell ringing, so he had never heard them rung. But the

twenty-foot-tall tower was impractical as a location from which to shoot. However, he noted that the top of the bell tower was a natural perch for a large bird, and easy shooting from the walkway below.

Walking around the tower, Efran paused at grilled openings in the top of the exterior walls. Without going around to count them all, he estimated there were twenty or so openings of a square foot each, all with some kind of metallic filter beneath the grills. Efran lifted one grill to pry up the underlying filter and peer down into a descending channel. They looked to be for rainwater collection, though he'd have to get one of the fortress engineers up here to tell him for sure.

He replaced the filter and the grill, then returned to the ground floor to hear that the doctor, Wallace, had summoned him to the creature below.

After leaving the great bird, Minka dismounted at Ryal's shop to scan the line of men that extended from the door and clustered at the window. She pushed past them, feeling little need to apologize. In the crowded front room, she watched Adele flirting with the man at the counter. Young and brawny, he was saying, "What are you doing here with an old man? I've got better things to show you."

"Go away, Colfox," Adele said, raising seductive eyes.

Rolling her eyes, Minka opened the door to the back room to see Ryal seated at the small table, sweating and tapping his fingers. He looked up at her helplessly.

Minka closed that door again and went back outside the shop to the first man in line to ask, "What do you need of the notary?" He gaped at her, opening empty hands, so she said, "Go about your business."

Man by man, she went down the line asking the same question, getting variations of the same response, and instructing them to leave. Some tried to bluster their way in, but if they did not state a specific need, she ordered them away. After she had asked a new resident this question, he looked down on her to reply, "What business is it of yours, sweetheart?"

She said through gritted teeth, "I am Lady Minka, wife of Lord Efran. Do you wish to talk to him?" He almost fell off the step leaving, so a number of men also departed at that time. Encountering one man who legitimately needed his plot lease registered, Minka directed him to one side.

When the line outside the door was cleared, she reentered the shop to begin asking the same question of the men inside, and thus the shop quickly emptied, save the resident who needed help. Minka stood by while Adele found the appropriate ledger to register his lease. He paid her a silver piece, then nodded to Minka as he left.

With the shop cleared, Minka regarded Adele, who indifferently stacked forms to one side without looking up. Minka said quietly, "If you turn out to be unhelpful to Ryal, Efran may well come back and drop you off at the Porterhouse."

"I don't think so," Adele sneered. "Ryal and I are married."

Minka gaped at her in disbelief. Then the back door opened for Ryal to hesitantly step out. She turned to him, gasping, "Ryal, have you married her?"

"Yes, Minka," he said, looking sick.

She clutched the counter, hardly daring to imagine what Efran might say. To her sister, she said tightly, "You're familiar with the concept of divorce. And were I you, I wouldn't be so ready to destroy everyone who tries to help me."

Adele scraped together some defiance to say, "I love him."

"Then be a good wife!" Minka cried. "Oh!" She left the shop, banging the door shut behind her.

She leaned on the horse, who nuzzled her. Stroking his neck, she murmured, "How am I going to tell Efran?" Thinking on this, she remounted to head toward the switchback.

While Minka had been inside the shop just now, Efran rode past it in response to the summons from Wallace. Scanning the sightseers who were taxing the line of soldiers, Efran followed the sentry to the far side of the spectacle where the doctor waited. Before speaking to him, Efran instructed the sentry, "Clear all these people away. Empty the barracks if you have to; I want everyone gone who is not in the army."

"Captain," the man said, saluting. Then he turned to roar, "EVERYONE DISPERSE!" A number of people fled right then; to those who stood fast, he got in their faces to roar. To the children who were frozen stiff, he bent down to say, "You need to go home now," and if required, he turned them with a little pat on the back.

In seconds the crowd had dispersed. Efran watched, then beckoned the man back to him. "I like you. What is your name?"

"Rigdon, sir, thank you," he said, saluting.

"Where are you from?" Efran asked, not recognizing him or his accent.

Rigdon paused, then admitted, "I was logging supervisor for Lord Monsell. Administrator DeWitt allowed me to swear loyalty to the Law of Roman and sign on to serve you, Captain."

"Very good. Carry on," he said to Rigdon's salute. Turning, Efran murmured, "DeWitt is worth almost as much as Estes." Then he asked the doctor, "What have you found?"

Wallace exhaled. "Well, Efran, it's a female with a fertilized egg. You may look at the egg, but don't touch; it's toxic. The instant I broke it open, it spewed smoke and acid." He lifted his gloved hands to show Efran spots where the leather was almost eaten away.

"So I see," Efran breathed, kneeling to look at the egg. Now in pieces, it had been about eight inches long, and had contained a chick embryo that was almost fully developed.

With a scalpel, Wallace lifted an embryo wing to point to the ribs beneath it. "The wing on the mother is hardened in place, so I was not able to view the appendage that you had described to Estes, but as you can see, there is nothing irregular about the chick. No arms or legs or anything non-avian. However, on the mother—come look."

He took Efran around the carcass to point at two bumps on the belly. "You see these? They appear to be vestigial structures."

"Legs?" asked Efran. "Human?"

“Possibly. I can’t tell. It’s hardened to the point that I can’t cut into it. The body is—almost metallic. This . . . is something besides avian,” Wallace said.

Efran sat back on his heels. “Is it a natural creature?”

“Not like any I’ve seen,” Wallace said, disturbed. “But there is definitely a mate somewhere, so I’d advise disposing of it as thoroughly as possible, as quickly as possible.”

“Agreed,” Efran said, standing. “Thank you, doctor.” Then he looked around. “Where is Minka?”

“I believe she went back up to the fortress, Efran,” Wallace said.

“Good,” Efran exhaled. Then he turned to shout, “Rigdon!”

The man ran up, saluting. “Captain?”

“I’m putting you in charge of disposing of this carcass. It will need to be burned with oil and the ashes dropped in the Sea. It’s poisonous, by the way; protect your hands. Oh, and use anyone you need,” Efran invited.

“Thank you, sir.” Rigdon’s supervisory instincts took over, and he started issuing orders.

“He’s going to get himself promoted if he’s not careful,” Efran murmured, hoisting himself up to the saddle.

“Pardon?” Wallace asked, already mounted beside him.

“Nothing. I’m going back to bed, if I can find it,” Efran said wearily.

“You’ve had a full night’s work, I see,” Wallace acknowledged. Efran, half asleep on the horse, hardly heard him.

Up in the courtyard, Efran surrendered the horse and staggered into the fortress. Opening the door to his quarters, he was mildly concerned to not find Minka here. He started to go out again, then heard, “Efran?”

Looking through the open bedroom door, he found her sitting up in bed, wearing a sheer silk robe he had never seen before. He stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

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Chapter 6

Efran stumbled toward the bed and Minka shifted, exposing one white leg clear to the upper thigh. “I saw the creature,” she whispered. “I had no idea—”

“I’m all right,” he said, sitting heavily to shuck off his boots and fumble with his belt. “You already saw . . . that I. . . .” But it was too difficult to form words right now, so he concentrated on undressing while she reached to him, lips parted.

He fell on her and she took him up passionately. Tired as he was, he dropped agreeably into the familiar rôle as

the target of a woman's romantic interest. He closed his eyes in appreciation of how glad she was that he had survived. Finally driven to reassert himself, he rolled over on her to finish what she had started.

Afterward, he lay beside her, drifting off. "Efran," she whispered, "my lord Efran."

"No, no," he muttered, eyes closed. "I'm High Lord. You make me feel like . . . High . . . Lord. . . ."

"Ryal and Adele are married," she whispered.

Eyes closed, his brows drew down. "Um? What?"

She lifted up. "Ryal and Adele got married."

His eyes cracked open, then clarity entered them while she watched, slightly apprehensive. He threw his head back into the pillow to start laughing. "That's what this was all about. You were afraid of what I might do to your sister, so you worked me over with *moekolohe* before telling me!"

"Efran!" she cried, trying to sound hurt while laughing in embarrassment at being found out.

He grinned, holding her tightly to him. "Just for doing it so well, you are granted clemency. I won't do anything to either one of them." Still chuckling, he sighed and closed his eyes.

When she started to get up, he tightened his arms around her. "Don't leave," he muttered.

"I want to go get Joshua out of the nursery," she whispered.

His arms relaxed. "Get dressed first," he mumbled.

"You!" She leaned over to press her lips to his face, but he was well and truly out now.

She got up gently so as not to shift the mattress, then put on one of her work dresses. She hung up the *négligée* in self-congratulation for the fact of its working, then realized she couldn't wear it again or he'd know right away that she'd done something. Thinking on this, she went to get Joshua.

He was just waking up when she arrived at the nursery, so she made sure the attendants knew she was taking him. Then she retrieved one of his bottles from a cold storage room (one of the rooms on the first floor that was always cold, regardless of the weather outside).

Taking both back to her and Efran's quarters, she saw a man in an Abbey uniform stop at the door.

When she approached, he said, "Rigdon at your service, lady, if you will kindly inform the Captain that the bird is blazing nicely, whenever he'd like to come look."

She nodded. "I will tell him when he wakes."

"Very good, lady." He hesitated, then said, "He may hear about the—popping and flares that occurred when the bird was lit up. It was—pretty extensive, and caused a great deal of excitement, but no damage."

"I see. That's interesting," she said.

He bowed and walked away. Nodding to herself, she approved of the way he delivered that message, despite the bowing, which she could never get used to.

She slipped back to the bedroom where Efran lay deeply asleep. Then she eased onto the bed to give Joshua his bottle. After he'd drunk the whole thing, she shifted him to her shoulder to burp him, as Bethune had instructed. He belched resoundingly, as he always did after a bottle. Afraid of waking Efran, she started to get up, then saw that his hand was on her thigh. She didn't know when he placed it there, because he was clearly asleep. But she stayed put.

On second thought, she lay down to put Joshua on her chest and stomach so that he could hold his head up and look around. When he did, he appeared to be surveying the entire room. Seeing his father lying nearby, he reached out a hand. This he waved in the air for a while, but as it was ineffective in moving him where he wanted to go, he raised his other hand to roll off her onto the bed.

Smiling sleepily at her, Efran picked him up to put him on his own chest. She whispered, "Sorry to wake you."

"No, I got what I needed," he mumbled while Joshua slapped his face. Efran yawned, his chest expanding so as to confuse the baby. Then Efran observed, "So Adele talked Ryal into getting married."

"Oh, I could have killed her," Minka groaned. "Figuratively," she quickly amended.

He snorted. "I stand by my decision to do nothing; they are both of age. But if he gets her pregnant, I'm going to feel exonerated."

She dropped her head to his shoulder in shocked laughter, and he kissed her. Joshua strove to get hold of her hair. Then she remembered, "Oh, your man Rigdon said the bird is burning nicely and invited you to come watch."

He nodded slightly. "I will come look when it is fully burnt and drowned."

"Drowned?" she murmured.

"Yes, it was a female carrying a fertilized egg," he said.

She raised up. "Then there is a male out there somewhere."

"At least one," he said. She lay back down, twining her arm around his. He whispered, "Don't be afraid."

"All right," she breathed. "Oh. Your man also made a point to mention the—popping and flares that went up when the bird was set on fire. He said it scared a lot of onlookers, but caused no damage."

"I see," Efran whispered, recalling that the same thing happened when he had tried to burn the pinion. If one feather burst out in flaming sparks, he could hardly imagine what a whole bird would look like set on fire.

At that time, Toby knocked on the door to ask Efran to come see his latest project, which he did, along with Minka and Joshua. Having discovered a natural depression on the far southeastern hilltop, Toby and the undergardener Tourjee had widened and deepened it, turning it into a small reservoir. Then they built an Archimedes screw to pump water to various areas of the garden. Minka was delighted and Efran impressed with the device, seriously attending Toby's demonstration.

Then Efran asked Toby, "Have you seen Pia?"

“Every now and then,” Toby said, looking west to the woods. “She’s all right, Efran.”

“I’m sure, but I need to talk to her,” Efran said. He wanted to know if she could sense anything about this avian creature, or creatures.

Following that, Efran and Minka, with Joshua, stopped to encourage Ivy, Noah, and Bethune’s Erastus in their weeding of the vegetable area of the garden. This Tourjee required them to do following their construction of a rabbit trap, with which they flattened a whole section of artichokes. Efran listened sympathetically to Ivy’s complaint of exhaustion, but declined to let her out of the work. Instead, he suggested she spend more time with Bethune’s daughter Cleo, who did not get into so much trouble.

As Efran and Minka were about to leave the garden, he spotted Pia lingering at the edge of the trees outside the fence, where her wild friends were. He could not make stay inside the fence. “There’s Pia. I’ll be right back,” he told Minka.

Pia, looking wild but healthy, waited for him to come to the fence with Joshua. She was *aina*—a Polonti child who could communicate with and, in certain cases, command animals. “Pia.” He knelt at the fence. “The big bird that you must have seen burning out front—are there others? Can you hear them?”

She shook her head fiercely, scowling, “Not *pohaku*.”

“*Pohaku*,” Efran repeated blankly. As far as he could remember, that meant “rock.” Did she mean “solid” or “real”? He thought about the metallic sharpness and sheen of the feathers. Regardless, it was nothing that she could communicate with.

“All right, Pia. Come in for a while?” he asked hopefully. She shook her head again, but easily this time. She knew he wouldn’t force her. After greeting Joshua with a pat on the head and a few words, she went back into the woods on the hilltop. Sighing, Efran stood.

From there, he took Minka and Joshua around front to the top of the switchback, where they could see the thing burning. It produced an acrid, metallic-smelling smoke. “How long will you keep it burning?” Minka asked.

“As long as its producing such a strong odor, for a while yet,” he said. Joshua started sneezing, so they took him back in.

With frequent reapplications of oil and other flammables, the bird was kept burning through that day and night, and the next day and night. On the third day, Efran went out to have a look at it. The remaining pile appeared to be uniformly black ash around charred bones, so he ordered it loaded into sacks which were weighted with rocks and carted to the terminus of the east Passage, where they were dumped into the Sea. Then he ordered all the men who had handled the ashes to bathe thoroughly and wash their own clothes.

Efran also met with Barr, Gabriel, Lyte and Goss to glean from them what shots appeared to be most effective in bringing down the bird. They agreed that while the underside of its belly was protected by scales, its throat, breast, and flanks were vulnerable. Also, hitting the underside of the wings could bring it down. Efran had them make drawings of the creature with its vulnerable areas labeled to pass around to all the archers. Goss’ drawings turned out to be so elegant and so much in demand that he had to take time off from his regular duties to produce a score of them.

Following all that, Efran did not know what else they could do, but wait.

Justinian continued his information-gathering in Westford, although there was little of interest right now. Efran kept him on retainer, however, because when he did happen on information, it was always useful. Today, following up on talk about the relocation of certain unsavory businesses from Westford to the Abbey Lands, Justinian went to the notary shop to get details about a particular tenant.

So upon the tinkling of the bell, he was considerably surprised to see Adele come languidly from the back room to the counter. "Hello, Justinian," she said to his hanging jaw.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Helping Ryal," she replied.

"Greatly, I'm sure. Where is he?" Justinian asked.

"Resting. He hasn't been sleeping well lately," she said, averting her eyes as if disclaiming any responsibility for it.

"I can see no reason for that," he said, looking at her low-cut blouse, an improvisation on one of the outfits Minka had found for her. "But we'll let him rest, and you can hand me the lessee book up there." He pointed to the high shelf.

She glanced back over her shoulder. "Oh, Ryal told me about that book. It's confidential."

"Ordinarily, I'm sure, but the gentleman in front of you is on assignment for the Lord of the Abbey Lands, and I need to know the name of the tenant in number twenty-two," Justinian said with only a shade of impatience.

Leaning forward on the counter, she purred, "I'm so sorry, but I have to follow the rules."

His eyelids fluttered briefly at this absurdity from her, of all people. "Then I'm afraid we'll have to disturb Ryal from his rest."

"We can't do that. He's *very tired*," she said.

"All righty." He then nimbly hopped up on the counter and stood before the shelves to extract the needed ledger. While she was screaming at him and beating on his legs, another customer entered. He backed up against the door in caution, but stayed to watch.

Justinian calmly turned pages, then ran his finger down a column while Adele beat on him. "Hmm. That's interesting," he murmured. He replaced the ledger and was about to hop down when Adele changed tactics, going around to the front of the counter to pull on his leg instead.

This caused him to fall back against the shelves and throw an arm over the top of the shelving. Although it had been nailed into the wall for stability, this proved to be inadequate anchoring against the force of an adult male hanging on it while his leg was being pulled. The whole unit began to fall forward.

With ledgers raining from the upper shelves, Adele screamed and ducked in front of the counter. His leg freed, Justinian jumped down around her and was out the door instantly along with the customer. The shelving came to

rest with a resounding *thud* against the counter, expelling the rest of the ledgers onto the counter and floor.

As Adele was rising up, Ryal came out from the back room to look around at the profusion of scattered ledgers and dislodged pages, and her in the midst of them.

The following morning, April 9th, Efran and Estes were again in his second-floor workroom, discussing further items on Loizeaux's list of requests. Efran said, "All right, we've covered the ale and the dresses. What's next?"

Estes picked up the long piece of wrinkled parchment. "Artichokes. Did we serve him any? They seemed to have impressed him. He wants five cases."

Efran winced. "I'm afraid my children destroyed most of them a few days ago. How do you think he'll feel about cabbages?"

Estes was expressing doubt when a sentry, Clough, appeared at the door in restrained excitement. "Captain, a great bird's been spotted heading this way from the east."

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Chapter 7

Efran stood. "Archers to high points along the crenelation. Get everyone who's on the hilltop inside the fortress."

"Captain," Clough said, darting away.

Efran paused to tell Estes, "I will be up at the bell tower. I . . . know you're good with a bow, but we have plenty of archers. I would prefer you stay here."

Estes hesitated, but nodded. Efran went downstairs to his quarters, where he found his bow and quiver. These he took with him up the stairways to the roof. Bypassing the archers who were taking positions along the east-facing crenelation, Efran found the small door leading to the highest point of the fortress.

Opening the door, he turned around to tell Gabriel, "I will be manning the bell tower."

"Yes, Captain," Gabriel said, resuming his trot to the east wall.

Efran emerged from the doorway onto the bell tower platform, then turned to scan eastward. The great bird, looking very much like the first, was approaching at a glide on a high thermal. Watching, Efran took his bow off his shoulder and nocked an arrow.

He tracked the bird as it lazily circled the fortress. Several arrows swept past, but nothing hit it—the archers were hindered in that half their range was blocked by the fortress. The bird then settled down on the top of the bell tower. Efran aimed for the lower throat and released.

The bird issued a screeching cry as blood gushed from the point of impact. Efran dropped the bow to cover his ears, watching the bird tumble down to the base of the tower, landing on its back. The weaving head turned to

him, uttering a softer cry, while Efran watched its abdomen. Archers began pouring out of the doorway behind him, but stopped alongside him to watch as well.

The first creature they had killed had two spindly appendages under its wings and two vestigial bumps lower down. But this one had four fully formed appendages that were moving and growing. The archers watched as the eagle head with the pierced throat began shriveling, as did the body and wings, while humanlike arms and legs were thrusting out, pulling at the diminishing skin.

Finally the hands grasped the skin between them and pulled, ripping it open. From there, the person underneath pulled the shrinking feathered neck off his/her head, then stepped out of the rest of the skin as if removing a clingy night shirt. When he/she was completely out, the remaining skin shriveled into a mass much like the ashes of the bird they had burned.

The men were then staring at a small person who appeared to be naked, but had no visible sexual organs nor hair. His/her skin was a light shade of blue, the eyes tiny and closely lidded. There was no nose nor mouth; the sounds, when they came, appeared to be made by the vibrations of vertical folds of skin on either side of the neck.

As the person emerged, wiping his/her arms, he/she was directing a verbal stream at Efran which sounded distinctly peeved. But the language was one that none of the men had ever heard, so they all just stared. It was fascinating to watch a creature produce speech without taking a breath.

Looking around at them, the person said a few more words or phrases, as if testing the men's comprehension, then he/she threw up his/her hands in a classic gesture of frustration. He/she turned to point at Efran, who fell back as though hit, but immediately righted himself. The creature shook a finger at him again, throwing him violently into the wall behind him.

Barr placed himself in the invisible line of fire while Gabriel leapt toward the alien from the side. With a furious outswEEP of the arms, he/she leveled the whole group of them, then resumed the attack on Efran, who finally collapsed against the wall. As he did, a ripple in the air seemed to emanate from him.

The person appeared to absorb this ripple, then spoke comprehensibly: "Well, potato heads! I am flustered at the annoyance you persons are. Just because I don't laugh to spend excessive years learning your talky-talk. What is your horror? Oh, the skin. Why are you violent to blue? It's the color of your sky, you ingrates. Well, let's change it up so you'll be resting."

While the men slowly picked themselves up, the alien began transforming himself according to the faces and figures he saw around him, which were uniformly male. Finally, he arrived at a skin color lighter than Efran's but darker than Gabriel's, with a head of curly brown hair that was apparently copied from Younge. Then there appeared eyes, nose and lips that looked disturbingly like Towner's. "There, donkeys! Is that admirable?" Perceiving their clothing, he dressed himself in an Abbey uniform, except in deep purple. He also raised his height from four feet to about five and a half, which appeared to be the highest he cared to go.

Meanwhile, several men were kneeling beside Efran. "Captain." "Captain!" "What did you do to him?" They angrily turned to the alien.

Efran was sitting against the wall, eyes open, but completely unresponsive to anything around him. Barr advanced on the alien so quickly that he barely had time to raise a hand and invisibly repel him. But all the other men were regarding him with dangerous eyes, so he put a hand to his apparent hip and said, "Well, what did you forecast, potato heads? He erased my transport! And he unwound poor Clephane before she could tippity tap! I

warned her not to crunch you with the two legs, but setbacks happen.” His lips moved when he talked, but not in synchronization with the words the men heard, which did not help them understand him. And he showed no sign of drawing breath.

The men began spreading around him so that he had to erect a protective shield around himself. “All right, I see this chews up our happiness. Get his little Minka up here to fix his brain back on.”

The men glanced at each other, but one ran out the doorway to the stairs. DeWitt pushed forward to stand in front of the alien. “I am DeWitt, administrator of this fortress. Tell us who you are and what you want.”

The alien looked him up and down. “Yes, I will speak in your face. You may reference me as the Croly. I need a hiding hole.”

DeWitt digested that, then asked, “What are you hiding from?”

“A big one,” the Croly said, shrinking. “A very big one.”

Shortly thereafter, Minka and Estes appeared in the doorway. She looked around anxiously, and the men parted for her to see her husband. She fell down beside him, gasping, “Efran! What—?” She held his head, stroking his hair and whispering in his ear. DeWitt went over to Estes to talk to him.

“Yes, see? There is the hilarity,” the Croly said, gesturing to Minka.

While Minka whispered to Efran, kissing his head, he slowly lifted a hand to her arm. DeWitt and Estes talked, and the Croly raised wary eyes to the sky.

Hammer in hand, Ryal reached out to test the new nails with a shake of the shelving. It held firm, so he climbed down the ladder to pick up the first few ledgers and hoist them up to the top of the ladder. From there, he placed them on the top shelf one by one, peering at the lettering on their spines.

The bell on the door tinkled, and he looked down. “I’ll be right with you.”

“Thank you,” his visitor said. Lowering the hood of her cloak, the elderly woman said, “Goodness, it’s so much warmer here than in Westford, but still windy. Are you remodeling?” she asked, looking at the newly affixed shelving and the stacks of ledgers on the floor.

“No, just rearranging,” he said, descending from the ladder. “How may I help you?”

She pulled out a form from a pocket under her cloak. “I need to register this death, please. I’m from Westford, but there’s no notary there anymore! It was my husband Pruden who died yesterday. I am Giardi.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” he said. “But whatever has happened to Notary Shaffer?”

Vexed, she said, “The sign on his door says he’s recuperating from the fever, but it’s been there for weeks now. No one knows when he’ll be back on duty.”

“How very inconvenient,” he mused. “Let me find the death registry, here.”

She waited as he went from stack to stack, looking. “Is that it right there?” She pointed.

He went to look, squinting at the spine. “Oh, yes it is. Thank you. The old eyes are just not what they were,” he said, reddening.

“Oh, well, look. Your glasses are filthy.” She took them off his face to rub them with her cloak, despite his protests.

When she gave them back to him, he replaced the hooks on his ears, flustered, then looked around. “Wh—” he began, then looked at her document in his hand. “I—can hardly believe it. They must have been dirty, though I thought I had cleaned them. I can see so much clearer now.” He stared at her in disbelief.

“Good! Yes, cleaning lenses with wool is useless; you really need silk,” she said knowledgeably.

“I suppose so,” he murmured, totally missing the incongruity of her statement with the fact of her having cleaned his glasses on her woolen cloak. Taking her document to his ledger, he moved a nearby basket, then entered the information in the correct place before handing the paper back to her. In sudden concern about her being left alone, he asked, “Had you children?”

“None that survived,” she murmured, eyes lowered.

“I’m so sorry,” he breathed.

“Thank you,” she said, digging in her pouch for payment.

Seeing that, he announced, “Today I am accepting lens cleaning in lieu of monetary payments.”

She laughed, “Oh, my, how convenient! Then perhaps you can tell me where I might get a bite to eat. I don’t often get down to this area. The—Abbey Lands?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m afraid I don’t know of any eateries yet, but I would be honored if you would join me for the midday meal. The Lord of the Abbey Lands sends me meals from the fortress kitchen.” He gestured to the newly arrived basket sitting on the counter.

“Why—I would love to! If you’re sure there’s enough,” she said hesitantly.

“Yes, it’s for two. And I always welcome company,” he said, showing her to the back room. “If you haven’t tried Goadby’s Best Ale, you must. It’s very light.” He brought over the basket to take out one bottle for her, and another for himself.

“Why, thank you. Surely you don’t run this shop all by yourself,” she said, looking around.

“It’s not difficult. Easier to do it by myself than with help,” he said, rummaging for cups in a cabinet. Then he blinked at what he had said.

She laughed. “Have you got someone coming in today to help?”

“I don’t know. She said she had errands to run,” he murmured. He placed the cups on the table, then lifted out of the basket two plates wrapped in paper. “Here we are. Fresh quail from the Abbey kitchen.” He placed a set of cutlery before her, and another beside his plate.

“Oh, my, that smells wonderful!” She picked up her fork to taste it. “Oh, how lovely. They must have hunters cover the countryside. I heard the strangest thing—something about a large bird your men brought down.”

“That *was* very strange, and unnatural, from what I heard. Lord Efran was so concerned about it, he had the carcass burned,” Ryal said.

“Oh, dear! Did he actually see it alive?” she cried.

“He must have; he was in the party that brought it down,” Ryal replied. “Everyone is talking about it.” He sat to begin eating.

She gasped. “Who all saw it?”

“Let me see,” Ryal said thoughtfully. “The men with him were Lyte, Barr, Gabriel, and . . . I can’t remember the other.”

“Oh, that is so interesting. I hope they’ve had no ill effects? Memory loss, blackouts or such?” she asked.

“Not that I know of. But I haven’t spoken with Efran since it happened,” he said.

“Oh, I see,” she said.

They talked of other things as they ate, then she thanked him greatly for the wonderful quail, and got up to leave. At the door, she turned and said, “You have a lock on your bedroom door, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, startled.

“You can use it, you know,” she said, patting his arm. Then she departed to the tinkling of the bell.

He stood in the same spot for minutes afterward, then walked around looking at papers. “What did she use on my glasses?” he murmured. “I can see as well as ever through them.”

He looked up, sighing. “I have been such a fool.” He climbed up on the ladder to continue reshelving the ledgers, and thinking as he did so. When he came across the divorce ledger, he looked at it for a long time. Then he descended the ladder to lay the ledger on the counter. Opening it up, he recorded the divorce of Ryal and Adele as of April 9, 8154—three days after their marriage. Then he filled out a notice of divorce, signed and sealed it before placing it on the largely unused bed in her room. Following, he checked to see that the lock on his bedroom door was working.

At any rate, Adele did not return to the shop that night.

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Chapter 8

After leaving Ryal's shop that afternoon, Giardi continued walking down the Abbey Lands road until she came to the switchback. She paused to study the fortress at the top of the hill. Then, smiling, she began to ascend the switchback on foot.

Efran still sat with his back to the wall on the roof of the fortress. Though awake, he was weak and disoriented, watching the Croly through slitted lids. Minka was curled up in Efran's side, her head on his shoulder, and would remain there until she was sure he was better.

Estes and DeWitt were conferring with him, and the archers were sitting around them while messengers were going back and forth to the fortress beneath them.

The Croly was pacing in circles around the bell tower. Efran uttered, "I want him gone."

From twenty yards away, the Croly cried, "You splotched my transport!"

"You have feet!" Efran shouted back.

The Croly rushed toward him with pointing finger and half a dozen men lurched up in his path. But Minka lifted her head to say, "We don't understand how to help you." The moment she shifted, Efran clenched her arm, so she didn't even try to get up.

When the Croly pointed at her, that glassy look began to come over Efran, but the Croly was merely scanning. Then he said, "You are singularly with womb and ovaries on this level."

"Yes," she said.

"Then you like to weep that the Clephane was splotched with egg," he said.

It took her a moment to realize that *Clephane* must be the name of the bird that Efran and his men had shot down and brought back. She observed, "If I killed someone in order to eat them, I would get splotched, too." Efran glanced at her, thinking that he should have known she would get the unredacted account from Estes.

"You eat sheep and other flyers!" the Croly accused her.

"They are not human," she said.

"You walking toads are not of my race," he sniffed.

"But we are speaking to each other," she said.

"Because I hefted globs of brain!" the Croly cried.

"From ME." Efran almost lurched up, then had to sink down again, dizzy. She pulled him back to rest his head on her shoulder while she leaned against the wall. He groaned, "I am too heavy on you."

"I don't mind," she whispered.

Curious, the Croly extended his finger toward her again. When she gasped and turned her head, Efran covered her with his arms and shouted, “Keep your filthy tentacles off my wife!”

But the Croly had drunk freely of what she experienced with her husband, and now was weaving on his feet, his tiny eyes out of focus. “Oh, Efran,” he whispered. “Ohhhh.”

Efran bolted up in full glassy-eyed rage, but Lyte, who had been waiting for just such an opportunity, drew the Croly’s hands behind his back and tied them firmly together. Then he stepped back and they all waited to see how effective it would be.

Dropping weakly beside Minka, Efran whispered, “Are you all right?”

“Yes, it’s just like—someone seeing you naked,” she whispered back.

“I’ll kill him,” he assured her.

It took the Croly a moment more to even realize that his hands were bound; when he did, he merely shook off the rope. Then he sat to earnestly study Minka.

Efran reminded him, “Even toads are poisonous.” The Croly ignored him.

Minka murmured to the alien, “You came from a long way away. What were you looking for here?”

The Croly said, “It was the pratfall.”

“You mean . . . an accident?” she said.

“Yes. The tumble down the stairs,” he said.

“We’re shocked,” Efran noted.

“And you can’t get back,” she surmised.

“We will howl and scream to go back,” the Croly said.

Minka was wondering if that meant he did not want to, but Efran sat up. “There are more of you?”

The Croly finally looked at him. “Who asked you, potato head?”

Efran turned to her. “Is that from your father’s audience with his clerks?”

“I will have you hanged,” the Croly told him.

“It sounds like it,” she said.

Efran looked over to Estes. “Can you get us dinner up here?” It was late afternoon.

“Yes,” Estes said, getting up. He paused at the exit to gesture several soldiers to him. Of the thirty or so archers who had been up here, there now remained ten. They wanted to keep watch on the Croly so that he would not go

down to the interior of the fortress. But he did not seem inclined to do that.

“What do you eat?” Minka asked the Croly.

“What is *eat*?” the Croly asked.

Efran looked over. “It’s what Clephane did to wolves, horses and humans.”

The Croly paused, weaving like Efran did when he was disturbed. “What it is if Clephane had splashed overboard.”

There was a silence, then Minka asked, “Are you saying that Clephane was someone like you who chose to become one with a flesh-eating bird?”

Efran looked at her and the Croly said, “The visual in your head is large.”

She told Efran, “That might mean I’m right.”

Efran regarded the Croly in distaste. “Do you mean that you—physically merge with these creatures to use them as transport with the possibility of it becoming—permanent?”

The Croly did not attempt to answer this. But Efran added, “The embryo in the egg didn’t have any appendages. Was your transport the father?”

This time the Croly said, “The visual in your head is wrecked.”

Efran scowled. “I wouldn’t even try to visualize that.”

But the Croly looked at him again. “You are hiding something scrumptious in your head.”

“From you? Yes,” Efran said.

“I think I will dissect you again,” the Croly said.

“You might not want to,” Efran replied. The alien considered that in silence. He did not point the finger at Efran again at this time.

Soldiers brought up dinner for those who remained at the bell tower: quail, squash, bread and ale. Efran sat up to inhale everything while the Croly watched in mild disgust and fascination. Seeing that, Efran extended half a quail to him. “You want to try something new? Or do you need your transport’s beak?”

The Croly recoiled, voicing, “You are purging my settledness.” Efran laughed.

Minka ate as well, preoccupied, then took Efran’s empty plate. “I need to go get Joshua out of the nursery, but I will come back in the morning.”

“Yes,” he said, leaning over to kiss her. When she stood unsteadily, he got up at once. “Let me walk you down the stairs.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. He still wasn’t fully recuperated.

“Yes, I want to see Joshua, too.” Then he directed a dark glance toward the Croly, adding, “But I will be back.” The Croly watched silently.

As night fell across the Abbey Lands, Efran and a few other soldiers returned with firepots and bedding for those who stayed to sleep around the bell tower. Besides having to sleep on wood and stone, the men needed shelter from the wind that gusted hard this high up.

When a soldier placed a firepot coincidentally close to the Croly, he sprang up in terror, crying, “You will scotch me, you ingrate! Away!” Waving mildly at him to settle down, the soldier moved the firepot six inches, and the Croly took himself to another part of the wall.

While the men stretched out in exhaustion, the Croly hunched down to watch his nemesis.

The next morning—April 10th—Ryal rose, washed, and breakfasted as usual. He put his glasses on and took them off several times, trying to understand how the simple act of wiping them clean could improve them so much.

Having left the back door unlocked in case Adele needed to come in, he knocked quietly on her bedroom door. Hearing nothing, he opened it to see the room empty and the bed undisturbed, the notice of divorce lying where he had left it.

Ryal opened the shop as usual and returned to the ladder to continue replacing ledgers. All the while, he was thinking. The name of the woman whose husband had died was Giardi. It was an unusual name, and he was sure he had seen it or heard it before. But he was certain he had never seen her before, and if she had lived for any length of time in Westford, he would have.

When he had replaced all the ledgers and returned the rolling ladder to its standing position, he pulled out the deaths ledger again. Turning to the last page, he looked at the entry he had made yesterday: Giardi, wife of Pruden, reporting his April 8th death on the following day, April 9th, 8154. Yes, there was that. But in his mind, her name was associated with another death.

He began idly flipping back through the pages. Page after page, year after year, he looked back at the deaths that had occurred in Westford. (He skipped the batch of loose pages for recent deaths from the fever in which numbers only, not names, were recorded. Those would tell him nothing.)

Then he stopped on the page for December 10th, 8149. Four and a half years ago, Giardi and her husband Pruden had died of the pox that had swept through Westford that year.

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Chapter 9

Efran opened his eyes to a bright pink and yellow sunrise reflecting off the white stone walls surrounding the bell tower. He turned his head to see the Croly crouched against the wall opposite, watching him. “I gather you don’t need to sleep, either,” Efran muttered. “So why would you want to merge with a creature that has to both eat and sleep?”

The Croly scooted closer to him. “Your question noodles the brain. I am a species that is alphabetically beyond you toads.”

Efran rolled over on his pallet, laughing. “Are you? You can’t even speak our language after cheating to get it.” But as he eyed the alien, he grew troubled.

The Croly fell toward him. “Something scrambling your brain that is what?”

Efran pushed himself up to sit on the pallet. “Tell me about the very big one that’s after you.”

“That one is hysterical if you think I am a laugh!” the Croly said in a high-pitched voice.

Efran studied the fear that made the representation of his face flicker so that some blue showed through. If the Croly’s presence was a draw for others of his kind, especially something called the Very Big One, Efran thought it might be best to let him go—if they could convince him to leave.

“Captain!” Barr cried. “Another great bird headed this way from the east!”

Efran looked over at the bird approaching on the thermals. As Efran’s archers nocked their arrows and raised their bows to track it, the Croly was desperately flicking his finger at them without effect. Either because of his fear, or the approach of the Very Big One, or some other unknown cause, he was misfiring. He could only wait at them not to kill an available transport.

Efran called, “Hold your fire.” His men looked at him in surprise, but lowered their bows. The Croly turned around, weaving on his feet.

The bird approached to land atop the bell tower. Efran told the Croly, “Give me your word that you will not splotch the two legs, and I will let you go.”

“The Croly does not splotch two legs,” he said righteously.

“Then leave.” Efran nodded toward the great bird.

With a cry, the Croly darted under the bird’s tail and disappeared. Then it lifted off to soar high up and away.

After a pause, one man muttered, “Did it go up the bird’s butt?”

DeWitt came over to Efran to murmur, “I won’t question you, Captain, but I’d like to understand why you let it go.”

Efran said, “The Croly is not our enemy, but the Very Big One may be. I’m letting him go so that the big one can chase him somewhere else”—*if it is not here already*, he thought.

Those who heard him nodded, some looking up to the black speck high above them.

In the fortress below them, Giardi had entered the foyer, looking around in lively interest.

Justinian, twirling his cane with the silver knob, eyed the front of Number 22 on the western Abbey plots. It looked clean and respectable, with tulips and daffodils growing in the front beds. Advancing up the walk to the door, he knocked on it briskly with his walking stick. After a short wait, it was opened, and—he and Adele stood staring at each other.

He laughed, “My, you get around.”

At the same time she demanded, “What do you want?”

Justinian replied, “I’m here to talk to Colfox. And don’t tell me he’s exhausted; he’s expecting me.” Reluctantly, she opened the door to him.

Having just finished the midday meal with Minka, Efran was rapidly proceeding down the corridor toward the foyer, Estes at his side. Estes was telling him, “The scouts we sent to the area where you killed the first bird just now returned. They say there’s no sign of any more creatures or any more kills.”

“How can they be sure?” Efran muttered. He passed an elderly woman in a cloak who looked to be wandering, but she didn’t register with him right away. Then he paused, thinking of Dora—whose sons were criminal—and turned with a bemused frown. But he didn’t see anyone, so he shook his head and moved on.

Estes replied, “Goss was with them, who was in your party for the first kill.”

“Yes,” Efran said. “And Goss said he saw no more activity?”

“That’s correct,” Estes said.

Efran breathed out in relief. “Good. We’ll check again in a week.”

A sentry, Fellowes, approached. “Captain, Justinian requests your ear. He’s in the receiving room off the foyer.”

“Excellent. I’m on my way. Would you mind coming as well?” Efran asked Estes.

“Not at all, if you need me. I understand that Justinian has made himself almost indispensable,” Estes said.

“Surprisingly, yes,” Efran said.

Fellowes opened the door to the receiving room for Efran and Estes to enter. Justinian, already standing, said, “Hullo! My reports merit the attention of all top Polonti now?”

Efran stopped in midair halfway down to a seat to eye him, but Estes said, “That depends on what you have to say for yourself today.” He sat, so Efran resumed sitting, and Justinian took the chair behind the table.

“You may or may not be pleased, depending on your objectives,” Justinian said, leaning forward with hands

clasped on the table. “But Number Twenty-Two is definitely housing a brothel. This morning I spoke with Colfox, the operator, to get a list of available girls and prices—all verbally, of course. If you want independent verification, send one of your men there to ask Becca to come clean his house. He’ll need use of a house, by the way—Number Fourteen is available now, I believe. At any rate, after he asks for ‘Becca,’ Colfox will give him the name of a real girl, a time and a price. She’ll come to his house, perform services, get paid and leave.”

Efran and Estes looked at each other grimly. “All right,” Efran sighed, shaking his head in dismay. Turning to Estes again, he said, “Who do you think? Krall?”

Before Estes could answer, Justinian cleared his throat. “Begging your pardon, but, to be sure of your bait getting a nibble, you’d best send someone—not Polonti.”

“Ahh,” Estes said in comprehension while Efran looked shocked.

“Why, I never had—” Efran began, and then caught himself at the sudden gleam in Justinian’s eye.

“Yes, Captain?” Justinian inquired, smiling, and Estes raised his eyebrows at him.

“Never mind,” Efran gulped. “All right, we’ll send Hawk. Give him a key to Fourteen; make sure it’s available,” he told Estes, who nodded.

As Efran and Estes rose, Justinian said, “Oh, one more detail. Adele is there.”

Estes’ jaw dropped as Efran gasped, “What? Is she—?”

“I don’t know what rôle she has, but she answered the door when I knocked,” Justinian told them.

“I thought she was helping Ryal,” Estes said in bewilderment.

“Not a great deal,” Justinian said carefully.

Efran put his head in his hands for a moment, then raised up with a gesture of dismissal. “I give up. She’s on her own now. Just no one tell Minka.” Justinian nodded and they all left the room.

At that time, Minka was sweeping out the western corridor. This wasn’t her job, and DeWitt had begun hiring cleaners for the fortress, but with so much time on her hands, she wanted to make herself useful. As she opened the western door to sweep out the dirt, a passing laborer paused. He came over respectfully. “Lady Minka?”

“Yes?” She looked up.

He struggled with something a moment, then said, “Adele’s yer sister, right?”

“Yes,” she said, her gut coiling. “What is it?”

He said, “She’s not at the notary’s anymore. She’s got herself into a situation at a—a house of ill repute, right ’ere on the Lands, number twenty-two. Yer might go warn ’er that someone who knows ’er has ratted on ’er.”

Minka stared at him, then threw down her broom and ran to the front courtyard. It was busy, as usual, and the gate guards were distracted handling a dispute, so neither noticed her running down the switchback alone. But an elderly woman in a black cloak was watching.

Another hour later, Efran and Estes were back in Estes' second-floor workroom attempting to dispense with the list of placating favors for Loizeaux. "Did we decide on cabbages instead of artichokes?" Estes asked.

"Yes. Ten heads. Check that off. What's next?" Efran asked.

With an air of vague hopelessness, Estes picked up the now-tattered parchment. "Let's see. Ale, dresses, artichokes—the next demand is for one month of Madea's kitchen services in Eurus."

Efran stared at him dully. "I will go to war over that."

"Why don't we just send him what we've agreed on so far and tell him that we're working on the rest?" Estes said in exasperation.

"Agreed," Efran said crisply. "So now—"

A sentry appeared. "Captain, Steward—Hawk is here to make a report. He's in the foyer receiving room."

"Yes, thank you," Efran said, standing in mild apprehension.

He and Estes went downstairs where Efran suddenly stopped, looking over his shoulder. "Did you see a . . . woman . . . ?" Estes looked at him questioningly, shaking his head. Efran exhaled and moved on.

They arrived in the receiving room, where Hawk, wearing civilian clothes, stood and saluted as they entered and shut the door behind them. Efran sighed, "Sit down and tell us what you know."

"Captain," Hawk said, as all three sat at the round table. "I did as instructed, sir, and, they sent a young girl to me at Number 14 who offered, ah, favors for five silver pieces. So, yes, it looks as though the intelligence you received is correct. The operator, Colfox, is a known offender in Westford."

Estes shook his head in distress. "It didn't take long for it to crop up here."

"How many girls does he have working for him?" Efran asked.

"Five, Captain. They're all poor and underage," Hawk said.

Younger than Minka, Efran thought with a pang. Estes looked pensive.

They sat thinking about this for a while, then Estes asked, "Didn't Elvey mention needing workers?" This was the seamstress who had moved from Westford to establish a clothing and textile empire in the Abbey Lands.

Efran studied him. "We can pay her to take five apprentices, can't we?"

"Certainly," Estes said.

"And we'll house them here. That's our charter, for heaven's sake—to take in unwanted children," Efran said. "Can you notify the children's matron to get space ready for them?"

"Yes," Estes said.

“All right,” Efran said, then he instructed Hawk, “Go tell Neale to collect his unit for a raid on Number Twenty-Two. Those five girls are to be brought to Estes. Colfox and any adults with him are to be taken in a locked carriage to Eurus and dropped off there. Tell Doane to issue a death edict for Colfox: if he ever comes back to the Abbey Lands, he dies. Do you have all that?”

“Yes, Captain,” Hawk said, standing.

“Go, then, and report back to me,” Efran nodded. Hawk saluted and left.

Standing, Estes said, “I’ll have the matron set up the girls’ housing. DeWitt will help me with the arrangement for their apprenticeships.”

“Thank you, Estes,” Efran said, looking at his hands, and Estes left.

In the quiet of the receiving room, Efran sat contemplating how quickly corruption had taken hold in his little domain. And Adele? He almost hoped that she were at 22, so that he would have legitimate cause to deport her. But he had no idea how he would tell Minka. He smiled, remembering her ploy for telling him about Adele and Ryal’s marriage. Then he thought he might wait until his hair had grown out to tell her anything further about her sister.

“Excuse me. Lord Efran?”

He looked up at an elderly lady in a dark cloak, and his eyebrows came down in vague recognition. “Yes?”

“May I speak to you for a moment?” she asked.

He cocked his head at her with a vague smile—not condescending, but close. “Who are you?”

“My name is Giardi, Lord Efran. I’m a longtime resident of Westford, but—none of that is important right now. I think you probably want to go get Minka out of Number Twenty-Two.”

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Chapter 10

Efran stared at Giardi for three seconds, then lunged up to run through the foyer and leap over the steps into the courtyard. “HORSE!” he bellowed. He spun around, looking for anything that had four legs.

A young stablehand came running around the corner with a horse wearing a bridle but no saddle. “Here, Cap’n!”

“Thank you.” Efran leapt up on the bare back as a gate sentry flung open the gates. Then Efran began to run him down the switchback.

It was a foolhardy impulse, but the horse was fortunately more in control of the descent than the rider. Fortress horses who were frequently required to rapidly descend the switchback had developed a kind of hopping lope to keep their hindquarters under them. Also, Efran instinctively kept his back straight to the vertical when ascending or descending, enabling the horse to balance easier. And he didn’t require a saddle to stay on any horse—not even Bastard.

A group gathered at the gates to watch him lope down the switchback at a record pace. Coming off it, he cast around desperately for numbers on the plot roads extending westward behind construction on the main road. He went down the first road, then had to backtrack and go down the second and then the third. Meanwhile, he glimpsed Neale's unit coming out of the gates at the top of the switchback.

Finally finding house number 22, Efran fell off the horse and ran up to the steps. He opened the door to stand on the threshold and call quietly, "Minka. Minka!"

In a few moments she appeared. Exhaling, she stood just out of his reach, saying, "Now, don't be mad at me—" He leaned in as far as he could and grasped her hand to pull her out, protesting.

Sweating profusely, he pulled her up the walk to the skittish horse. Rather than try to get either of them on it, he just took the reins to begin leading it with one hand while gripping her hand with the other. She walked with him quietly, then said, "Efran, you're hurting my hand."

Without stopping, he lessened his grip and said, "Then you hold on to my hand." She took his fingers and they turned onto the main road going south toward the switchback. They had to move to the side of the road to allow Neale's unit to lope past them.

As he and she began walking up the switchback with the horse between them, she said, "I know you want an explanation for why I was there. Well. I just found out that Adele left Ryal's shop, and has been staying at that house. And . . . there's a man running a house of prostitution there, so I had to get her out."

"Did you? Get her out?" he asked.

"I don't know. I was talking to her when you made me leave," she said.

"How did you know about the prostitution?" he asked, trembling.

"I heard talk," she said cautiously. Before he could react to that, she went on, "I'm sorry to have upset you so much. I know that the last thing you want is for your wife to be seen coming out of there, but—I had to go in to talk to her. She wouldn't come out to talk to me."

He stopped in the road just to breathe for a minute. "Minka. We just found out about it today, and I just now ordered a raid. I ordered all adults in that house to be deported. And Neale's unit is executing my order now. Look." He nodded over his shoulder.

She wheeled to look at the soldiers gathered in front of Number 22. Efran watched her face drain of color. "I would've been—deported," she whispered in shock.

"Exactly," he said. "Except, I wouldn't have allowed it, of course. I would have rescinded my own order, making you and me both fools and hypocrites—and allowing the brothel to continue."

"Efran!" she fell on him, crying, and he held her. "I'm so sorry!" she cried. Then she raised up, growing still. "All my apologies wouldn't mean a thing if you hadn't got me out when you did. I knew I shouldn't go in there, but I put Adele above my better sense. That was—thoughtless and stupid—"

"Minka." He let go of the reins to take both of her hands in his. "We are done helping Adele. She is five years older than you; she is responsible for her own choices. I won't allow her to destroy you along with herself."

She nodded shakily. "I understand. I'll do exactly as you say, Efran. You saved me!"

She fell on him, crying again, and he thought, *I'm not the one who saved you*. He looked pensively up to the fortress.

Minka held his hand tightly in hers as they resumed walking up the switchback. At the gates, he surrendered the horse to the young stablehand. "Thanks, Squirt." Efran ruffled his shock of blond hair.

"Sure, Cap'n," the boy said smugly.

Minka was too ashamed to even lift her face going into the fortress. Looking at the foyer floor, she turned to him to say, "I need to get Joshua out of the nursery now."

"Yes," he said. Before allowing her to go, he took her in his arms again to say, "It's all right, Minka. God took care of us today, and He will take care of us tomorrow. All right?"

She raised her face to smile a little. "I'm usually the one telling you that."

"And you're usually right." He bent to kiss her. She sighed, turning into the corridor.

Efran exhaled, then looked up at Giardi standing by the receiving room door. She pressed her lips together in a way that said, *Good. I'm glad it worked out*.

He walked over to take her up in a gentle but comprehensive hug. She patted his back, and he let her down, whispering, "How did you know?"

"I saw her, Lord Efran," she said.

"And then came up here to tell me." He raised his brows with a befuddled shake of his head at the coincidence. Then he frowned in bewilderment. "But . . . I saw you. . . ."

"Yes," she said. "I was looking at something else."

His face grew wary. "Anything I should see?"

"Yes, I think so," she said.

"Where? Where is it?" he asked.

She looked at him for a moment, then said, "The bell tower."

His mouth dropped open, then he shut it and nodded. "Let's go look."

They ascended the stairs slowly, as she was old, then he took her out onto the crenelation walk, and from there to the small door leading to the bell tower. Up here, he kept a hand on her due to the gusting wind.

"Where did you see it?" he asked.

"Over here." She led him to a corner of the wall enclosing the crenelation stairwell, then pointed at the stone

floor. Efran gaped at an egg lying there. It was roughly the same size and color of the great bird egg that Wallace had dissected—light brown with specks of blue.

Efran looked quickly at her. She said, “I think you should break it. But you must be careful not to touch or breathe in the contents.”

Looking around, he considered how to do that. Anywhere he tried to break such a large egg up here would almost inevitably splatter him or her, and they’d certainly get a whiff of it.

So he looked over the edge of the bell tower platform to the ground far below. He couldn’t afford to drop it on anyone, either. But. . .

He went to the southern edge facing the Sea to look out over the glorious, gray-green expanse. Then he leaned on the crenelation to look straight down. He believed he could throw it out to the Sea, but it probably wouldn’t matter if it hit the rocks at the bottom of the cliffs.

So he went over to pick up the egg and carry it to the edge. As he hefted it, a sense of foreboding came over him. He paused, then asked, “Is it safe to throw it down to the rocks?”

“I believe so,” she said.

“Here we go,” he said. He raised the egg back over his head, then hurled it out toward the Sea as hard as he could.

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Chapter 11

Efran and Giardi watched the egg sail over the southern slope to land just at the edge of the Sea on the rocks. They could not see it break from this height, but they watched a wisp of smoke rise from the obvious point of impact. The smoke kept rising, billowing up, then eventually dissipated in the wind.

After watching it vanish away, he asked, “Where did the egg come from?”

“I’m not sure,” she said hesitantly.

Then he murmured, “Ryal.” For some reason, Efran thought of him. Turning to her, he asked, “Will you check on Ryal?”

“Yes, I think I should,” she said, and he helped her descend the many stairs to the first floor.

After seeing Giardi out, Efran collected Estes and two other men, Milo and Finn, to tell them everything about the egg he had just found. Estes said, “That sounds like what happened after Wallace broke open the egg from the bird you brought back.”

“Yes, it was one of theirs, but whether it was laid deliberately on the roof or—misplaced, I don’t know,” Efran said. He told Milo and Finn to alert the men to eggs that might be lying around on the hilltop.

Following, Efran found Neale waiting to give his report on the raid. In summary, the five underage girls were now receiving their apprenticeship instructions at Elvey's shop, and their quarters in the Abbey fortress were being made ready. Colfox was in the locked carriage heading for Eurus. No one else had been found on the premises.

Efran dismissed Neale with thanks, then did a slow burn in the foyer receiving room. So Adele had managed to slip out of the house before getting caught, whereas he knew that Minka wouldn't have—she would have stood her ground and tried to explain.

Making an effort to put it behind him, he went to their quarters and opened the door. There, he saw her sitting on the floor holding Joshua. She looked up with shining eyes. "Watch this!"

She laid the baby carefully on his back. Swinging one arm over, he promptly rolled himself onto his front and pushed up to look around. Seeing Efran, he started working his legs in a fierce but unproductive frog crawl.

Grinning, Efran sat on the floor beside them.

Giardi entered the notary shop with the bell tinkling above her. At the same moment, Ryal came out of the back room. Startled to see her, he said, "I was just about to close the shop." Sunset was beginning to cast its golden glow into the front window.

"Oh, well, I'll only be a minute. I just wanted to say hello," she said, lowering her hood and fluffing her hair.

Ryal looked at the soft gray curls and found them attractive. But, he was still perturbed over what he had found. Being who he was, he blurted the truth. "I appreciate your stopping by, as I always enjoy company. But I must tell you, I found an entry in my deaths ledger which recorded the deaths of you and your husband years ago."

She blinked at him. "Oh, that's awkward. May I see your ledger?"

"Yes." He went to the shelves, now very secure against the wall, and pulled down the deaths ledger. He opened it right up to the year 8149, and turned the page to the end of the year. Then he showed her the entry for December 10th.

She studied it silently a moment. "That's very disturbing. I can't imagine how you felt when I came in with the death notice of my husband." He silently nodded. She turned a page. "I see that this was during the pox. That was so terrible, we left Westford for a few days."

"Many people did," he acknowledged.

Giardi turned another page, then another, scanning the list of names. "Oh, look here. There's a correction at the bottom of the page." She turned the ledger toward him.

Ryal bent to look. Beneath a long list of the deceased from the pox was the notation: "Pruden and Giardi found alive Dec. 13." It was his own handwriting, cramped for lack of space.

He inhaled in shock and outrage at his own carelessness. "I recorded it here without correcting the original entry! That is inexcusable!"

“Oh, you mustn’t be hard on yourself. That was such an awful time. No one could keep up with all the deaths,” she said.

Trembling, Ryal brought out his blotter to firmly erase the original entry. While he was doing this, a Fortress messenger delivered a basket containing two servings of the evening meal: roasted chicken with peas in sauce, butter rolls, and lemon pie for dessert.

Ryal set aside his blotter to receive the delivery with thanks, then told Giardi, “As apology for my terrible lapse, I must insist that you stay for dinner.”

“Oh, that’s lovely. You are too kind. But I can’t; I really must get home before dark,” she said, lifting her hood again.

Ryal took a stand. “It’s already too late for you to make it to Westford before dark. I have a completely furnished guest room that I must insist you use.” Accepting no argument, he went to the back room to bring out the small table and place it before the sunset.

Still, she protested, “Oh, but dear sir, aren’t you concerned about the gossip?”

He stopped dead to look at her. “At this point, dear lady—no. Now let me get your chair.”

That evening, with Minka firmly tucked into his side and Joshua in his crib beside them, Efran lay wide awake, staring into the darkness. Focusing his mind on the crucifix in the keep—on the reality behind it—Efran began, *God of heaven, I need Your help.*

He thanked God, again, for His mercy in sending Giardi to warn him to get Minka out of the brothel. He thanked God, again, for the living, breathing child of his that lay within his touch. In mild disbelief, he thanked God for Justinian’s work in uncovering the brothel in the midst of the Abbey Lands, and enabling them to deliver five young girls from that degradation.

Then he prayed, *I need help with enemies that spring up out of nowhere. An egg on the fortress roof. Are there interlopers in the fortress? Anywhere on the hill? I need to understand the reality here.* . . . He trailed off to consider several ideas that occurred to him before he fell asleep.

In the early morning of April 11th, before sunrise, Efran gently extracted himself from Minka to go get breakfast from whatever was on hand. Then he told the door sentry that he would be on the hilltop outside the fence.

There, he was looking for two things: evidence of trespassers, and Pia.

First, he had realized last night that it would be much easier for an interloper with the same nature as the Croly to trespass on the hilltop rather than in the fortress proper; there were too many eyes in the fortress. But since Efran had banned hunting up here, the hilltop had been mostly given over to Pia and her animal friends. At the same time, he needed to talk to her further, to find out why she couldn’t communicate with the big birds.

So Efran began walking the hilltop in the early morning light. The first thing he noticed, which disturbed him, was how quiet it was. There were many birds who nested up here; they should be raising a ruckus at this time of the morning. Then he began calling, “Pia? Pia!”

Immediately he felt a sense of fear. “Pia?” She was afraid. He ran forward a few steps, but didn’t know where to go. “Pia!”

He turned in a circle, scanning. And then he saw a broken tree. His stomach dropped.

He ran to the tree to look around from there. Seeing another half-crushed tree, he scanned around it; finding another with its crown broken down, he went over to see a scraped-out circle of broken trees. In the midst of these, however, was a large nest of branches on which lay three eggs, all light brown with blue specks. Bones littered the ground on the perimeter of the circle. “Pia!” Efran shouted.

He heard her, then, and looked toward a cave, one of several on the hilltop. Running up to it, he found the entrance blocked by large branches jammed into the sides of the opening. “Pia, are you all right?” he called, hands on the branches.

“Efran! Get me out!!” she cried.

“I will; don’t worry,” he said, looking over the branch doorway. He could barely see her through the gaps of the branches. It was a natural cave, but not wide or deep, only about six by six feet at the outer portion, diminishing in height and width for another ten feet back. Efran tried pulling on one or two branches, but they were jammed into the earth too solidly.

“Pia, get as far back as you can,” he said tightly, and she scurried back. *God of heaven, give me strength.* He grasped a branch protruding horizontally over his head, then lifted his feet to pound his boot heels into the center of the branch door. Massive branches cracked under repeated blows so that he could pull out the pieces along the sides of the opening.

Finally he was able to reach in and lift her out while a badger and a hare immediately bounded out after her. But the deer that desperately poked her head through was too large. Pia cried after her, so Efran had to spend a few more minutes wrenching broken branches away until the doe could lift her feet and hop out. Inside the dugout, Efran saw a few other animals that were dead.

He turned to scoop Pia up and trot with her to the front gates, which were quickly opened to him. He took care going up the steps into the fortress, given his propensity to fall over them when he ran. Efran brought Pia into his quarters, where Minka looked up, startled. “Take care of her; she’s probably hungry,” he said, dropping Pia’s feet to the floor.

Then he went back to the bedroom to get his bow and quiver from the wardrobe. Before exiting to the corridor, he bent to kiss his wife and tell her, “Stay inside.” She nodded, her eyes wide.

Trotting to the dining hall, Efran stepped inside as the men were having breakfast. He whistled loudly. “I need all archers armed in the courtyard.” As they lunged up, he told Detler, “Bring inside everyone who’s out working on the hilltop.”

In the front courtyard, he directed ten archers up to the bell tower, telling them, “Kill any great bird you see. Kill anything that comes out of it. And if you see anything, whistle.”

He gave the same instructions to the ten he sent to the back grounds and the five that he had remain in the courtyard. To all the rest waiting, about forty men, he said, “I have found a nest. We are going to destroy the eggs and wait for the birds to come. They had trapped several animals *and Pia* in a cave for dinner. We are killing all of them and anything inside them.”

Then he turned to lead them out to the hilltop woods.

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Chapter 12

As Efran and his men stood looking at the nest, Younge said, “Why haven’t we seen this? We should have spotted them instantly!”

“I don’t know,” Efran said. “Most likely, they’re flying at night. But if they’ve found a way to cloak themselves, we may have an interesting time of it. At any rate—Barr, Younge, Koschat—each of you take an egg and throw it out to the Sea. Be careful not to break it before then.”

While Younge stepped gingerly into the nest to hand out the eggs, another man observed, “If they’re flying at night, we may have to wait a while for them to come back.”

But another replied to him, “Not if they see the smoke from their eggs going up.”

Efran nodded. “Good point. However long it takes, we’ll be here.”

The archers spread out to search the rest of the hilltop. The three egg-throwers returned to report the eggs destroyed, with the smoke emerging. Most of the men sat at the edge of the woods, giving them a view of the sky with quick access to the protection of the trees.

And they waited.

As Giardi came out of the guest room, Ryal asked anxiously, “Were you able to get the stain out?” All he had to do was look at the front of her dress to see that, no, the large purple stain remained.

She waved. “Oh, don’t worry; it’s such an old dress; I don’t care.” She began to throw her cloak over her shoulders. “Thank you so much for a lovely evening and your very nice accommodations. Imagine, a garderobe!” she said as though she rarely saw one.

Ryal was still obsessing over the stain on her dress. “Since I am the one who spilled the wine, I must make it up to you.”

He went for his money box but she gasped, “Oh, no! I won’t take a piece from you. How will I explain that I suddenly have money?”—which meant that she didn’t.

Heartsick, he looked at her. “But I so enjoyed your company. You are someone I can talk to.” She was about eight years his junior, which was a great deal more appropriate than sixty, in his thinking.

“And I enjoyed yours. It is rather nice to finally get to know you,” she said, moving to the door.

“Take a dress,” he said suddenly. “There are a number of dresses hanging up on the rack that should fit you. Choose one or three.”

She looked dubious. "Who do they belong to?"

"The Abbey," he said. "The girl assisting me had need of a few things, but she has left and I don't care to have them taking up space. It would be a kindness if you would take some off my hands."

"Well," she said, conflicted, "if it will ease your mind about the stain, I will take one." He earnestly nodded, and she went back to the guest room. Shortly, she came out carrying an undyed linen dress with an adjustable waist. "I like this one, if that's acceptable to you."

"Yes, of course," he said, not looking at the dress.

"Well, I am most appreciative of your kindness." She smiled at him.

As she went to the door, he blurted, "Come back for dinner tonight."

She turned, gray brows raised. "Oh, dear, you'll get tired of me."

"No, no," he said. "Come back any time before sundown."

"I will try. Thank you," she said, and left. Ryal, agitated, turned back to tap his fingertips on the counter.

When Justinian attempted to get a carriage to leave the fortress that morning, he had to wait until the sentries secured permission from Efran. Slightly peeved, Justinian asked one sentry, "What is the problem? I have been altogether righteous in my conduct and somewhat responsible with the money."

"Oh, it's nothing you've done, sir; it's the birds," the man told him.

"Ahhh," Justinian said, with no clue as to why birds should interfere with his taking a carriage.

But the other sentry returned from outside the gates to report, "The Captain says Justinian can go wherever he likes, just keep an eye on the sky, sir."

"Yes, by all means," Justinian assured him, shaking out the sleeves of his new buff-colored coat. And shortly, his sleek chaise arrived. "If birds are a problem, I might order the top up, with the new hat," he mused. But for now, he let it be as he climbed in and set off down the switchback.

His first stop was Number 22 of the Abbey plots. He knocked at the door with his silver-topped cane, then stood back to make himself visible to someone peeking through the crack. The door opened barely, then fully. Justinian smiled. "I thought I'd find you here. May I come in?"

After a suspicious glance down the road, Adele stepped back to let him in. "Well?" she said.

"Well, how long do you think you're going to stay here?" Justinian asked.

"Where did they take him?" she asked dully.

"Eurus," he said.

“Prison?” she asked.

“No, I believe they just dumped him in the road,” Justinian said.

She chewed on that. “I need money,” she said, turning her eyes up at him.

“I’m sure you do,” he said sympathetically.

When he made no move to withdraw a purse, she thrust her hand into his nearest pocket. Her face registered outraged disappointment to find it empty. “Dearest Adele,” he whispered, “I’m wearing thief-proof belts.”

She exhaled, “All right. Drop me off at Ryal’s.”

“I’m so sorry; I’m not going that way,” he said, drawing lambskin gloves from his pants pocket to put them on. In fact, it would be difficult for him to go almost anywhere without passing Ryal’s shop.

“Did you just come by to gloat?” she asked angrily.

“Yes, of course,” he laughed.

“Oh! Get out!” She opened the door and thrust him out onto the step.

Laughing, he went to the carriage, then lifted his eyes. “Oh, dear. I believe we will raise the top, Driver. I’m wearing a new hat.” He was watching a giant bird circle the fortress hilltop.

A dozen men ran up to the creature writhing on the hilltop with almost that many arrows in its breast, stomach and throat. Seeing it finally still in death, Efran ordered, “Shane, get Wallace up here.”

“Captain.” The word floated back to him as Shane took off at a dead run.

Lyte, standing beside Efran, said, “Captain, this is something I’m not understanding. The first bird we took down hardened like any corpse, but the bird you killed around the Croly went to ashes.”

Efran shook his head. “We must have killed the person inside—Clephane?—in the first bird, but the Croly stepped out of his alive. That may have something to do with it. I want Wallace to look at the insides here.” Then he paused to ask, “Who brought gloves?”

“Here, Captain.” The men passed a pair of leather gloves up to him, and he put them on to lift a wing.

There was nothing underneath. “I . . . don’t see any appendages,” he muttered. The other men looked. One man lifted the other wing with the tip of his bow, seeing nothing unusual there, either. Nor were there leg bumps on the lower abdomen.

Apparently deciding not to wait on Wallace, Efran drew a serrated knife from the sheath on his belt. He hefted it to pierce the thick skin at the base of the bird’s throat. Lifting as he went, he drew the knife down through the skin, separating the scales on the belly, clear to the base of the tail. Cutting horizontally at the top and the bottom enabled him to open up the carcass like a package. In doing so, he had to remove several arrows first. Then they all leaned in to look.

There was a blue figure similar to the Croly's original appearance, but with no eyes. Arrows having pierced its head and abdomen, it appeared to be dead. But the figure they stared at was little more than a trunk and head. Instead of arms and legs, there were blood vessels and nerves. There was a large cluster of both intertwining around the head. The sight was disturbing enough that a few men turned to retch.

No one spoke. In a little while, Wallace came huffing behind Shane, who was pressing him to hurry. Everyone except Efran fell away from the carcass as Wallace came up to look down into it.

He surveyed the interior for a few minutes, then muttered, "So this is what is meant by 'merging.'"

After pulling on gloves, Wallace used his own scalpel to cut away tissue here and there, then said, "This bird is also female, but there is no egg. But with the integration of the blue man—frankly, it looks like a monster in the making to me."

He leaned in close to study what he could see, moving aside veins or tubes. "Fascinating." Then he cut open what appeared to be the head. Several of the men watching turned quickly away. Efran continued observing, with a slight grimace.

Then Wallace straightened. "You see this tube that enters the side of the head, Efran? It connects directly to the bird's stomach, so that part of what the bird eats goes to the blue man, and part to its own system. And this blue man head is actually a digestive organ."

Efran said, "So the blue man is digesting what the bird eats."

"That's what it looks like," Wallace said. "Oh, my—and look at this strictum in the posterior—"

"The what?" Efran said, peering.

"Strictum," Wallace repeated. "An opening which is now closed. That looks to have been an opening into the body cavity. Apparently, it closes after a blue man has filled the space."

"Oh," said Efran. "I wonder if all that means that the blue men *must* merge with their transports in order to survive, and the birds *must* eat everything they find in order to support both of them. I don't want to kill unnecessarily, but I will not risk any of my people. They had Pia locked up with other animals for their next dinner."

"You may have to make the decision to kill or not without ever knowing the details of their biology," Wallace said.

"Kill them all," one soldier grunted.

Surveying the blue thing entwined in the great bird's entrails, Efran said, "Unless we learn something new, that's what we're going to do."

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Chapter 13

“Ryal!” Adele cried, throwing herself into the shop. Standing over a ledger at the counter, he continued his perusal with only a glance at her. She leaned over the counter to breathe, “I’m in such trouble. I trusted an old friend who lured me into the terrible situation at Number Twenty-Two.”

She paused, but he merely listened without responding. So she asked, “Do you know about the situation at Number Twenty-Two?”

He shifted, sighing, “Not yet, but I’m sure to hear about it.”

“Oh, Ryal, it wasn’t my fault!” she cried. “But now I need money. Please, please help me.” She fixed him with her large blue eyes.

Clearing his throat, he pulled out his change box and extended it to her. She looked at him with a deep sigh of disappointment, then went to his back room. Slightly troubled, he followed.

She pulled two short ledgers from the middle shelf against the side wall, which caused several adjacent ledgers to fall onto the floor. These she ignored in withdrawing a strongbox which had been hidden by the short ledgers. Flipping this open (since Ryal rarely locked it) she shook out all the coins—a few royals but mostly silvers—into the pocket of her dress. Dropping the empty box, she went over to flip through the dresses on the rack, then raised her hands in disgust and brushed past him to the front room. He turned to watch her walk out of the shop without another word.

For several long minutes, Ryal stood where he was. Then he picked up the dented strongbox to replace it on the shelf, hiding it again with the short ledgers. He bent for the dislodged ledgers on the floor, then discovered that one of them was not a ledger at all, but the book of *Annotations*, which contained corrections and additions to the *Annals* and *Latter Annals* of Lystra. This book, which he had mistaken for a ledger, must go to the Abbey library. So he put it on the front counter to remind himself to give it to Efran.

During the dinner hour in the fortress, Efran walked wearily into the dining hall to look around. He heard her quick intake of breath before she threw herself onto him an instant later. He smiled, rocking her. “I can always count on you to make a scene when I walk in,” he whispered.

Minka laughed into his dirty, sweaty shirt. “Is it true? Did you shoot down another great bird?”

“About ten of us did, yes,” he said. “Where is Pia?”

Minka lifted her head to look toward the front of the room. “Last I saw, she was sitting on Estes’ lap. Efran, what happened?”

“The birds had boxed up her and a few animal friends to have for dinner when they got back,” he muttered, and she gazed at him in horror. “It looks like they all must be killed. But I don’t know how many there are.” Her arms tightened around him.

“Don’t be afraid,” he reminded her. “We will defeat this. But tonight I am sleeping outside to keep watch with the men.”

“Ohhh,” she groaned. “At least have dinner with me.”

“I can do that,” he smiled.

Neither Minka nor Efran knew that Pia was having a deep conversation with Estes, mostly in the Old Tongue, the Polonti language. While Efran had largely discarded his native language, Estes kept a stronger hold on his heritage. Thus he was better able to talk with Pia.

Tonight they talked about how the great birds had been essentially enslaved by the blue men. Pia had refused to attempt communication with the birds because of their corrupted nature, but Estes suggested that they had been corrupted against their will, and against their nature, by brute force. Birds do not by nature build cages in which to trap other animals. So Pia should still be able to reach them apart from that foreign control—if she would try. And as she had already experienced, the lives of everyone in the fortress were dependent on disrupting that control.

Pia agreed to try. And she began reaching out to the birds that night.

Ryal had moved the small table to the front window in the hope that he might have a guest to share the dinner that an Abbey messenger had just delivered. Ryal was restless and anxious, even going out to the front step to look down the road once or twice.

Finally, when he had sat at the table in resignation, he glanced up to see a black-cloaked figure silhouetted against the sunset. He bounded up from his chair to rush down the road and offer her a hand of assistance to his door, even though it was not at all certain that she was headed in his direction.

“Oh! Ryal. You startled me,” Giardi laughed.

“I beg your pardon, but the dinner is cooling and I want you to enjoy it at its best. Efran is certainly justified in his opinion of Madea’s worth,” Ryal said almost sternly. He opened the door to assist her out of her cloak and seat her at the table. Then he sat himself in satisfaction.

“You are very kind. Oh, this smells heavenly,” she said, taking up a fork to taste the trout. “How beautifully someone has prepared it.”

“Indeed,” he said, as if personally vindicated. “Do you care for ale or wine tonight?”

She glanced up to see what was on the table. “The ale is perfect, thank you.” As he began pouring it for her, she added, “I was just talking with Perronet in Twenty. He was so relieved to see Twenty-Two cleaned out.”

“What was happening there?” Ryal asked in vague dread.

“Oh, dear. Girls for sale,” she said obliquely.

Ryal paused in deep shock. “Efran must know about this,” he groaned to himself, meaning Adele’s involvement.

“Oh, he cleaned it all out yesterday, and they carted away the perpetrator,” she said in satisfaction.

Ryal was too chagrined to continue eating. “What a perfect fool I have been.”

She glanced up. "Why?"

"I gave shelter to a girl who used me, poured scorn on me, and exposed me to ridicule," he said bitterly.

"But that is admirable," she said. He looked at her in shock. "Of course, you can't be expected to continue to help someone who has proved false, but wouldn't you rather be made a fool by someone who took advantage of your kindness rather than close your heart to someone in genuine need?"

He stared at her, then said, "You are perfectly right. Here, please try the rolls; they are fairly dripping with butter."

Efran and his men stayed out all night to keep watch on the hilltop, sleeping in shifts. But April 12th dawned with no sign of a bird. Efran stood on the southern cliffs, looking out to the Sea, lit with gold on the left and cloaked in purple velvet on the right. He had prayed so much without an answer, he felt drained and totally alone. The men could not keep up this tense vigil, nor could the workers be cooped up in the fortress much longer. The lives of the Abbey depended on work, regularity, and security. And Efran did not know what to do.

Gaul approached from behind. "Captain, a man's coming up the switchback that some of us thought you'd know."

Efran exhaled in impatience. In the face of their worst battle yet for survival, he was supposed to go personally meet a random man that he might know. Then he thought of random Giardi, and how answers to prayer might appear in any random encounter. "I will come," he said, turning.

By the time Efran had come around the hilltop to the top of the switchback, the visitor was about two-thirds of the way up. The purple Abbey uniform was the most obvious identifying feature, but more certain than that was the frustrated, aggravated manner of the walk and the whine that reached Efran's ears even where he stood: "I'm vortexed. Creamed. Bottomed out."

"The Croly returns," Efran observed as the alien stopped before him in utter despair. "Come in," Efran nodded, turning, and the gates were quickly opened to him and the visitor.

Efran led the way to the receiving room off the foyer while the dispirited creature trudged behind him, moaning. Shutting the door after them, Efran paused. "Do you want to sit down?" The Croly plopped down to the floor beside a chair, and Efran despaired of any meaningful communication between them.

Efran sat on the edge of the table. "What happened?"

"My transport was bounced!" the Croly wailed.

"How?" Efran asked. It was difficult talking with something that looked like a maniacal Towner.

"It was whisked. Rules are rules," the Croly said sorrowfully.

Efran's eyebrows drew down in concentration. "It was taken away because you wouldn't abide by the rules for using the birds as transport."

"The Croly verified no crunching the two legs!" he cried. "Viscosity must be maintained!"

Again Efran slowly translated, “You promised me that you wouldn’t let your bird eat humans, but the rules allow it.”

“So the Croly is dispersed,” he mourned.

“They kicked you out for refusing to comply with that rule,” Efran said.

“They see that you are a blot,” the Croly lectured.

“Obviously,” Efran agreed.

“They are coming with a conniption,” the Croly said.

“I’m sure,” Efran said, eyes watering.

“And the VERY BIG ONE with them,” the Croly said, Towner’s lips stretching emphatically.

Efran squinted. “Is—the Very Big One a—big bird?”

“Astronomical!” the Croly cried. “They will smush your fortress with hoopla!”

“They can’t,” Efran said, shaking his head. “They would kill themselves ramming it.”

“SIT! SIT! SIT!” the Croly cried, his appearance wavering to blue in his distress.

Sit? . . . Land. Efran caught his breath. If a flock of these very large birds landed together on the fortress rooftop—yes, they could cave it in . . . and feast on the bodies in the wreckage below. “How do we repel them?” he whispered.

“The . . . the . . .” The Croly groped for a word that would not come, then looked up to point at Efran’s face, and images of raging flames appeared in his mind.

“Fire,” Efran breathed, standing. Yes—the burning feather, and Rigdon’s report of the flaring, popping carcass. There was something not only toxic, but highly incendiary in their skin and feathers. “Yes. We can arrange that.”

He started out of the room, then turned. “Thank you, Croly.”

“THE Croly,” it corrected him.

“The Croly,” Efran exhaled, with a lift of the hands. Then he calmly walked out to start issuing orders.

A hundred long-burning torches were solidly affixed at the highest points of the bell tower and crenelation, and men were drafted to assemble hundreds of replacement torches when those burned out. Volunteer archers were set with casks of tar at points around the bell tower. Additional archers with casks of tar were set along the crenelation and at strategic points on the grounds. And thousands of arrows were brought up to the bell tower, as well as rags for the men’s hands if they were forced to handle a bird. They could not shoot in gloves.

While waiting, the men were permitted to rest and eat. Fortress workers who demanded to be let outside were allowed, but cautioned that they’d be called in if the birds were spotted. And all receptacles that could hold water were filled in order to douse fires started by flaming birds falling.

Efran consulted with Estes and DeWitt about their strategy, and they agreed it was the best course they had at the moment. Then he went to hold Minka for a while before going up to the bell tower. This was the place of greatest risk; there was little shelter from a great bird's beak, claws, or exploding in flames. As for the Croly, he scrunched himself under the table in the receiving room.

And again, they waited.

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Chapter 14

About an hour later, the birds came. Whistles went up from the men along the eastern crenelation as the flock approached. Above them flew the Very Big One, which was at least three times the size of the standard 15-foot-long bird with its 40-foot wingspan. But the Very Big One kept himself well out of reach to supervise the attack.

As the birds came within range, the archers began firing. But it quickly became apparent that the birds were impervious to such an assault: fire arrows bounced off their bellies, breasts and even wings without igniting anything.

The archers kept firing; looking for weaknesses—and soon found a few. One bird that was hit in the head became disoriented, falling to the hilltop below. While it was struggling to rise, someone ran out from the fortress to toss a torch on it, and the bird exploded in flaming sparks just as the men had hoped. The archers also discovered that a hit to the neck was fatal—even if it did not pierce the skin, it could crush the airway, which caused the bird to falter and fall.

Because of the torches, the birds did not land on the bell tower, and those that hovered over it put themselves at risk. The first bird who hovered closely was easily shot in the neck, falling to the bell tower platform below. Men quickly dropped their bows to wrap their hands in rags and cooperatively hoist the creature over the rooftop wall, where it dropped to its death on the rocky hillside.

Any bird that fell on the hilltop was lit with fire; any that fell over the Sea was drowned. A bird that fell on the plots would cause terrible carnage, but they were not flying over the inhabited Lands—yet.

But the birds that remained seemed to fill the sky. And they were flying in a spaced-out pattern so that the majority of shots merely flew through empty space. Worse, futile shots required the same effort to get off as those that hit, but even strong archers were effective only for the first hour or so; after that, their strength waned. So as Efran fired, he was probing for a way to take out more at once, because if the attack outlasted his archers, they were dead.

At that point, Efran began to notice slight aberrations in the attack. A few birds veered off and flew away. He feared greatly that they were going for reinforcements, but none ever came. Then a few fell out of formation to strike a bird next to it or even fall into the Sea without having been hit. Their flying pattern began to fall apart. The archers, alert for opportunities, began to focus on these aberrations to strike weak points, with or without fire arrows. Birds began falling more reliably.

Meanwhile, Efran was keeping an eye on the Very Big One, and noticed that it was dropping bit by bit as it monitored the fighting below. It would do Efran no good to simply shoot at its belly when it came within range;

he'd already seen how ineffective that was. But, it was riding the thermals, wings outstretched. . . .

When the Very Big One dropped another little bit, Efran shifted to track it on the thermal with an unlit arrow. He was aiming for the underside of the left wing next to the body, leading the target slightly. He released to watch the arrow hit that vulnerable spot, sinking just enough to interfere with the wing's stability.

As the Very Big One began tilting, dropping farther, other archers swung over to exploit the opportunity: the bird was hit on its head, neck, and right wing, striking two birds below it, who fell. Losing all control, the Very Big One began tumbling, and an intrepid archer (who later refused to be identified) leaned over the east crenelation to hit it with a fire arrow dead-on as it passed.

And the Very Big One exploded in a firestorm of sparks that (harmlessly) pitted the stone of the fortress—though a few archers received mild burns. The blast was seen and felt all over the Abbey plots; residents looked up in wonder at the streaming colors that painted the sky for miles around, and at the flashes of fire that trailed the bird as it landed with a loud *whoomph* at the rocky base of the hilltop, burning like Hades.

That effectively ended the battle. The remaining half-dozen birds turned eastward again to fly away until they disappeared over the horizon. The residents of the Abbey fortress, seeing the archers descend the stairways in exhausted jubilation, celebrated by going out to resume the work that hadn't gotten done.

Minka was waiting for Efran as he trod heavily down the stairs, and he smiled in sympathy at the tears on her face. He shoved the bow back over his shoulder to wrap her in his arms and whisper, "Let me bathe."

She whispered in return, "I'll help you." So he turned to walk her to their quarters.

When, an hour later, someone who wanted to use the receiving room off the foyer found the Croly under the table, Efran was summoned. Happy and refreshed, he leaned over the table to tell him, "We're done. We won—at least for now. You can come out now."

Uncertainly, the Croly emerged, pointing a querying finger at him. "The Very Big One is not functioning."

"That's right. One of my archers took him out," Efran said. "You helped us a great deal, the Croly. You may stay or go."

The alien swayed on his feet. "I am granted presence in this orbit?"

"Yes. You gave me what we needed to kill the Very Big One," Efran said.

The Croly ran those words several times through his processor without success. "What is *kill*?" he asked.

Efran paused. "Go look at the burning heap on the east hillside. That is the Very Big One, killed. Like Clephane."

Looking back at him frequently, the Croly crept out through the foyer and paused at the gates, but the sentries knew by now that the strange purple uniform could come and go as he wished.

Ryal was one of many Abbey tenants who rushed outside at the sound of the explosion to watch the colored fireworks streaming through the sky over the fortress, and the flaming heap plummet down the hillside. It was both alarming and exhilarating, and certainly something that he would ask Giardi about tonight. He had noticed

the large birds flocking above the fortress a little while ago, and wondered if that had anything to do with it. Peering, he saw that it looked as though they had all flown off.

He reentered his shop to make sure everything was clean and tidy for tonight. He hoped that he could induce her to take another dress or two, or maybe even—he blushed fiercely, even though no one was around to hear his thoughts. But it was evident that since the death of her husband, she had no one to take care of her. And Ryal wanted to take care of her.

At closing time, he moved the table from the back room to the front, and happily received the Abbey delivery of tonight's dinner—sausages, he was especially pleased to see. They were so good and not always available.

As he lit the candles at twilight and waited, he castigated himself again for lacking the courage to make dinner with her a more formal engagement, so that he would not be anxiously waiting every night for her to happen by. It disturbed him to remember that he did not even have her address, as that was not required to register a death.

Checking out the window again, he exhaled in relief to see the black cloak coming up the street. But then the person wearing it turned to call to someone, lowering the hood, and he saw that it was not Giardi. So he settled back down at the table to wait.

But twilight advanced, and she did not come; then the sun descended in its daily baptism of fire, and she did not come. At last, in the dense evening, Ryal ate one sausage by himself and extinguished the candle.

The next several days provided a much-needed period of rest and normalcy for the Abbey fortress. Early spring life was well underway, with the gardens flourishing in green, the fruit trees budding, and the bees making the rounds of the snowdrops, squill and crocus. Pia was allowed back out to the hilltop woods as long as she had one soldier with her, whichever man she chose. And she had to check in with Efran or Estes at least once a day.

Minka constantly carried Joshua out with her to the gardens and the henhouses. She didn't attempt to do the dirty work when she had him; they just enjoyed the hilltop in spring together. She let him pet the chickens and taste the honeysuckle, then she would lay him on a mat for him to exercise and look around. The next time they went out, she took the first book of the Annals of Lystra to read while she lay on the mat with him.

Three days later, on April 15th, Minka was spread out like this reading with Joshua beside her when Efran threw himself down on his back near the baby. Startled, she lowered the book and Joshua began kicking in excitement. Efran picked him up to put him on his chest, murmuring, "I never believed it was possible to be happy. I knew what everything else felt like except happiness."

He looked up at her; she smiled and he said, "But when I look out here and see you like this, I know happiness."

She put the book down to lay her head on his shoulder, reaching over Joshua to brush the hair out of Efran's eyes. "I told you it grows fast," he added. "Do I cut it down to spikes or let it grow?"

"Let it grow, for now," she said, stroking it away from his face. He closed his eyes in deep contentment.

A shadow fell across them, and Milo said, "Apologies, Captain, but Justinian is here to report to you."

Efran opened his eyes. "Bring him a mat out here, please."

"Captain." Milo saluted down at Efran on the ground and walked off.

Efran smiled at her again. “Justinian is having much too much fun.”

“He enjoys being useful,” she said. “I know he loves nice clothes, but he’s most happy having a purpose.”

He cupped his hand around the baby’s head. Then he observed, “You look for the good in everyone. I still don’t know what you saw in me.”

She raised up, laughing. “I’ve told you that over and over again.” He squinted dubiously at her. “That was simple lust,” she whispered.

He shook his head. “Impossible. You were an innocent.”

She laughed in humorous frustration. “Men are so naïve.”

He had lifted up to scrutinize her when Milo approached with a mat in hand and Justinian at his side. Milo placed the mat beside Efran’s, then stepped back with a salute.

Justinian stood by the mat, shifting from foot to foot in reluctance. “You’re very accommodating, dear brother, but it will wrinkle the suit.”

“Elvey’s people will press it for you,” Efran said.

Condescending to sit, Justinian grumbled, “Says the man who wears a dress uniform to explore caves.”

Minka exhaled, “I know; he’s maddening. Beautiful, but simply heedless.”

Both men evaluated that comment for a moment, then Justinian cleared his throat. “Well, you’ll find my expenses slightly elevated this week because I’ve just returned from Eurús. Our dear Marguerite sends love to her ‘darling Sybil and that handsome man’—whose name she has obviously forgotten.”

Efran leaned his head back to laugh. “That matters not at all, as long as I’m darling Sybil’s handsome man.”

At the same time, Minka was sighing, “See, what did I tell you? Oh, Marguerite! You are such an angel.”

Justinian continued, “She is unaffected by disasters contrived or natural, but Eurús at large is having a problem with great birds snatching up livestock in the countryside round about.”

Efran and Minka looked at him quickly. “Are they attacking people?” he asked.

“To eat? Not that I’ve heard. The farmers are having some success luring them to the bogs west of the city, near the Passage. That area’s always the first to flood and the last to dry out,” Justinian said, brushing a pants leg. He critically surveyed his mat for unwanted insects. “They’re also putting out poisoned animals as bait, and then harvesting feathers from the dead birds to make torches. I talked to one old farmer who was full of useful information about the birds. The old timers call them the Graetrix, and they flourished in the Green Hills hundreds of years ago.”

“When they were known as the Poison Greens, before Ares and his men cleansed them,” Efran murmured.

“Possibly.” Justinian looked mildly irritated at the interruption. “Anyway, the—beings inside them, like your

Croly, are known as riders who direct the birds' hunting. Most riders who lose their mounts die, because they're dependent on them for food. But a few do learn to live outside of the birds' bodies, despite entirely different physiology from ours. The riders don't have sex or procreate, but the Graetrix will occasionally lay them in their eggs. Disgusting but intriguing. At any rate, those riders who learn to live without the Graetrix are pariah, and are hunted."

At this information, Efran slowly sat up, moving Joshua to his leg. "Can the pariah hide?"

"I doubt it, because the Graetrix have means of tracking them, probably through their mental projections, and they're quite persistent. As long as your Croly is here, you're vulnerable," Justinian said. Efran blinked.

Justinian allowed a moment for that news to sink in, then went on to the next: "Oh, and on the way back, as I was making the rounds in Westford, I was accosted by a large, one-eyed Polonti gentleman looking for his girlfriend," Justinian said, smiling.

"Awfyn?" Minka gasped. Although preoccupied studying Joshua's Polonti features, Efran nodded, unsurprised. Awfyn was thorough, and he remembered everything.

"The same. Very careless of him to misplace her like that," Justinian said with an air of gravity.

Efran asked, "What did you tell him?"

"Only what I knew: that the last man she had taken up with had relocated to Eurus," Justinian said in careful disinterest.

"Did you tell Awfyn his name?" Efran asked.

"Possibly," Justinian said with a straight face, "as the man is a criminal, after all—not a good criminal like our Polonti friend, but a bad criminal," he clarified.

"Oh, poor Adele," Minka breathed.

Efran began, "We are *not*—"

"No, oh no," Minka said hastily. "It's just a shame that she didn't appreciate the only good husband she ever had."

Justinian drew up, his chest expanding as he lifted his face. "True, my dear Minka. Well! That's all for now." He stood to brush invisible grass from his pants. "I'll just pick up my reimbursements and head out again."

"Very well," Efran said to him while eyeing his wife. As Justinian touched his hat and strode off, Minka leaned over to whisper to her husband, "But both she and I lust after *you*. Still." Conflicted, he studied her.

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Chapter 15

At that time, Koschat approached Efran, Minka and Joshua as they sat on the mats near the gardens. “Pardon, Captain. I’ve just come from the plots below; Ryal the notary asked if you might stop by, sir.”

A shadow of concern passed over Efran’s face. “Yes. Please ask that Trud be saddled for me.”

“Captain.” Koschat saluted and began trotting to the stables.

As Minka took Joshua from Efran’s hands, she said, “Let me know.”

“Yes,” he said, leaning forward to kiss her. He paused with a hand on the baby. “Thank you,” he barely whispered. That she so willingly, so lovingly took care of the baby that Adele had borne to him still filled him with half-unbelieving gratitude.

“He’s mine, because you are mine,” she reminded him, which made his eyes water again.

In the front courtyard, Efran hopped up on Trud, and a crowd discreetly gathered to see how recklessly he would careen down the switchback today. But they were disappointed; he descended only at a brisk trot, so they had to resume their duties.

Efran pulled up to the notary shop and entered while Ryal was filling out a form for a nobleman of Westford. Seeing that whatever problem Ryal had was not urgent, Efran stood back to wait—which he would do for very few people.

Ryal nodded to Efran as the man was complaining, “It’s such a nuisance to have to travel clear down here to get these things registered. I must insist that you relocate back to Westford.” A companion of the lord’s who stood waiting in patient boredom glanced at Efran’s entry, nodding to him courteously. Efran acknowledged him with a glance.

“I’m very sorry, Lord Reinagle, but my old shop was falling down, and I was offered a very attractive deal to move here. I’m afraid the notary business, while essential, is not very lucrative,” Ryal said with a glimmer of humor. “I hear that Notary Shaffer should be back on duty soon.” He turned the ledger, saying, “Sign on this line, please.”

Quill in hand, the lord bent to sign, venting, “Yes, well, this upstart Polonti that thinks to make this area into something—”

At the same time that Reinagle’s companion violently cleared his throat, Ryal anxiously interrupted, “The residents are all quite pleased with Lord Efran’s efforts, sir, and—”

“Who made a filthy Polonti lord?” Reinagle said. His companion put a hand to his face in distress.

“The deed of bequest, Lord Reinagle!” Ryal said sharply. “His title is as firmly grounded as yours, and I will thank you not to disparage an honorable man!” He thrust the lord’s document at him.

“Bah.” Taking the paper and slapping a coin on the counter, Reinagle banged out of the shop without a glance at the Polonti waiting.

But his companion stopped to say, "Please excuse Reinagle, Lord Efran. He's experienced some reverses that have almost driven him over the edge."

"Who are you?" Efran asked mildly. As Southerners generally considered that all Polonti looked alike, it piqued Efran's curiosity when someone he didn't know recognized him.

"Lord Bowring, sir." When Efran shook his head slightly, unenlightened, Bowring continued, "When you were a Captain, you ordered your regiment to stand at the very windows of my house to save it from being burned to the ground during the bread riots of four years ago."

"Oh, after the wheat failure," Efran recalled.

"You and your men encompassed my house like a wall all through the night, and left without even thanks when the rioters finally withdrew in the morning," Bowring said, his voice nearly breaking with emotion. Ryal, listening, nodded. He had been grateful for the humble appearance of his shop when it escaped the rioters' notice that night.

"I seem to remember that you had daughters. Are they well?" Efran asked Bowring.

"Oh, yes, they've both married and moved to Eurus," the lord replied.

"That's good," Efran said softly. Bowring did not know that one of those daughters, the eldest, had thanked Efran personally early in the morning with deep kisses. Then he regretfully noted, "We failed to save the stables."

"Which were empty at the time, except for the rats," the lord laughed ruefully. "By the following morning, our house was the only one left standing on the block."

"We didn't have enough men against so many," Efran recalled with a shake of his head. "But since you opened your home to your neighbors, that was where our Commander directed us. It was no heroism on our part; it was simply our duty."

"A viewpoint which only an honorable man would have. Please consider me a friend, Lord Efran," Bowring said, offering his hand.

"Gladly, Lord Bowring," Efran said, taking the proffered hand. Ryal looked gratified.

Reinagle stuck his head in the door. "Bowring! The driver's waiting!"

"Excuse me, sir," Bowring said, bowing to Efran. He smiled, and Bowring followed Reinagle out the door.

Efran turned back to Ryal, half laughing, "That can't be why you summoned me. What do you need?"

"Efran, your cavalier attitude toward your own worth is sometimes baffling," Ryal vented.

Efran looked off blankly, then said, "You wanted to chastise me for accepting that I'm a filthy Polonti?" Ryal looked at him in such distress that Efran said, "I am toying with you, Ryal, but it would be wonderful if you could tell me why I'm here."

"Yes," Ryal said, sagging. "There is a new widow whom I've grown fond of—get that look out of your eye!"

“No, Ryal, what look? I’m only relieved that you and Adele are a thing of the past,” Efran said, laughing.

“This is difficult, and you’re not making it easier for me,” Ryal said sternly.

“Forgive me. Please continue,” Efran said, still smiling.

“The woman’s name is Giardi, and I haven’t seen her for three days. She’s perhaps seventy, always wearing a black cloak. I don’t who she has in her life since her husband died. She lives in Westford, but I don’t know where. She had been dropping by to see me until three days ago, and I am concerned about her,” Ryal said.

“Giardi,” Efran said, nodding in recognition. “Let me see what I can do.” He turned out of the shop to mount Trud, turning his head in the same motion. Ryal watched through the front window in gratified bemusement at the instant, unquestioning response.

Efran rode up to Westford without thinking. If he had been thinking, he would have returned to the fortress to instruct a unit to go search for a new widow in a black cloak. But since he was preoccupied, he simply went to perform the task required. Yes, he would absolutely find the woman who had suggested he get Minka out of Number 22.

When he turned onto the main east-west road of Westford, he began going down side streets, looking. He stopped at a bakery to stick his head in the door and ask, “Can anyone tell me where Giardi lives?” Blank faces looked back at the Polonti in work clothes, and a few people shook their heads. He withdrew, thinking, but paused to ask someone every now and then, “Do you know where Giardi lives?” The answer was uniformly *no*. So he continued to lead Trud on foot to look for Giardi, thinking.

But he wasn’t thinking about her, he was thinking about Reinagle. A few months ago, it would have—and did—cut Efran to the core to be called a “filthy Polonti.” Adele used the term at an especially savage moment, leading the EurAsian army against him after having slept with him. And whenever he felt weak, or abandoned, as when Minka rode to EurAs without explanation, the fact of his race pierced him, in that something he could not help nor change made him unworthy. He stopped at a crowded secondhand shop to ask, “Does anyone here know where I can find Giardi?” Only a few looked at him to shake their heads or say, “No.”

But today, that knee-jerk reaction to “filthy Polonti” did not happen. “Excuse me, do you know where Giardi lives?” “Who? No.” Today, when Reinagle used the term directly about him, Efran felt no sting nor even discomfort. It bothered him so little, he even made a joke about it to Ryal. “Do you happen to know where I can find Giardi?” “No, never heard of her.”

Why was that? How did this taunt lose all its power over him? Holding Trud’s reins, Efran stopped in the middle of the street to think.

Minka. Her love of him, and especially her acceptance of his son, finally put a stake through the heart of that taunt. If she mentioned his race at all, it was as an added allurements, a bonus. It was *moekolohe* in the attraction, but a *moekolohe* with the courage to greet him on the street—more than that, to kiss him on the lips in front of everyone.

After finding an answer to that question, Efran finally looked around. He had come to the end of the houses, and farther down the road was the newest part of the ever-expanding cemetery, with the lime-filled pit where those deceased from the fever were thrown. Standing in front of the pit was a woman in a black cloak.

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Chapter 16

After Efran had left the notary shop, Ryal paced in agitation. This was good; it was very good of Efran to take the matter so seriously as to go look for her himself. But Ryal was still vexed by the name: *Giardi*. At first he had thought it was associated with death, probably because somewhere in the back of his mind he remembered both the mistaken death notice and the overlooked correction.

But now he felt there was another, deeper reason: he remembered her. He had known her at some point in the past. But she had mentioned nothing of the kind—Wait. Yes, she had; she had said something to the effect that it was good to finally get to know him. When had he known her? Where? It had to have been in Westford; except for military service, he had lived all his life there, before his recent move to the Abbey Lands.

So if he had known her in Westford, but had forgotten her, it had to have been a long time ago, when he was a young man. But there was no way to find out—except there was, possibly. He looked over at the *Annotations*, which he had forgotten to give to Efran.

He went over to the counter to open the book and begin searching in the early years—say, the year he turned 12, which would be 8086. Flipping to that page, he began scanning names and biographical details. He searched through that entire year, finding many pleasant, exciting remembrances, but nothing of what he was looking for.

So he went on to his thirteenth year, 8087. He had searched almost entirely through that year until coming to December 20th, which was the birth date of Henry and Sophie's first child: Giardini. That child, a girl, had been blessed by a nun from the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea with the gift of helping. And today that child would be 66 years old.

Efran walked Trud to stand beside the woman in the black cloak at the cemetery. "Hello, Giardi."

"Hello, Lord Efran," she replied, continuing to look down in the pit. "Were you looking for me?"

"Show me where you live," he said.

There was a silence. When she finally replied, it was to say, "That's my husband Pruden on top, third from the left. A few more deaths will cover him up."

Making an intuitive assumption, Efran asked, "How did you lose your home after your husband died?"

She sighed. "We owed back taxes."

Efran's jaw began working. "There is no palace, no army, no administrators, no Surchatain. Who is collecting taxes in Westford?"

"It does not matter," she said.

Efran began slowly repeating, "*Who is collecting—*"

“Lord Reinagle,” she said. “But again, it does not matter. The house has been razed.”

Efran turned Trud so that Giardi was standing at his side. “Ryal wants you to come live with him. So I’m going to take you there.”

“He is very kind,” she said, then glanced at the large horse. “But . . . it has been many years since I last rode—”

Efran placed his hands on her sides, below her ribs, and lifted her to the saddle with her legs facing him. As she clutched the pommel, he turned Trud to begin walking him back up the road away from the cemetery. “I’m sorry; I didn’t hear you,” he said belatedly. “But I am taking you to Ryal because he wants you there.”

She sighed, “Thank you.”

“I am paying a debt,” he said in a gravelly voice.

While the sun descended on their right, Efran walked Trud with Giardi south, glancing back occasionally to make sure that she was not slipping off. They passed over the old stone bridge marking the northern boundary of the Abbey Lands, then it was only a few more minutes to the door of the notary shop, lit by a lantern.

Ryal opened the door as Efran lifted Giardi from the saddle. Reaching a hand to assist her up the steps, Ryal said, “Thank you, Efran. The Abbey messenger who delivered dinner inquired after you.”

“They will shortly find me at the gates,” Efran said, swinging up on Trud. He paused to watch Ryal bring Giardi inside the shop, assist her out of her cloak, and seat her at the candlelit table with dinner waiting. Then Efran turned Trud toward the switchback.

“Thank you. What a lovely dinner,” Giardi murmured over the pork medallions. She placed on her lap the linen napkin Ryal had provided. And she happened to be wearing the dress he had offered her.

“You are most welcome,” he said, cutting into the fried pork. “Madea cooks mostly meats because that is what her men prefer, but if that does not suit you, we can request something else. The Abbey has an abundance of fruits and vegetables preserved, and more on the way . . . Giardini.”

She smiled down at her plate. “Well, now. How did you find out?”

“The *Annotations*,” he said casually. “Which also mentions the fact of your being blessed at birth with the gift of helping. So now at least I understand how my glasses miraculously help me see all of a sudden. But I have been vexed to not remember you. I cannot remember when I knew you.”

“Oh!” She looked away, embarrassed by the sudden tears. “I was so much younger than you—how could you be interested in a baby?—you who had the ear of my father even as a boy. But I adored you—so handsome, so intelligent, so willing to go wherever he sent you. Oh, I cried myself sick when you went off to fight at the border, and only heard after my marriage that you had come home safely. I often wondered what would have happened had I waited, but. . . .” She shrugged.

He took off his glasses to wipe his eyes, then said, “Well, if you are willing, we have much ground to make up. I understand that you need to mourn your husband, but the room that you have been using is waiting still, and I earnestly hope you will make free use of it.”

“I would, but—” She laughed weakly. “Even in such a state, I can hardly bear being an object of pity.”

“I am the one to be pitied, who has been looking for you and longing for you these past three days. I was finally driven to interrupt Lord Efran’s defense of the entire Abbey Lands and Fortress with the request to find you. He dropped everything to come to my aid,” Ryal said.

“Oh my!” Her green eyes were wide, and Ryal thought them lovelier than Adele’s. Giardi looked down, a shy child all over again. “Then . . . I suppose we should make good use of what time we have remaining.”

“An excellent plan. Now do you prefer the ale or the wine? Should I spill any on you, there are more dresses,” Ryal said, smiling.

“The ale, please,” she said, extending her glass, and he primly poured.

When the Abbey gates opened to Efran on Trud, the first thing he saw was a girl in riding skirts who had obviously been barely restrained from going after him when he did not promptly return from Ryal’s shop. She was waiting patiently now, however, with a baby on her shoulder who just didn’t want to go to sleep.

Efran dismounted in the courtyard and gave up Trud’s reins without seeing anything but her reproachful eyes and the baby’s attempts to turn his head to look at him. She said, “You could have asked my help in shelving Ryal’s ledgers.”

He grasped her around the waist. “He’s in love with her.”

“Not Adele!” Minka said in horror.

“No, thank God. Giardi,” he said, laughing.

“Who?” she said.

“Did I not tell you about Giardi? Come back to our rooms, then,” he said, taking Joshua from her shoulder, and the baby began kicking industriously in the air.

“You need to eat,” she observed.

“In a little while,” he said, an arm around her.

But when they entered the foyer, and Efran saw the lantern light in Doane’s cubicle, he went over to look in. Doane, seated behind the desk, looked up and Efran said, “What are you doing, still here? Go have dinner.”

“Thank you, Captain; I’ve eaten. Just thought I would clean up a few items. Ah, he’s getting big. Good evening, Lady Minka,” Doane said.

“Hello, Doane,” she smiled. Her next project, she decided, was finding him a wife. He was a handsome man.

“Since you’re here, take a letter, please,” Efran said. Doane pulled out his quill, ink bottle, and parchment, then looked up.

Efran dictated, “To Lord Bowring of Westford: it was gratifying to hear of your gratitude for our regiment’s efforts after the bread riots of four years ago. If you consider me a friend, I ask your intervention on behalf of the

widow Giardi of Westford, whose home was seized by Reinagle for back taxes after the death of her husband. She is now destitute and dependent on friends. I know of no one authorized to collect taxes in Westford at this time, especially following Surchatain Lightfoot's declaration of clemency. I would be grateful if you would investigate the matter, obtain relief for the widow Giardi, and stop such oppressive and illegal collections. Your servant, et cetera."

Efran waited while Doane finished scratching with the quill and read the letter back to him. Then Efran said, "That's good; thank you. Have it sent in the morning, please."

"With pleasure, Captain. Good night, Lady Minka," Doane said, and she nodded, smiling.

As she and Efran, holding a sleepy baby, turned to the corridor, she breathed, "What all happened?"

"I'll tell you," he said, opening the door of their quarters.

An hour later, Joshua was asleep in his crib as Efran finished explaining why he had taken time to go find Giardi himself and what Bowring had to do with it. "But . . . how did she know I was at Twenty-Two?" she whispered in his ear.

His face on her neck, he breathed, "She said she saw you." She shifted, and his eyes opened. "Am I hurting you?"

"No," she exhaled, her hand on his hip. "But she couldn't have seen me, Efran. I was very careful that no one saw me go in."

"She told me you were there; I went there, and there you were," he said, moving.

She was quiet but for the breathing, then sighed, "Oh, Efran . . . !"

He stopped; they looked at each other, then she burst out laughing. "I'll kill him," Efran promised, lifting up to lie beside her.

"Where is the poor Croly?" she asked.

"I don't know, but I'll kill him," he vowed again.

"Not now. Come here to me," she said, drawing him back. "I'll just be quiet from now on."

He protested, "But I like to hear it."

She thought about that, then twined her arms around his neck to murmur, "Then look at it this way: a bunch of your men now know that you make your wife very happy."

He slowly smiled. "Yes," he said, and moved onto her.

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Chapter 17

The following morning, April 16th, Efran and Estes were once again in the second-floor workroom wrestling with Loizeaux's list of demands for maintaining peace. "Did we get a response to the first shipment?" Efran asked.

"Not yet," Estes said tentatively.

"As long as I don't see his uniforms marching on us again, we should be good," Efran muttered. He paused, then asked, "Have you seen the Croly?"

"No," Estes said with a sidelong glance. "You were the one who seemed to be his friend."

Groaning, Efran leaned his head on the chair back to look at the ceiling. "Who's at the door?"

"I believe Coxe is out there today," Estes said.

"Coxe!" Efran shouted.

The door opened. "Captain?" Coxe saluted.

Efran turned reluctantly. "Coxe, please ask for volunteers to search around the fortress for the Croly."

"Captain." Coxe saluted again and shut the door on his way out.

"What's the problem?" Estes asked.

"Apparently, we'll continue to have bird attacks as long as he's here. Justinian talked to an old farmer outside of Eurus who knew all about them. The old timers call them the Graetrix, and they apparently originated hundreds of years ago in the Poison Greens."

"Those hills were the source of many supernatural evils," Estes said.

"That have taken flight," Efran muttered. "Now, then." He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped. "Where were we on the list?"

Estes sighed. "You were unwilling to send Madea to Eurus for a month."

"And I still am," Efran said. "Her, or anyone. Unless it's the Croly. Do you think we can pass off the Croly as a cook?"

Estes shook his head. "I wish I knew how serious Loizeaux is about this list. It's absurd."

Efran looked at him. "I wonder if it's another game. A test."

"To see if we would go along with it, like we had to pretend he was Lord Rawson?" Estes asked.

"Not exactly," Efran said, thinking. "He seemed to be looking more for . . . how clever we could be in negotiating it."

“Oh,” Estes said. “Then how do we cleverly handle a list of absurd demands?”

Efran mused, “I think we were on the right track with substitutions. Instead of Madea, let’s suggest Shirreff’s beef. Let’s send him a ten-pound gift order, and tell Shirreff that Loizeaux is interested in ordering more.”

Estes approved. “Loizeaux will be helpless—Shirreff got you to triple the Abbey’s order of his inferior beef.”

“Thank you for the reminder,” Efran said tightly.

“You brought it up,” Estes countered, writing. “Next—”

There was a knock on the door, and Coxe stuck his head in. “Captain, no one’s found the Croly on Fortress grounds. Should we look outside the fence on the hilltop?”

“Yes, and look for Pia as well. Make sure she’s with a soldier. And—find out if she’s hearing anything from any of the birds,” Efran said.

“Captain,” Coxe said, saluting as he withdrew.

“What’s next?” Efran asked Estes.

Estes lifted the tattered parchment. Then his head drooped. “Fifty pounds of Abbey beef.”

Efran leaned his head on the chair back to groan and laugh. “So we send him ten caged squirrels,” he said, looking up at the ceiling.

“Does he *want* to provoke another battle, you think?” Estes asked.

“Let’s find out,” Efran said, standing. He took the list and tossed it in the low-burning fireplace.

“Thank you,” Estes said.

“See? I listen to you,” Efran said.

Estes muttered under his breath, but with Loizeaux set aside for now, they turned to other Abbey business that required Efran’s attention.

Coxe returned to make his report. “We found Pia with Krall, Captain. He said she’s tried several times to reach the birds, but they’re either too far away or are not responding. No one’s been able to find the Croly yet.”

“All right. Thank you,” Efran said.

When Estes was satisfied with the decisions he got out of Efran, he released him to go look for his Minka. Efran went out back to the gardens where she was most frequently found these days. After scanning the crowded grounds for several minutes (as mid-April was prime planting season) he saw her on the bench under the walnut tree, holding Joshua. She had not seen Efran yet in the crowd out here.

Inhaling in contentment, Efran started toward her, but then a sentry intervened. “Pardon, Captain, but Awfyn is asking to see you.”

"I was afraid of that," Efran murmured. "Yes, I'll come." He turned away reluctantly from the comforting sight of Minka with Joshua.

The seven-foot-tall, one-eyed Polonti criminal, with five of his companions, watched Efran enter the foyer to say, "Welcome, *maka* Awfyn. What can I do for you?"

"I am here for Adele, friend Efran," the giant rumbled.

"To my knowledge, she is not here. I had heard she went to Eurur," Efran said carefully.

"You brought her from Rinkart to the notary," Awfyn said.

"Yes," Efran said tiredly, "but that was several steps ago. Minka found her in a house on our land that I had—" His words froze in his mouth as he stared at the person entering the foyer from the courtyard.

"Oh, hello, darling," Adele said. "You are looking luscious today." She puckered her lips at Efran, who was staring at her in shock. "And there is my big one come for me. Shall we be flown, then?" She put a hand on Awfyn's massive arm to stretch up with puckered lips.

Efran watched in mild horror as Awfyn leaned down to kiss those lips, then sweep her up in his arms and carry her out the front doors, his men following.

When Efran stood unmoving, Younge, who was on door duty today, came over in concern. "Captain?"

Efran closed his gaping mouth, then licked his lips to whisper, "We found the Croly."

First, Efran went straight to Estes in his second-floor workroom. "Estes. I found the Croly. Posing as Adele. To Awfyn. Who kissed her and left with her. Him. It."

For ten seconds, Estes held a parchment he was trying to read in midair. Then he asked, "Are you sure it wasn't Adele?"

Efran swayed slightly with the force of the words that were all trying to come out at once. "Croly's grasp of the language is better, and his lips match the words, but, it's not enough to fool anyone who knows her."

Estes considered that soberly. "Awfyn will dismember him."

Efran exhaled, "At least. But first, I want code words between you and me in case the Croly survives and poses as me."

"Ten caged squirrels," said Estes. Efran nodded, turning out to find Minka again.

He looked all over the garden, but she was not there, so he backtracked to their quarters, where he found her changing Joshua's wraps. "Efran!" she said, looking up. "Will you—?" She stopped at his face. "What happened?"

"I will wait for you to get Joshua cleaned up," he said carefully.

She did that, then said, "Please watch him—I have to rinse these out and take them out back to the laundry."

“Yes,” he said, taking up the clean, dry baby.

When she finally came back, drying her hands, she took up the bowl of tallow to spread on her hands and Joshua’s bottom, monitoring Efran’s face the whole time. Then she sat on the bed and Efran sat with Joshua to tell her, “The next time you see Adele, it may not really be her. Have you seen her or the Croly today?”

She shook her head. “Are you saying that the Croly has changed himself to look like her?”

“Yes. And making an effort to talk like her. It was good enough to fool Awfyn. For now,” Efran said.

“Oh no,” she breathed. “Why is the Croly doing that?”

Efran looked helpless. “Testing his wings?”

The following day, April 17th, one of Awfyn’s men, Chior, came with a message from Awfyn: what was wrong with Adele?

Standing at the gates, Efran told him, “It’s not Adele. It’s someone who thinks she is Adele, and wants to be just like her. Take her to Loizeaux, and look for the real Adele in Eurús.”

Chior said, “I will tell Awfyn your words.” And he rode away.

Walking away from the gates, Efran murmured, “I may have started wars on several fronts.”

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Chapter 18

Several days following, on April 19th, Efran received a reply from Lord Bowring regarding the seizure of Giardi’s house for unpaid taxes. Bowring had written, “I was grieved and vexed to hear of the plight of the widow you mention, who is fortunate to know such a generous and kind-hearted man as yourself. It also distresses me to confess that my hands are tied in the matter, as Lord Reinagle has been endowed with the authority to administrate what remains of certain services of the government of Westford to the best of his ability. Notwithstanding, I and my family remain your grateful servants.”

“I hope you never need anything from me, Bowring,” Efran murmured. He started to toss the letter in the fireplace, then changed his mind and took it to Estes to log as official correspondence.

With four days having passed since he had dropped off Giardi at Ryal’s, Efran decided to drop in to see how they were doing. So, after receiving all-clear reports from the skeleton crews he had stationed at the bell tower and in the hilltop woods, he rode down the switchback to Ryal’s shop.

Entering to the tinkling bell, Efran saw Giardi manning the front counter, looking fresh and content. “Good morning, Lord Efran,” she said in surprise.

“Good morning, Giardi. I’m glad to see that Ryal finally has competent help. Are you settling in all right?” he asked amiably.

“Oh, yes; he already had the guest room stocked with everything I could need,” she said. “Oh—here. He found that the *Annotations* had been accidentally left behind. It should go with the Annals and Latter Annals.”

“Excellent. Thank you.” Efran took up the volume to glance through it.

“Do you need to see Ryal?” she asked. “I’m afraid he’s at the printer’s replenishing our supply of ink.”

“Oh, no bother. I’d rather see you,” he replied, smiling, which involved some crinkling around his eyes.

She laughed, “He warned me that you are a charmer.”

“Shot down in flight,” he muttered, lowering his head to thumb through the *Annotations*. She laughed again. He stopped on an entry, shaking his head. “Henry the Great was four years younger than I am when he was proclaimed Surchatain of Lystra.”

“He was terrified, at first,” she confessed.

He glanced at her. “You are too young to have witnessed the ceremony, but you must have experienced some of his high points. His eradication of the slave trade is legendary.”

“He was a courageous man and a wonderful father,” she said, growing misty-eyed.

Efran smiled at her. “Did you know his children?”

She looked at him for a moment, weighing what to say, then decided on the basis of his lovely smile. “Look at the entry for December twentieth, eighty-eighty-seven.”

As Efran was turning pages in the *Annotations*, the bell tinkled and a customer came in. Seeing a Polonti taking up counter space, he scowled, but Giardi said, “How may I help you?”

The customer slapped a form on the counter, venting, “It is absurd to have to make the trip down here every time I need to register these!”

“I’m so sorry,” she said, turning the form toward her. Efran, having found the entry in the *Annotations*, drew in a sharp breath and looked at her in wonder and delight. She directed a secret smile to him, then said, “Do you have the authorization for the Petition of Seizure, Lord Reinagle?”

Efran turned predatory eyes on the lord as he said in exasperation, “I’ve already covered this with the proprietor of this shop. I’ve been granted emergency authorization by the Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford.”

Wordlessly, Efran held out his hand to her for the form, and she gave it to him. Reinagle began blustering as Efran read through it, turning it over to see the fine print on the back, as well.

When Efran started laughing, Reinagle turned a deep red. Efran looked at him and said, “This form requires the authorization of the ruling entity in the district in which the petition is made. As Lord of the Abbey Lands, wherein this shop resides, I deny your Petition for Seizure.” To underscore the point, Efran ripped the document in half.

While Reinagle stood stricken in disbelief, Efran asked Giardi, “How many of these has he registered here?”

Consulting the ledger, she replied, “Seven, Lord Efran.”

He told her, “Those seven are retroactively denied due to illegitimate authorization. You’re to issue notices to that effect and deliver them to the Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford.”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” she said, beginning to make notations.

Efran turned to Reinagle again. “Having profited from fraudulent petitions, you are required to make complete restitution to the victims of your seizures.”

“You have no authority to compel a citizen of Westford to conform to your little Abbey rules,” Reinagle said, trembling in anger.

“No? I can invalidate the petitions you have acted on and prevent your filing any other forms with this office. So find yourself another notary,” Efran said. Of course, until and unless Notary Shaffer recuperated from the fever and returned to duty, the next closest notary was in Eurus, almost a day’s ride to the north.

“I demand a refund for the petitions I’ve registered here!” Reinagle shouted.

Efran reached into his pocket and flipped a royal to him, which covered the cost of 30 petitions (at a silver piece each). “There you are. Get out.”

Grinding his teeth, Reinagle banged out of the door. Giardi turned to gaze at Efran. Regarding her, he shook his head. “I’m sorry; only my wife is allowed to adore me.” She had to hold her stomach for laughing.

“Dear Giardini,” he sighed, pulling out two more royals to lay on the counter. “That’s for the work I just gave you, and for having to explain to Ryal that I shut the door on his best customer. Tell him I’ll make it up to him.”

She shook her head. “I can’t believe it. I feel so vindicated. I could kiss you!”

He leaned over the counter to present his cheek, on which she bestowed a prim kiss. “Don’t tell my wife. She’s very jealous,” he said, then turned out in satisfaction at her musical laughter. But he forgot to take the *Annotations*.

When Ryal returned to hear of the morning’s events, he was slightly chagrined—he had the authority to deny Reinagle’s petitions, but was cowed by him. Ryal also had no idea that the widow he was smitten with had been victimized by him. But she cheerfully gave Ryal the royals tended for their services, and turned to fill out the Revocations of Petitions humming to herself.

That afternoon, Elvey appeared at Ryal’s shop with two helpers and a cart full of textiles. She entered under the tinkling bell to explain that Lord Efran desired Giardini’s person and quarters attired with whatever she wanted.

Giardi balked at first, feeling the gesture excessive, but Ryal prevailed to insist that she select better dresses, a rug, blankets and bed cover, window dressings—and wouldn’t a tablecloth be nice? So she agreed.

Several days later, on April 24th, Efran received a message which read, “To the esteemed Efran, Lord of the

Abbey Lands, from his servant Lord Bowring. Dear Sir, I come to you with a grievance against your Notary, who has issued a baseless Revocation of Petition for the property called Barbauld in Westford, which the Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford had recently granted to me. I appeal to my lord's sense of justice to order your presumptuous Notary to revoke this outrageous Revocation and restore this legally obtained property to me."

"Oh, excellent," Efran murmured, reading it twice just for enjoyment. To the sentry Routh, who had given him the message, he said, "Have Trud saddled, and send me two men with mounts. Whoever's available."

"Captain." Routh saluted and ran to a back door.

Efran carried the letter with him to the front courtyard to wait. Minutes later, Shane and Connor appeared with two horses and Trud. "Gentlemen, we're going to have fun today," Efran announced, then asked, "How are you, Connor?" His handsome face was set in hard lines, very unlike his normally genial appearance.

"I'm well, Captain," he said, jaw tense. Efran waited, looking at him while Shane turned his eyes elsewhere. Connor blinked and said, "Fanny went back to Eurus." Loizeaux's favorite courtesan had fallen in love with Connor, induced him to marry her, then gotten tired of him.

Efran exhaled. "I'm sorry, Connor." The young man nodded; Efran cleared his throat. "Mount up; we're going to execute a little justice."

When the three were at the top of the switchback, Efran scanned the skies over the fortress. "There have been no birds since the Croly left with Awfyn. I wonder if Awfyn sent him on to Loizeaux, then?" he murmured. Thinking, he turned to the switchback.

The three rode down to the notary shop, where Efran motioned both men to accompany him inside. When the bell announced their entry, Ryal and Giardi looked up from behind the counter. "Oh, good morning, Lord Efran," she greeted him warmly, wearing a new dress.

His eyes inadvertently crinkled at her. "You look lovely, Giardini," he said, tossing the letter to Ryal, who picked it up to read.

"Thank you, Lord Efran," she said primly.

"And I will thank you not to flirt with my assistant," Ryal muttered over the letter. While Efran laughed at Giardi's blushing, Ryal looked up. "I tremble to think what you're going to do with this."

"I will be gentle, my friend," Efran said. Shane clamped his jaw tight against the laughter, and even Connor's face lost its grim lines. Efran continued, "First, I want to know if you have the names of those on the Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford."

"Yes, we should." Ryal looked over his shoulder at the array of ledgers.

"Would it be in 'Index of Authoritative Bodies'?" Giardi asked.

"Yes. Pull that out, please," Ryal said.

"Efficient, isn't she?" Efran smiled.

Ryal harrumphed at him as he opened the ledger. “Ah. The Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford. Chancellor: Lord Reinagle. Vice Chancellor: Lord Bowring. Members: Lord Webbe, Lord Kelso, Lord Cennick (in *absentia*).”

He looked up at Efran, who placed a handful of royals on the counter. “Excellent. I want letters addressed to each of these men individually as members of this committee. You’ll tell them that the Lord of the Abbey Lands has informed you, his notary, that if necessary, he will support with force the revocations of all Petitions of Seizure obtained through your office.”

In other words, Efran would invade Westford. If necessary.

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Chapter 19

“Oh my,” Giardi whispered.

“Now,” said Efran, looking up at the ledgers, “I need the name of the owner of Barbauld, its location, and where he can be presently found, if you know.”

Ryal and Giardi both began looking. “The name of the owner is Weber, the tanner,” Ryal said, scrutinizing a sheet.

“So he should be at his shop, then,” Efran observed.

“Yes, one would think so. It’s on the Passage, south of the cemetery,” Ryal said, and Efran nodded.

Giardi spread a map before Efran. “Here is his house. It’s in a nice district next to the nobles’ estates,” she pointed out.

“I see,” Efran said, looking over the map. Then he straightened. “All right; if you will send out those letters to our esteemed committee members, I will go see what we can do for the tanner.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Giardi said as Ryal pulled out his quill set.

Outside, Efran told Connor and Shane, “Let’s go find Weber first, then we’ll look for his house.” The three of them turned their horses to the north at a moderate lope.

They found the shop easily, as it was set off by itself, away from other businesses. From a distance, Efran could see people around it and a one-horse cart being loaded. When he, Shane and Connor pulled up, they were stonily regarded by Weber himself, worn and dispirited, and his family: three young men who regarded them with hostility, and a wary woman who held a young girl to her side.

“I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Lands. I assume you are Weber the tanner?”

“Yes,” he said.

Looking around at evidence of a move in progress, Efran asked, "Where are you going?"

"I don't know," Weber said flatly. "They've taken my house for taxes I didn't know I owed, and the landowners downstream are threatening to burn down my shop."

"I will buy your house for a fair price if you will move your family and your shop to the Abbey Lands. But you must set up south of the mill," Efran said.

"What?" Weber gasped, and the faces around him changed.

Efran said, "I have revoked the Petition of Seizure used to claim your house, as it was illegally obtained through the Abbey Lands notary. However, we are in need of a tanner, so I wish to make it easy for you to come down to us."

His wife burst into tears and the young men looked at their father. "Why—yes, certainly," he stammered.

"Is your cart ready to go? Who do you want to drive it?" Efran asked.

"Yes. I will," the wife said, getting up quickly. She put the girl in the front seat and climbed up with her.

Efran turned to Connor. "Take her to Estes and let them work out the details. Send me a unit quickly to take possession of the house."

"Yes, Captain," Connor said, looking more like his old self. Turning his horse, he said, "Please follow me, ma'am." She nodded, lifting her face, and he started out at a walk with her horse and cart rattling behind him.

Efran turned back to the group. "I want to look at your house—Barbault?"

Weber gestured to the youngest son, a boy about ten years old. "Tarrant, hop on Mistletoe and take them."

"Yes, Papa," he said, running to the rear of the shop. In moments he came around on an old mare, bareback, with a halter.

Shane grinned at the sight and the boy said importantly, "Follow me." Turning Trud, Efran glanced back at Weber and his other two sons proceeding to hastily load a second cart.

As the map had shown, Tarrant led Efran and Shane to a nice middle-class area—not as fine or large as the nobles' estates, but well-built houses that a nobleman like Bowring would not be ashamed to enter. Some of them were on a pond surrounded by trees, making them desirable as vacation homes. It was one of these to which Tarrant brought them.

The first thing Efran noticed was the chain lock across the front door handles. As he could see furnishings inside the house, he asked the boy, "Is that your father's lock?"

"No, sir, that's the Committee's what says they own the house now," Tarrant replied.

"Shane, get rid of it," Efran said, looking off.

"Yes, Captain." Shane dismounted, feeling in his pockets, then brought out a small tool. He knelt before the lock and popped it open. Going around the house, he flung the lock at least 200 feet to land in the pond with a *plop*.

“Nice shot, sir!” Tarrant said.

“Thank you,” Shane said, raising his hands as if acknowledging applause.

With a half-smile, Efran instructed, “Check around the house for other locks.”

“Captain,” Shane said. Tarrant slid off the mare to follow him, and Efran detected another *plop* in the pond. Coming back to the front with his admirer, Shane reported, “That’s all, Captain.”

Efran said, “Tarrant, go tell your father that your house is open now.”

“Yes, sir!” Tarrant jumped up on the mare to turn her back toward the shop.

Efran and Shane waited. In a few minutes, Shane lifted his chin, so Efran looked over his shoulder at riders approaching, five of them. But they weren’t Abbey soldiers. Leading them was Lord Bowring, who waved in pleased surprise.

“Lord Efran! How kind of you to respond so quickly, and personally, to my appeal. Here you are guarding my house once again!” Bowring said.

Efran laughed, and Bowring laughed, then Efran said, “No.”

Bowring paused. “Excuse me?”

“No, Lord Bowring. But I appreciate your letter, which enabled me to verify that the Petition for Seizure of this house is illegitimate. I am guarding it for its owner, Weber, who is selling it to me,” Efran explained.

Bowring’s mouth continued to hang open in a half laugh for several seconds, then he said, “I don’t believe you have the authority to do that.”

“Ask Reinagle whether I do,” Efran said.

“You are in Westford, not the Abbey Lands,” Bowring said.

Efran said, “You are relying on a Petition granted in the Abbey Lands, which I have the authority to deny.” At this time Connor, leading a unit of twenty men, turned a corner onto this street.

With his back to them, Bowring said, “Well, Lord Efran, if it comes to that, I see two Abbey people here, and five Westfordians opposing you.”

“So the rioters, who had more people, were entitled to destroy those houses,” Efran said. “And your gratitude just empty words.” Connor’s men continued to approach at a leisurely trot.

While Bowring stared at Efran, his men swiveled in alarm at the Abbey soldiers coming toward them. One man hissed at the lord, who belatedly turned in his saddle. Then Bowring, sweating, faced Efran again to say, “I beg your pardon. I will not fight you.” He and his men sedately departed around the oncoming troops.

Efran watched Bowring’s contingent ride off as Connor came up saluting. “Your unit, Captain.”

Swallowing his anger, Efran said, "Thank you, Connor. Help Weber and his family get whatever they need out of this house, because it won't be standing by tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Captain," Connor said. As his eyes followed Efran's to the departing lord, the hardness returned to his face.

While all of this was taking place in Westford, Minka had just changed clothes after chickening. Leaving the bedroom, she saw the outer door open and Efran step into the receiving room. She was opening her mouth to greet him when he said, "Come with me."

"What is it?" she asked, studying his face. She did not recognize his expression.

"Come. I will show you," he said.

"All right," she said in slight confusion.

They went out the front doors and out of the gates to the switchback. "Where are we going? Why are we walking?" she asked.

"Because that is what we must do," he said.

Baffled, she went with him, though she had to trot to keep up with his stride. When he walked fast like that, he always held her hand to make sure he wasn't outpacing her. But he didn't touch her today. "Efran! What's wrong?"

"Nothing. We must hurry," he said.

She exhaled in exasperation. "Then why aren't we riding?"

"Walk," he instructed. Throwing up her hands, she did.

They got to the end of the switchback to proceed up the northbound road and over the old stone bridge until he turned west, toward the Passage. They were fifty yards down this road when Connor's unit passed them going north without seeing them.

Minka was fairly winded when they got to the new bridge over the Passage. As they crossed, she said, "Oh! Is Awfyn back in his forest hideout?"

"Yes," Efran said.

"Why didn't you say so? Is Adele with him?" she asked, hurrying to keep up.

When he didn't answer, she said, "Efran?" He was silent.

They were in the woods now, gloomy even in daylight. She began to feel afraid. And she had never felt afraid when Efran was with her, not since he was almost hanged. "Efran, talk to me," she said shakily.

"Here we are," he said.

She looked, and they were indeed at Awfyn's hideout. He opened the door. She looked inside, but no one was there. "Efran, I—"

He pushed her in so that she sprawled on the dirt floor. Watching the door slam shut and lock behind her, she cried, “You’re Croly!”

“THE Croly will return to let you emerge!” he shouted.

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Chapter 20

Returning to the Abbey fortress with half of Connor’s unit, Efran went first to Estes’ second-floor room to make sure that Weber’s family had a place to live and an approved area to set up his shop. Elvey, thrilled to hear that the tanner was relocating to the Abbey Lands, put her army of associates to work assisting them move into their Abbey house and begin construction on their new shop.

With a sigh of satisfaction, Efran went to his quarters, because that’s where he always checked first for Minka. Opening the outer door, he stuck his head in. “Minka?”

“Here,” she said from the bedroom.

He went in to see her sitting on the bed in the sheer silk robe, and he laughed, “What have you done now?”

“Come here to me,” she said, patting the bed.

He looked in her face, and his smile faded. He came closer to look at her, his heart thumping. She said, “Why do you hesitate? Your lips are cushiony.”

He reached out to grab her by the throat with one hand. “Where is she?” he whispered.

“You are hurting me,” she said.

He grasped tighter, lifting her. His voice was shaking as he said, “Not like I’m going to hurt you if you don’t tell me where she is, Croly.”

Gurgling, she said, “You are cutting my air.”

“You don’t breathe air! Where is she?” Efran shouted, shaking her.

At that time, he heard the gates bell clanging in the front courtyard with the call, “Birds! Birds overhead!”

Throwing the Croly to the floor, Efran spun to his weapons closet for his bow and quiver, then ran out to leap up the stairs toward the bell tower high above.

On the floor of the bedroom, the Croly sat up painfully. “Ooooh, that did not go out well. That made him very whispery. We will think of another thing.”

As he sat on the floor thinking, his back to the leaded-glass window high in the wall, the light in the room

darkened. Blinking, he turned to look up at the shadow of a head with a beak pass over the window, and a blow cracked the glass.

Screaming, the Croly rushed from the room.

High overhead on the bell tower platform, Efran fought to contain his shaking as he shot down bird after bird. He had learned to target the weak spot under the wing where it met the body. Hitting any muscle in that area caused the bird to lose control of its flight. This either brought it down immediately or brought it within range of another archer.

What Efran had to do to stop these attacks altogether was get the Croly out of the fortress. But until Efran knew where Minka was, he couldn't expel him. So with tears streaming down his face, he kept shooting.

In the foyer, the Croly stopped to evaluate who he appeared to be and who he needed to appear to be. Minka would not work; Efran saw through it. So the Croly changed into a maid he had seen. Walking down a corridor to the interior of the fortress where it was safer, he came straight upon this maid.

She looked at him with widening eyes, then started screaming. Dashing away, the Croly looked for a place to hide to change appearances again—he wasn't experienced enough to do it on the run. Finding an empty corridor, he changed back into his Towner copy in the purple uniform. Wait—no—they all knew the Croly was in the purple. So he changed that to the gray-green uniform, equipping himself with a bow and quiver for realism.

Walking back leisurely toward the interior of the fortress, he came upon DeWitt listening to the hysterical maid. Glimpsing him, DeWitt shouted, "What are you doing down here? Get up to the roof!"

The Croly froze; DeWitt approached him in near-unbelief. "Did you hear me?" he said in a low voice. So the Croly had to run to the staircase. On the tenth step, he paused to settle down. The DeWitt did not chase him farther, and the staircase was empty, so he could just sit and wait.

Shortly, however, he heard clattering below him, and two soldiers ascending with firepots almost fell over him. "What—" "Who is it?" "Get up—!"

Screaming, the Croly was forced to run up all the stairs to the crenelation. Here, at least, he could get out of the way of the firepots. Then he moved cautiously along the wall to the west side of the fortress.

This side was the farthest from all the activity; no one was stationed here or shooting from here. The north side faced the courtyard and the switchback; the south side faced the Sea; the east side faced the oncoming Graetrix. But here, all was quiet.

The Croly stood looking over the Passage to the hills and mountains beyond. West: yes, he would go west. The farther west he could go, the farther out of their range he would be. And with the Very Big One smushed, the others would not care about one stray rider. As he thought about this, there was a gust of wind, and talons came at him out of nowhere.

On the rooftop, the archers paused. The birds suddenly began lifting off to the east. But there was more: "Is that screaming?" someone muttered. And they all watched a great bird fly over from the western wall with a vaguely human blue form dangling from its talons.

"The Croly!" "They got it!" "Goodbye, Croly!" the archers cheered.

“Minka,” Efran breathed, watching the writhing blue figure sail out of sight.

“We’ll find her, Efran,” Estes said, sitting across from him. “Everyone is looking, and the Croly can’t have taken her far.”

“Yes. That’s true,” Efran said. “Will you ask Giardi what she sees?”

Estes hesitated. “She said that all she can see is a dark place,” he said reluctantly.

“A dark place,” Efran said, wiping the sweat from his lip. “That could be—a cave. He could have pushed her down into a cavern beneath us, where I was.”

“I don’t think so, Efran,” Estes said carefully. “The points of entry that we know about have not been disturbed.”

“The Treasury,” Efran said. “If the Croly was posing as me to lead her away, he could have asked her to get out the signet to take him up to the Treasury, and then left her there.”

“Where is the signet?” Estes asked.

“I asked her to hide it where I couldn’t find it,” Efran said.

“The Croly would not know about that,” Estes argued.

“He scans our minds, Estes,” Efran said.

So Efran and Estes almost dismantled his quarters looking for the signet, but did not find it. Efran went up to the door of the Treasury to shout at it, but heard nothing. By design, the only way to break into the Treasury was to destroy the fortress. But the final argument against the Treasury that Estes did not make was that, by this time, she would be dead for lack of air.

When the most likely places were searched and Minka was not immediately found, Efran became a walking corpse. Much like the time she had ridden to Eurus without explanation, he was in Abaddon again, without light, without understanding, without hope.

He did not look at or speak to anyone except his children. Noah, Ivy, Pia and Toby came to him at different times to climb on him, seeking comfort or to comfort him. He held them when they came, but had nothing to tell them. He could not even hold Joshua for long; he, too, had become primarily a token of loss.

Several people asked Pia to question her animal friends about Minka’s whereabouts, but she could only shake her head: they knew nothing.

Dinner at the fortress was wretched. Bethune had to come back on duty to nurse Joshua because Efran could not even feed himself in his present state. And when he finally lay down to attempt to sleep, it was in his old spot under the crucifix. Since he could not eat, sleep, or think about anything else, he prayed.

The following day, April 25th, everyone in the fortress turned out to search for her. Every square inch of the fortress, the hilltop, and the Abbey plots, houses, and businesses were searched. She was nowhere.

But Minka was not idle where she was, especially on the second day. She probed, prodded, and banged on both

doors of the hut. She dug in the ground near the wall with a stick she had found. Discovering that the walls extended at least 16 inches underground caused her to abandon that plan, at least for the time being.

The hole in the ceiling to let out smoke from a central fireplace was also a tantalizing option. She could climb the walls to a certain point, but where they started curving inward, she always fell.

So the second day passed, and she was not found.

However, that night, Efran suddenly woke and sat up to look at the portion of Scripture on the wall of the keep that was illumined by moonlight: *Once God has spoken; twice I have heard this: that power belongs to God.* “Yes, I understand,” he said, and lay back down.

On the third day, April 26th, Efran got up and ate breakfast, then went to get Joshua out of the nursery to carry him around. He had to take the baby right back to the nursery to ask them to show him how to change his wraps. They did that for him, giving him a clean baby back.

Then Efran took him up to Estes’ second-floor room, where the Steward was conferring with the Administrator. “What do you need from me today?” Efran asked.

Estes and DeWitt studied him, then Estes said, “Well, come sit.” Efran did, holding Joshua.

DeWitt said, “You seem encouraged, Captain.”

“I’ve been given assurance that she’ll be found,” Efran said. “All I have to do is wait.”

“I’m glad. I’m very glad, Efran,” Estes said. But neither he nor DeWitt was sure they believed it—mostly because they wanted to so badly.

The Captain’s change of heart was communicated throughout the fortress. Some believed it; some didn’t. Some soldiers believed it who remembered his assurance that they would turn aside Loizeaux’s second attack, which ended when the flooding swept away a thousand of the invaders. And those soldiers who had known Efran as a pessimist courting death also believed it.

Still, there was the waiting.

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Chapter 21

Weber’s ten-year-old son Tarrant was a good boy. When Efran gave his father the opportunity to move his family and his tannery to the Abbey Lands, Tarrant was a mighty helper, despite being the youngest boy and second-youngest child in the family. He worked beyond his age to load, unload, carry and help build, even though the woods on the west side of the Passage called to him. He was a boy, and boys like to explore.

So on the day they moved, April 24th, and the day following, Tarrant worked from sunrise to beyond sunset without stopping except briefly to eat. On the third day, however, he couldn’t stand it any more, and slipped away after the noon break just to look around.

The Passage was a strong-flowing river, and his mother sternly warned him not to get in it, else he'd likely be swept out to sea. Tarrant obeyed her, but no one told him he couldn't cross the bridge to visit the woods on the west side of the river.

So, when no one happened to be watching (that Tarrant could see) , he went over the bridge to explore just a little. The tall trees encompassed him; the chittering birds talked to him; the undergrowth crunched under his feet. It was another world here—he was almost sure there were dwarfs hiding in the ferns and fairies peeking out from under the mushrooms. And when he looked high up at the treetops, he saw angels among them.

But the most wonderful thing he found, at the end of a faint path, was a house of trees. He almost didn't see it at first, as it was so well camouflaged. But when he looked at just the right point between two large trees, he saw a round-topped door with a handle and a lock. Intrigued, he went over to try the handle, but found he had to turn the key in the lock. It was almost rusted shut, so that he just about gave up trying. But certain types of children can be very stubborn about finishing something they start, so he kept working it, and finally the key turned so that he could open the door.

Even in midday, it was dim in the little house, so he wasn't sure what he saw at first. It just looked like a pile of old clothes. But then it moved, and a girl's face in the midst of messy brown hair looked at him. He looked at her. "Are you the lady that went missing?" he asked.

"I must be," she whispered, sitting up. "Are you my hero?"

"I must be," he grinned, and went over to help her stand up.

She was weak, so he had to practically hold her up as she took the first few steps out the door. It wasn't all that hard, because she was only about six inches taller than he was and maybe ten pounds heavier. She got a little stronger as they walked out of the woods and over the new bridge. Then she only needed to lean on his shoulder to walk on the east-west road until they turned south over the old stone bridge.

Men working on the stone wall at the end of the plots saw them and started shouting. Some of them threw down their tools and ran toward the main road. Bigger, stronger men came over to try to push Tarrant aside and take charge of her, but she wouldn't let them; she stubbornly held fast to her hero. She smiled at Tarrant, and he smiled back.

As they came down the main road, a large crowd gathered around them, so that they couldn't walk any farther. Tarrant tried to tell them to get out of the way, but they weren't listening to him. They all tried to touch her or take her. He finally started slapping people's hands away. They faintly heard the courtyard bell ringing.

Then the crowd parted, and Tarrant looked up in mild awe at Lord Efran gazing at them with tears running down his face. Only then did the lady let go of Tarrant, and that was to reach both arms to the lord. He gathered her up like a long-lost treasure, and Tarrant found himself crying, to his consternation. But Lord Efran was crying, too.

The lord looked at him, then, at Tarrant, and said, "You found her." Tarrant nodded, and the lord asked, "Where?"

"There is a house of trees on the west bank," Tarrant began, turning to point.

But Lord Efran threw back his head to groan (or laugh), "Awfyn's hut! How did we all forget Awfyn's hiding place?" All the while, he was holding her tightly, and she was curling up on him as if in her natural resting place.

He turned aside to his horse, then. Tarrant stepped back out of the way, but the lord set down his treasure in order to lift Tarrant onto the horse and give him the reins. "Will you come up with us for just a moment?" Efran asked him. Astonished, Tarrant nodded. Lord Efran then picked up his treasure to carry her in his arms with Tarrant riding beside them. Looking over the heads of all the people around, Tarrant felt like a lord himself.

He saw his mother and father rush up with astonished faces. Lord Efran told them, "Your son has found my wife, so I asked him up to the fortress for a moment. Please come with us, if you will." Dazed, they fell to each side of the horse to accompany the hero up to his reward. And that was when Tarrant finally realized that he had found Lady Minka, the wife of Lord Efran.

At the gates at the top of the switchback, the palace Steward and Administrator were waiting, as well as many other people. The lord put the lady's feet to the ground in order to speak to another lady, who took charge of her. Then Tarrant was lifted down from the horse, and he and his mother and father were taken to the dining hall with Lord Efran and many other people.

The kitchen crew was pulling together a feast for everyone while the lord was talking with his people. Tarrant and his parents were brought to the head table, seated, and asked to wait for just a moment. When their other sons and daughter came in, places at the head table were found for them as well. At that point, Tarrant's parents leaned over him from either side and demanded to know what happened. Tarrant told them.

Tables throughout the hall quickly filled, which resonated with excitement. Lord Efran appeared to finish talking with his people as he nodded quickly once, then again.

Then Lady Minka entered the hall, washed, freshly dressed, hair brushed, and Lord Efran went to her side to escort her to the head table. Her and Efran's adopted children Noah, Ivy, and Toby ambushed her with hugs, kisses and tears. She greeted them lovingly, but because she was already unsteady, Efran steered her to a chair. He sat her beside Tarrant's father, but remained standing himself to raise his hands in a request for silence, which was immediately granted.

Lord Efran swallowed and said, "We thank God for the answer to so many prayers today, and we also want to thank Tarrant, my wife's rescuer, for saving her life. [He had to stop here to compose himself before going on.] So, it has been decided that Tarrant's parents, Weber and Keenie, shall receive a lifetime lease on their home and their business, and a bonus of five hundred royals for the expenses of setting up their much-desired tannery. And to Tarrant [looking at the boy now] I wish to extend my personal thanks, and tell him that he has my ear from this time on."

An outpouring of applause and cheers followed this, but Tarrant, and especially his parents, sat in shock. In a matter of days they had gone from utter ruin to great wealth . . . by accepting Lord Efran's invitation to move.

Toby, about two years younger than Tarrant, greatly admired him, and walked right up to him after Efran's speech to introduce himself. Tarrant took to him at once, and since Toby asked, he described the hut in great detail, inviting Toby to come have a look at it.

So Tarrant made first use of Efran's offer of access that very day. He and Toby waited patiently at Efran's side while a lot of people were trying to talk to him. When he noticed the boys waiting, he knelt to give them his attention. Tarrant began, "Lord Efran, Toby wants to see the hut, and I would like to show it to him, please."

Efran looked troubled. "It's dangerous, Tarrant."

"No, sir, just the locks. I'd like to use the hut," Tarrant said.

Efran glanced at Toby waiting in silent supplication at his side. “All right. Just a moment.” Standing, he looked around, then beckoned to someone.

Connor pushed his way through the crowd to salute. “Captain?”

“Connor, go find a volunteer to go with the boys to the hut. I need someone to remove the locks and stay with them as long as they’re out there.” He looked down at the boys to include them in his instructions. “West of the Passage is beyond Abbey boundaries, so you must have a guardian with you at all times out there. Toby, you must get your chores done before you go. And Tarrant, you must have your father’s permission. Work comes first.”

“Yes, sir,” Tarrant said gravely. Toby nodded vigorously.

Connor said, “I’ll go with them, Captain.”

“Thank you, Connor. Let me know when Toby gets back,” Efran said. Looking down at the boys again, he added, “Tarrant, you should know that you are welcome at the fortress any time.”

“Thank you, sir,” Tarrant said, gratified. And those three boys went off together.

Wallace would allow Minka to have only a little to eat and drink, then her head began bobbing where she sat. Efran picked her up to carry her out, but said, “Please, everyone, continue. I will be back when I can.” They all complied with this instruction.

She was already asleep when Efran laid her in bed, with Wallace’s wife Leese sitting beside it. Efran sat on the bed to stroke Minka’s face in continual gratitude for its warmth.

Estes appeared at the door behind him. “How is she?”

“Just needs rest,” Efran exhaled.

“Thank God,” Estes said in a low voice. “Efran, everyone wants to know: what was the assurance you were given? How did you know she would be found?”

Efran turned to him, wiping his face on his sleeve. “In the middle of the night, last night, I had two dreams, one after the other. They were so vivid I still remember every detail. In the first, I saw the hole in the top of the cavern that I climbed out of—I was looking down at it from above ground. And I saw Minka being pulled out of that hole.” He started crying again. “She wasn’t climbing out; she didn’t have the strength. But someone very strong was pulling her out of that hole.”

He stopped to breathe and swallow while Leese wiped tears from her face. “The second one was harder to understand, but—I saw her sitting somewhere; it must have been in the garden, and a dove lit on her shoulder for her to pet and feed from her hand. But she was happy, as she always is, and she smiled at me, so I knew that she would be with me again.”

Efran laughed a little. “It doesn’t sound like much repeating it to you, but—the two dreams together, one after the other, made for such a strong conviction that I accepted it and went right back to sleep,” he sighed.

“Time tells the truth of everything,” Estes murmured. “Efran, I am so, so glad.”

"I as well," Efran breathed, lying down beside her, and he was immediately asleep, too.

Leese rose. "I don't think she needs me now." Estes escorted her out, and they closed the door behind them.

The next day, April 27th, Efran made a heroic attempt to get some work done with Estes, but when Leese reported that Minka was awake and having breakfast in bed, he went to her.

He sat on the bed beside her as she was finishing breakfast. Leaning her head back, she said, "Efran, I'm so hungry. I want more to eat."

"Complain, complain—that's all I hear from you," he murmured. She groaned out a laugh, and he turned to Leese. "Ask Wallace if she can't have a little more."

"Of course," she said, turning out.

"When can I see Joshua?" Minka asked him.

"I've told the nursery to bring him when he wakes," Efran said, setting the tray on a side table with one hand. Then he slid his arms around her and leaned back against the headboard. "Tell me what happened. Did the Croly pretend to be me?"

"Yes," she said, snuggling into him. "I should have realized it right away, but I never imagined he was back. I knew it wasn't you, though, when he shoved me into the hut and slammed the door."

"Thank you," he said, and she chuckled. Efran added, "He had to get you out of the way, because when I came in, he was posing as you on the bed in your pink robe."

She sat upright. "What?"

He laughed. "He was not convincing. I almost throttled him trying to get him to tell me what he did with you, but then the birds came."

"Because he was back in the fortress," she said, nestling back down.

"Yes. It didn't take long for them to carry him off," he said.

"Is he dead, then?" she asked.

"I don't know. But if he manages to get away from them and come back, I will certainly kill him," he said complacently. He held her quietly, kissing her hair.

She sighed, her head on his chest, listening to his heart beat. "Where is Adele?"

"Probably in Eurus," he said, lifting a hand to comb his hair back out of his eyes. "But I'm not going to find out."

"Justinian will know," she said.

“Do you want to hear from him when he gets back?” he asked. “He’s due soon.”

“Yes. But, he doesn’t have to be told about the Croly fooling me,” she said self-consciously.

“All right,” he murmured, holding her tighter.

With a knock on the door, Leese entered, carrying another tray. “Wallace said she can have more, but if she gets sick, he will say, ‘I told you so.’”

Sitting up to take the tray, Efran laughed, “He’ll be entitled, and we’ll allow it.”

Minka sat up with determination. “I will regret nothing.”

“As usual.” Efran went to the door. “Please stay, Leese; I’m going to see what all I’ve left undone.” He bent to kiss Minka’s hair again, and she waved him away with the fork.

Several hours later, Justinian arrived from Westford. By this time, Minka had dressed to go get Joshua herself. She and Efran met Justinian in the small dining room, where he was enjoying an early midday meal. “Madea could be independently wealthy if she opened a tavern here,” he observed.

“We don’t need a tavern,” Efran said.

“Where are your travelers going to eat?” Justinian asked, pained.

“We don’t have travelers. This is the destination,” Efran said stubbornly. He was watching Minka kiss Joshua’s baby cheeks.

“Well, you may shortly. I hear that Awfyn is coming down with Adele,” Justinian said, turning up his glass.

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Chapter 22

“I have just the place Awfyn can put Adele,” Efran said, leaning back, “only for her, it will need new locks on the front and back doors.” He obviously and facetiously meant the hut.

“What are you going to do with her? Seriously,” Minka asked him, nuzzling Joshua. He gurgled, patting her face.

Efran replied, “I don’t know. That depends on what Awfyn says. But she’s not staying here or with Ryal. Nor is she opening a brothel.” He watched Minka coo over his son, then looked again at Justinian, who was industriously wiping his hands on his napkin after an excellent meal of fried fish. “Did Awfyn find her in Eurus, then?” Efran asked.

“I’m assuming so, but I don’t have a firsthand account of that. You, however, are wanted for the burning down of Lord Bowring’s house Barbauld in Westford,” Justinian said, examining him critically.

Efran laughed lightly. “I must be going to war with Westford after all. Excellent.” Inside, he was steaming. So

Bowring, who had professed such gratitude, not only attempted to seize the home of the tanner and his family, but burned it down when Efran prevented him. *Then* he attempts to shift the arson onto Efran himself. *I am now at war with you, Bowring*, Efran thought.

Justinian looked troubled. “Westford is getting to be a rather bad place.”

“With no one ruling?” Efran asked.

“Exactly. Factions are posturing, making noises against each other, but no one really has an edge over another, so the citizens don’t know who to fear the most,” Justinian said.

Efran nodded. “What is the name of Lord Bowring’s estate? The one that didn’t burn down.”

Justinian squinted. “That’s Tuttiett.”

Efran pressed his lips together. “Sounds expensive.”

“Oh, I’m sure it is. He has a private force guarding it,” Justinian said.

“How many?” Efran asked.

“At least thirty. Possibly fifty,” Justinian replied.

Efran laughed. “Is that all? Really?”

Minka said anxiously, “Oh, please tell me you’re not going to attack him.” She unconsciously held Joshua a little tighter.

“Not I,” Efran disavowed, but she suspiciously regarded the glint in his eyes. “Where are you staying? I may need to get a message to you,” he told Justinian.

“The Porterhouse Inn. They also have their own security, and are neutral ground for all factions,” Justinian said. He stood. “I’m off, then. I don’t care to be around when Awfyn brings her back.”

“You’re jealous,” Minka said, smiling.

He looked at her, pained. “No, dearest Minka, I’m afraid. I don’t want him to pawn her off on me.”

She laughed so robustly that Joshua startled, turned his head to her, and opened his mouth as if to laugh with her. Efran watched, shot through and incapacitated with gratitude.

Mid-morning of the following day, April 28th, Awfyn arrived with Adele. They did not receive the ostentatious reception that had welcomed them here ten weeks ago, nor did they arrive in a ponderous carriage. Awfyn was on foot, which was just about the only way he could travel; over seven feet tall and around 400 pounds, he was too heavy for the back of the sturdiest horse. Adele was on horseback, sullen and undecorated in her face or her clothes.

Efran and Minka hosted them in the small dining room, where they had roasted chicken, garden greens, bread with butter, ale and Madea’s amazing lemon custard pie. (Joshua was in the nursery. Since Adele was under the

impression that he had died at birth, Efran and Minka desired her to remain in this misunderstanding.)

Minka greeted her, “Hello, dear Sister,” and attempted to kiss her cheek, whereupon Adele rolled her eyes and pulled away, flouncing into a chair at the table. Minka, unruffled, turned to bestow a kiss on Awfyn, who bent down to present his cheek. He was then seated in the heavy-duty chair that Abbey woodworkers had crafted just for him.

Efran poured the ale, making small talk. “I’m very glad to see you, brother, and very glad that you retrieved Adele from—her situation.” She shot him a black look, which landed on his blank face. Efran continued, “I am concerned, however, about keeping this Colfox off Abbey Lands.”

Awfyn grunted, “No worries about that, brother.”

“Thank you.” Efran did not press for details. “But where are you staying now?”

“Eh, that’s uncertain,” Awfyn said, glancing at Adele. This unsettled both Lord and Lady of the Abbey Fortress, who wanted neither of them here.

“Why is that?” Efran asked flatly.

“She doesn’t like to be on the move,” Awfyn said.

“Well, that’s understandable. Women like to settle down and decorate. Collect furniture. Hang curtains. Don’t you?” he asked Minka.

“Yes, my lord,” she said, engaged in none of that.

Efran continued, “There are areas ripe for settlement by a man with your wealth and potential manpower. I have it on good authority that Westford has become a field of conflict between competing factions, none very powerful. With a force of, oh, three hundred men, you could walk in and claim any estate for your own. Adele knows the kind of estates that litter the area.” She turned her eyes to him in cautious interest.

Efran went on: “And it would be a favor to us at the Abbey as well, to have a friendly power in an important area so close to us.”

Awfyn considered that. “I do not know Westford well. Where would we settle?”

“I would suggest Tuttielt, the estate of Lord Bowring. It’s quite luxurious and vulnerable. If you’re not familiar with its location, I happen to have a map of Westford right here.” Leaning over, Efran picked up a rolled map which he spread before Awfyn, moving aside dishes to do so. Then he and Awfyn began a serious discussion of invasive maneuvers, with Adele listening. Efran made a point to tell him, “His daughters are supposedly married and gone, but if they happen to be there visiting, I am sure that you will evict them courteously.”

“Certainly,” Awfyn said. “Now, on the south point of entry.”

At this time, Minka got up. “Please excuse me. I have to go check on—my wall hangings.” She had almost said the name of the baby that wasn’t supposed to exist. Efran glanced up to nod, repressing a smile, but neither Adele nor Awfyn noticed. So Minka left them to their plotting.

Two hours later, Awfyn and Adele left with the map. And Efran sent two soldiers to the Porterhouse Inn in

Westford with a verbal message for Justinian to be alert for upheaval centered around Tuttiett.

When Estes found out about Awfyn's interest in acquiring Tuttiett, and especially Efran's encouragement of that, he was not pleased. "Efran, it's dangerous and irresponsible for someone of your stature to support a criminal like Awfyn. He doesn't abide by rules and you don't know what measures he will take to get what he wants."

Efran accepted the chastisement. "You're right," he sighed. "I let my anger override my judgment."

DeWitt had words for him as well. "It's not just Awfyn. He has wanted murderers in his band that go pillaging under his protection. They'll see no reason to confine themselves to Bowring's estate."

Efran winced. "This I didn't know."

"That is why you have advisors. Use us," DeWitt said while Estes looked on grimly. Efran groaned.

That evening, when Efran came to their quarters weary from beatdowns by his administrators, he looked around the empty outer room. "Minka?"

"Here," she said from the bedroom.

He opened the door. His heart nearly stopped upon his seeing her sitting on the bed in the pink silk robe. She was lounging in almost exactly the same position as the Croly. Efran fell on the bed to seize her shoulders and look hard in her face. With a devious smile, she asked, "Well? Which of us wore it better?"

"You—!" he gasped, falling on her. He tried to kick off his boots, but her robe fell open, and he was helpless in her hands.

The following day, April 29th, Efran received a sealed message from Loizeaux. While the messenger was left in the receiving room off the foyer with all the ale he wanted, Efran took the letter up to Estes on the second floor before even opening it.

Walking into the room, Efran silently raised the message. Estes, seated at the worktable, looked up to ask, "From Loizeaux?" Efran nodded, closing his eyes. "Are you going to read it or do you want me to guess his reaction to the appeasements we sent him?" Estes asked.

Sighing deeply, Efran broke the seal and opened the letter. He read silently, then continued to stand motionless for the next thirty seconds. Estes said, "Efran, I'm not a violent man, but you are seconds away from a beating. Read the message."

Efran cleared his throat and read: "To Lord Efran blah blah. From Loizeaux blah. I received Adele here on April nineteenth by the hand of your Polonti associates, and enjoyed her greatly for several days. But now I find her gone and desire her back very much. Am looking for your prompt return of her. Your friend and ally, blah blah."

Estes stared at him. "But . . . at that time, Adele was with Colfox—"

"That's correct," Efran said.

"And . . . Croly presented himself to Awfyn as Adele—"

“Yes,” said Efran.

“And . . . when Awfyn asked you what was wrong with her, you told him to take her to. . . .”

“Loizeaux,” Efran finished for him.

“So, Loizeaux . . . enjoyed Croly very much, thinking that—he was Adele. . . .”

“Exactly,” said Efran.

“But then Croly left Loizeaux to. . . .”

“Come here and work on me as Minka. Which didn’t happen,” Efran was quick to note. “What do I tell Loizeaux?”

“That we don’t know where she is,” Estes said, returning to his parchments.

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Chapter 23

Loizeaux’s messenger was returned with the reply that Estes had recommended. Then Efran sent two soldiers to Westford dressed as monks with swords under their robes (and slits in the robes for easy access). They were to present themselves to any questioners as Preaching Brethren who traveled everywhere proclaiming the grace of God. Just in case, Efran had asked for volunteers who actually had experienced something of God’s grace.

But he didn’t require them to be tonsured, because that seemed unnecessarily cruel to men who were trying to attract women, and no one in Westford would know that their heads were supposed to be shaved. The soldier monks were to stable their horses at Porterhouse Inn (because everyone would question monks on horseback) and take their preaching to the area around Tuttiett. Then they were to report to Efran whatever they saw.

Efran solemnly swore to Minka, Estes, and DeWitt that he would not support Awfyn and Adele with Abbey troops, should the Polonti criminal actually try to seize Bowring’s estate. But Efran wanted to know what was happening, and Estes agreed that was reasonable.

Abbey fortress residents rejoiced at the cessation of bird attacks and threw themselves into celebrating a gorgeous spring on the hilltop. The plot holders were also deeply engaged in their own planting, livestock, and building. With the number of Westfordians flowing down to the Abbey Lands, there was a waiting list for plots, though DeWitt and his assistants were assigning them as rapidly as possible.

The underage girls who had been rescued from Colfox’s brothel, now working as apprentices for Elvey’s associates, were quickly adopted by leaseholders. Efran had the families vetted first, and warned that if the girls were compelled back into prostitution, the adoptive families would be evicted from the Abbey Lands and the girls placed elsewhere. This warning was seriously regarded and, as far as anyone knew, never needed.

Weber’s tannery went up quickly, and several inspections verified that the noxious chemicals necessary to the craft were safely washed out to sea. No one had much concern over the possible poisoning of aquatic life, first,

because the quantity of chemicals was so little in such a large body of water, and second, there was no fishing along the Abbey coast due to the cliffs.

In fact, there was no fishing along the entire coast as far west as Prie Mer because of the hurricane of two years ago. It had virtually wiped out that coastal trade center as well as the smaller town of Nicarber to the east of it. Efran was one of the Westfordian soldiers who had volunteered to assist with rescues and relocations.

Also one of the first on the scene at Prie Mer, Efran was to have nightmares for months afterward due to the number of bodies that required removal and disposal, and he had seen plenty of death in war by then—but those were not children. His personal recklessness in rescuing survivors won him the commendation from his Commander that was never recorded because of a clerk's carelessness. But every time Efran was able to pluck a small gasping body from the floodwaters, another nightmare was laid to rest. So he did it over and over and over again.

Tarrant and Toby worked with industry and ingenuity in creating a playhouse/meeting room from the hut. The men cut down a number of trees to help them clear a large playground all around it, which Efran ordered encompassed by a sturdy wooden fence. The boys' work attracted the attention of a few more adults who helped haul heavy materials. Other children, especially Noah and Ivy, also came to help. Soon those two were as devoted to the project as Toby. All the children worked under Connor's supervision. He, in turn, gave periodic updates to Efran, who decided to come have a look.

When Efran came out to see the amount of work they were investing in the project, he became concerned about possible objections from the landowner—especially regarding the tall wooden fence. So he went to Ryal's shop to ask for the name of the owner of the property on the west shore of the Passage adjacent to the Abbey Lands.

After hours of intensive research, Ryal reported to Efran that no owner could be found. Ryal had all possible records from Westford, which was the only likely place of registering ownership of the property, and no one had ever claimed woodlands near an area plagued by wolves.

So on behalf of the Abbey, Efran laid claim to a strip of land five miles wide from the western shore of the Passage beginning at the northern edge of the playground around Awfyn's hut (which was barely a mile north of the northern border of the Abbey Lands) and extending south to the coast. Ryal estimated the value of the land at 250 royals, which Efran deposited with him in an escrow account, should a preexisting owner eventually be found. (At the time, neither Efran nor Ryal realized that this encompassed the ruins of the small harbor town Nicarber.)

Then the entire land purchase was enclosed with wire fencing accompanied by notices that this land belonged to The Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea.

Toby and Tarrant, thrilled with the official approval and protection of their project, confided to Efran their immediate plans for it. Approving of that as well, Efran asked the stonemason in charge of the wall, Ernst, to give the boys whatever materials and help they needed, within reason. Ernst agreed.

The stone wall protecting the northern boundaries of the plots had been completed from the north-south road all the way west to the banks of the Passage, with special gates and cutaways allowing for entrance to the mill. Construction continued on the wall to the east of the road, and a pair of iron gates, similar in design to those at the top of the switchback, were set across the road (although the ironmonger did not attempt to replicate the unique wreath of thorny roses that adorned the courtyard gates). To not impede the traffic that went back and forth from the Abbey Lands to Westford, the gates would remain open but manned during the day.

This burst of springtime activity, furthered by the absence of the great birds, also brought a renewed flow of sightseers to the fortress. Gatekeepers on the road could not deny access to people who just wanted to look around, as this was reasonable and necessary for prospective leaseholders. But gatekeepers at the top of the switchback were more exacting in requiring credentials for those who wanted entry to the fortress.

Still, setbacks happen. It was known throughout Westford that the Lord of the Abbey Lands was Polonti, but Efran refused to dress up to his rôle. He constantly wore the work clothes—dark gray pants and white shirt—that all his men wore when not on assigned duty. So he was not readily identifiable to strangers.

On this day a particularly imposing and well-dressed woman successfully blustered her way into the fortress, escorted by the liveried driver of her blue and gold carriage, which did resemble Loizeaux's. As she entered the foyer to look around, Efran entered from the corridor and spotted his wife, whom he had been looking for. He caught Minka up to kiss her good and hard, and she pretended to resist for play.

"But this is outrageous!" the woman cried, watching them. Efran and Minka disengaged to look at her. "To allow such intimate aggression between unmatched persons in public is abominable!"

Efran shut his mouth and walked over to look down on her. Lips set sternly, she raised her face courageously to this reprobate. He slowly, sensuously slipped his arms around her substantial waist and lowered his face to kiss her softly, caressing, until she opened her mouth and raised her arms to his broad shoulders. Then he kissed her deeply, pressing her body to his, while everyone on duty in the fortress ran into the foyer to watch. Her driver was too shocked to intervene. Minka had her hands over her mouth in laughing disbelief.

Then Efran let go of the woman and stepped back. "That's how we greet all fortress visitors," he explained.

Swaying, the woman nodded, turning around, and her driver caught her by the hand. Then he helped her stagger out the door and down the steps to the courtyard, where he opened the carriage door for her to fall inside.

As the carriage descended the switchback, laughter rocked the foyer. Efran turned back to Minka, who pouted, "I'm jealous."

"You're next in line," he grinned, and took her up laughing.

But an hour later, the switchback was clogged with women in carriages coming to receive an official Fortress greeting.

For the first two days following the dispatch of the Preaching Brethren, they returned to report no aggression around Tuttiett beyond the usual harassment of religious persons in public. In fact, another disguise was needed because Gabriel almost had to draw his knife to defend himself from agnostics demanding to debate. So Efran sent different men, Rigdon and Hawk, in workmen's clothes with surveyor's equipment.

On that day, May 3rd, less than two hours after they had left the fortress, Hawk came galloping back. Efran and DeWitt met him in the courtyard to hear him report, "Awfyn has attacked Tuttiett, Captain, but he's only got about a hundred men. I don't know if he thinks he could take half of them by himself, but he's going to find out that the nobles share defenses, and when the others see one estate attacked, they'll send their men over to fight."

Efran groaned, "Idiot." Then he muttered, "I need to go watch for myself."

DeWitt, one of the few men besides Estes who had the courage to speak frankly to Efran, said, "Captain, you'd

have to take a bodyguard, which you promised you would not do. And you'll be mistaken for one of Awfyn's men."

Efran, who was not stupid, listened. Then he said, "What if I went in dress uniform? Wouldn't that indicate that I was there as an observer?"

DeWitt considered that, then said, "Yes. Coxe and I will also wear dress uniforms to accompany you." Coxe had been acting as assistant to DeWitt since Cassel's death.

"Thank you." Efran turned to Hawk. "Ride back and tell Rigdon to expect us shortly. But you two are working surveyors not associated with us."

"Captain." Hawk remounted with a leap and turned to lope down the switchback. Efran ran back into the fortress to change.

Minka came in as he was pulling on a fresh shirt. He already had on the crisp linen pants. As he tucked in the shirt, he explained, "Awfyn has attacked Tuttiett with too few men. DeWitt, Coxe and I are going as observers only, hence the dress uniform."

He pulled on the matching undyed linen jacket with gold trim, which fit him perfectly. Minka sighed, "All right."

Sitting to pull on his socks and boots, he shook his head at her soft expression. "I promise to wear the dress uniform another time when I don't have to run off."

"All right," she said again, just looking, and, toying with her hair.

He stood to shake his clothes down, and she tilted her head to watch. "Women," he laughed. "Hasn't Toby been asking you to come down and see their hut?"

"Yes," she said, smiling vaguely, and he bent down to kiss her.

He ran out to the front courtyard, where Trud was already saddled and adorned with red and gold Abbey livery. DeWitt and Coxe came around in their red dress uniforms with horses likewise decked out in livery. Then, attended by a number of onlookers in the courtyard, the three mounted and turned down the switchback.

Work in nearby plots came to a standstill as the three Abbey representatives loped up the road in formation. Soldiers at work on the wall straightened to salute. A few women waved, but everyone was looking. Efran was bemused at this unconscious, dominant reaction to dress uniforms. Did it have something to do with the pride of belonging to a worthwhile effort? He thought about that as they rode.

Their uniforms hadn't elicited the same reaction in Westford, although people looked. Thinking back, Efran knew that his Westfordian dress uniform didn't command attention, either—but the insigne did. Those who noticed his Captain's insigne respected it, and him. That insigne was the hardest thing to give up in leaving the army . . . which is probably why he gave it to Minka.

As they rode into the area of the nobles' estates, they caught glimpses of the fighting. Not wishing to get too close, they paused on the road, then Efran pointed to a small hill ahead. "What if we watch from that hill, DeWitt?"

"That's good," DeWitt agreed, so they turned up the hill for front-row seats to the battle for Tuttiett.

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Chapter 24

The hill was good not only for a comprehensive view of Bowring's house and grounds, but to allow the Abbey representatives to be seen as well. They were obviously not armed, obviously not dressed for combat, and obviously not hiding. So Efran, DeWitt and Coxe turned their horses toward the arena of conflict to watch silently.

It did not look good for the aggressors. Awfyn himself was having no difficulties, taking out a handful of men right and left every time he swung his club. But he was only one man, and the rest of his men were swamped by defenders. Efran looked over to Bowring, watching from the second-story balcony overlooking the back grounds. His front façade having been successfully defended by archers in second-story windows, the assault had now moved to the rear of the house, which provided more opportunities for ingress.

During the fighting, Efran heard Awfyn shout once or twice in the Polonti language. Efran listened intently to the words: *Pua? Paina?* He wasn't even sure he was hearing them right, but if the first word were indeed *pua*, he knew that meant *come*. Was it a call for help? From whom?

Bowring raised a large yellow card, and the Abbey observers quickly looked for the recipient of this signal. Of the two estates within hailing range, it appeared that a man standing on the rear balcony of the house to Bowring's right was his confederate. Even from this distance, Efran recognized him as Reinagle.

Bowring saw the Abbey observers, then, and pointed to them. In reply, Reinagle raised a black card. Coxe asked, "How long do you think we ought to stay, Captain?"

"A few moments more," Efran said. Hawk and Rigdon came up behind them on foot. Glancing at them, Efran asked, "Where are your horses?"

"Behind this hill, sir," Hawk answered.

"Go get them and sit with us," Efran said, so they turned down the hill.

Watching his fellow Polonti sink under the tide of defenders, Efran's conscience assailed him again. If he had consulted Estes to begin with, he wouldn't have gotten entangled in this debacle. What was Awfyn thinking? He wasn't stupid; why didn't he bring more men?

As Hawk and Rigdon came up the hill on their horses, Efran started to turn Trud's head with an order to leave. But there was a sudden gust of wind and the sky darkened. They all looked up; Coxe and Hawk shouted, "Birds!"

There were at least ten of the Graetrix bearing down on them. "Don't move," Efran said instinctively.

Their horses shied, but the men kept them from bolting. Then they watched the birds swoop over the men fighting, pick one man up in their great talons, fly off a ways, and then toss him down to his death. It was horrifying and mesmerizing to watch this picking up and disposing of a screaming human being, over and over.

Awfyn's men stopped fighting and stood still amid the defenders who were scrambling for cover from the talons.

Bowring and Reinagle disappeared into their houses while their men below were picked off one by one. Coxé whispered, “Captain, the birds are—taking out only Bowring’s men.”

That appeared to be true. The Graetrix were not biting or eating the men; they hovered over the fighters to select a man to pick up, carry off, and throw away. But none of Awfyn’s men were taken, and the Abbey watchers were not targeted. Yet.

As the number of defenders rapidly dwindled, Awfyn’s men turned to enter the house by the back doors. When the grounds were cleared of Bowring’s men, the Graetrix filled their talons with the dead and flew to the east. Efran and his men remained on their horses, watching. DeWitt suddenly said, “Who’s that? Is that Bowring running from the house?”

Watching tensely, Efran said, “Yes, and it looks like he made it to Reinagle’s.” It was a small consolation that Efran didn’t have Bowring’s murder on his conscience.

Not quite an hour later, Awfyn came out of the back door, lifted a hand, and began walking toward them. Efran spurred Trud to descend the hill, and those with him followed.

When they came within hailing range, Awfyn said, “The house is ours, friend.”

Efran moistened his lips. “Are his daughters here, Awfyn? His wife?”

“No, friend Efran; the women were gone when we got here,” Awfyn said. So Bowring must have had advance warning of the attack.

With a tremor in his voice, Efran asked, “Awfyn, what have you given the Graetrix for their help?”

“Meat!” Awfyn laughed, gesturing at the dead that remained scattered over the hills.

Someone behind Efran retched; he felt sick himself. Killing was a necessary part of war; Efran had been prepared to die in every battle he had ever fought. But this was—perverse. Men were not meat; they were husbands, fathers and sons. Some of Efran’s best soldiers had been enemies who joined him.

But worse than this was realizing that Awfyn was too cheap to spend his gold for soldiers, choosing instead to pay the Graetrix, Efran’s enemies, in human flesh for their services. This was likely to result in the Graetrix attacking Westford or the Lands when they wanted more flesh. Worse still, it was a betrayal not just of Efran, but of the divine origin of all people, regardless how fallen.

“Awfyn, this is—not good,” Efran said tightly. “The Graetrix are not—reliable allies. They are treacherous.” He was shaking in just getting the words out.

Awfyn laughed, waving away his concern. “We are good. Stay and celebrate with us, friend!”

“No, Awfyn.” Efran turned Trud to leave, making eye contact with DeWitt. Because Efran’s face showed his intense regret for his part in this abomination, DeWitt felt no need to say anything further. The Abbey observers loped away.

When they were riding through Westford, someone behind them shouted, “Hullo!” Efran turned, as did his companions, to see Justinian leaning out of a carriage they had just passed. Efran trotted back to him.

Justinian said breathlessly, “Did you see it? Did I see what I thought I saw—the Graetrix picking up men and throwing them about?”

With the coincidence of catching Justinian, Efran suddenly knew what he had to do. Leaning down from his saddle to the carriage window, he said, “Stay just a moment. I am going back with you to your farmer who knows all about them.”

Studying him, Justinian quietly agreed. He gestured up to his driver: “Wait.”

Efran returned to his men. “Don’t say anything about this to anyone yet—except Estes,” he said with a nod to DeWitt. “I am going with Justinian to talk to a farmer who knows all about the Graetrix. I’m going to find out how to kill them. All of them.”

“You need someone besides Justinian to go with you, Captain,” Rigdon said.

“Then come,” Efran said.

When Rigdon trotted over to him, so did Hawk, who explained, “He just said what I was thinking, Captain.”

“All right, but DeWitt and Coxe must return. I’ll be back quickly,” Efran promised them. *I hope.*

DeWitt said, “Good, because I’m not explaining any of this to Minka.” Efran winced in agreement as those two turned their horses south to the Lands.

Efran, Rigdon, and Hawk drew up to Justinian’s carriage. “How far away is this farmer?” Efran asked.

“About four hours,” Justinian replied.

“How far by fast horse?” Efran asked.

“Oh, dear brother, it’s too late today,” Justinian groaned. “Let us get some dinner—”

“With the royals you have, the farmer will feed you. Drop off your carriage and get you a horse,” Efran instructed.

Reluctantly, Justinian took them to the Porterhouse Inn, where they all ate a light meal while Justinian exchanged his carriage for a saddle horse. Then he explained to Efran that they’d take the northbound road until it intersected with a side road named Burnap. The farmer lived at the end of this road.

“I’ve seen the turnoff. I know where that is,” Efran said. “All right; we ride.” And they started off at a fast lope, Justinian forsaking the reins to clutch the pommel.

By the time they reached the turnoff, Justinian was woozy in the saddle, so Efran slowed down for him. Still, they arrived at the farmer’s house shortly after sundown, before it got dark. Justinian had to be practically carried to the door, but he managed to adjust his hat, introduce the Lord of the Abbey Lands to the farmer, Pensum, and explain their mission.

“You want to kill off the Graetrix, do you?” the old man asked, studying Efran. His linen uniform was badly wrinkled and sweat-stained by now.

“Yes. They’re killing and eating people,” Efran said, studying Pensum in return.

The farmer shook his head sadly. “I’m sorry to hear that they got a taste for human flesh. In the old times, they could talk to people because of the riders they carried. They could cooperate and make agreements with us. They did it all with the power of their minds.”

“Yes, I’m sorry too that it’s necessary, but I don’t want to see any more people being carried off as dinner. Can you help me?” Efran said, controlling his voice.

“Yes,” Pensum sighed. “I think so.” Picking up a lantern, he took them to a back room which had tables, shelves, bowls and other equipment. Efran tensed, as it reminded him of Arenado’s workshop.

The old man lit a second lantern, taking this to the shelves to rummage among them. “I could find it better in the daylight,” he grumbled. “Well, here’s what I have—crushed ginkgo seeds. For some reason, the seeds of this ancient tree are highly poisonous to this ancient creature, possibly because they originated at the same time thousands of years ago.”

Efran looked at the small blue bottle. “That is very interesting. But I want to kill all of them. Is there nothing that will spread from bird to bird, like—the fever?” He handed the bottle back to Pensum.

“Yes, they are vulnerable to diseases that spread—this one is particularly bad: the mad sheep disease.” Pensum took another bottle, this one green, off the shelf to hand to Efran.

“I remember that from—what? Five years ago? Sheep were dropping dead by the hundreds. But first they—started staggering, and twisting, rolling, falling over everything,” Efran murmured, studying the bottle.

“Yes, that almost wiped out the Graetrix as well, because sheep is their favorite meat. What you’re holding is a concentrated sample of brain tissue from a sheep that died. That is quite potent—if it got into the body of one Graetrix, all the others it got close to would be infected,” Pensum said.

“How do I get this into their body?” Efran asked.

“That’s the hard part,” Pensum admitted. “You’d have to put it on food that they ate. Don’t spill it on yourself. Here’s a little opener to help you.” And Efran watched him insert a little eye hook screw into the cork stopper.

“Pay him for this, Justinian,” Efran said, pocketing the bottle.

“Oh. Yes. How much do you want for it?” Justinian asked, digging in his pockets.

“How much do you have?” Pensum asked.

With a pained look, Justinian pulled three royals from his pockets, turning them inside out to demonstrate that three was all he had. Pensum took those three.

“All right, we’re off. Are you going with us back to Westford?” Efran asked Justinian.

Looking as though he were afflicted by the mad sheep disease himself, Justinian wavered, but said, “Yes.” To the farmer, he said, “Thank you kindly for your assistance, Pensum.”

The old man nodded. “Good luck.”

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Chapter 25

As Efran and his men were retrieving their horses, Hawk asked, “Do you believe that old man, Captain?”

“I choose to, because I’m desperate to get rid of the creatures,” Efran said with a glance at Justinian.

Hefting himself into the saddle with an assist from Rigdon, Justinian grunted, “He’s a sharp operator, but his potions have been proved—which is why he can get whatever he asks for them.”

“Then I’m very glad he doesn’t know about your money belt,” Efran said.

“Shhhh,” Justinian said.

They set off again, Justinian clinging to the pommel as before, hat jammed down on his ears so he wouldn’t lose it, matching his suit as it did.

All the way back to Westford, Efran’s heart was pounding and his breathing shallow. He was thinking, thinking, desperately casting about for how to get these sheep brains into a Graetrix. By the time they arrived at the Porterhouse Inn to deposit a groaning Justinian, Efran knew. The only way to do it was to get close to one.

The night porter accepted Justinian, his hat, and his horse. Then Efran, Hawk and Rigdon turned down the street, leading their horses. “Let’s look in on Awfyn’s new house,” Efran said.

Hawk nodded, but Rigdon asked, “Will they be bedded down by now?”

“No,” Efran breathed. “Not Awfyn’s crew.”

At first it appeared that he was correct. As the three entered the nobles’ district, they saw the bonfire on the back grounds of Tuttiett. They tied their horses to sturdy trees on the far side of the hill that they had sat on this afternoon, then they crept up to the grounds to look.

Rigdon breathed out an oath and turned away. Hawk lowered his face; Efran squinted at the human remains on a spit over the bonfire. A safe distance away from the fire, a group of Graetrix, about a dozen of them, squatted together.

It took several minutes for Efran to process the implications of this scene. The Graetrix were afraid of fire, which is why they were sitting apart from it. Yet still one or two of them would flap hesitantly toward it, as there was meat, but they always shied away. They did not look hungry, and the bones scattered around them indicated that they were well-filled. Nor did they require or desire their meat to be cooked. Only men wanted that.

Efran refused to think further; he closed his mind to the inevitable conclusion in order to focus on what was required of him now.

His mouth dried up. When he was in the army, he had embraced the thought of death, believing it his destiny. Now that he had Minka, Joshua, and their adopted children, he no longer wanted to die. But he knew what must

be done, and as far as he knew, he was the only one who could do it. *God of heaven, my life, my wife, and my children are in Your hands.*

Standing, he whispered to his men, "If anything happens to me, ride back to the Abbey at once."

Hawk and Rigdon protested, but he walked over the hill in his dress uniform with the bottle in his pocket.

Half a dozen Graetrix heads turned in his direction as he approached, but one jumped up with flapping wings. *Efran! It is the Croly!*

"Croly?" Efran murmured, staring at the flapping Graetrix in the firelight.

THE Croly! Yes! You have come to celebrate with your friend Awfyn!

"Yes, I have," Efran said. He glanced around, still not seeing living humans. "Where is he?"

They are very tired from the great battle today and have put themselves asleep. But we still celebrate the delicious victory! Why do the men behind you not come?

"They're afraid. They don't know you," Efran replied. "I see that you got a new transport."

Yes, all is forgiven. I am much comfortable and fed here. This is best.

"Yes," Efran said, wiping the sweat from his lip.

You are highly anxious.

"I'm afraid your friends will eat me," Efran said. Was the Croly reading his emotions more clearly than his thoughts? If so, Efran might be able to disguise his purpose long enough to get it done.

Ha ha oh no. We are all full of men. We will not be hungry again until tomorrow.

"That's nice," Efran said, noting that the Croly no longer felt bound by his promise not to eat humans. He looked up at the beak high over his head, wondering how he was going to get up there.

The bird's black eyes looked down on him. *You are angry about your little Minka.*

After absorbing this, Efran realized that, yes, he wanted to kill the Croly for that. Swallowing, he said, "You tricked her into going into that hut and left her to die there."

Oh no, just a laugh. The Croly would go back for her, ha ha.

"But you didn't," Efran said, trembling. "It was up to a child to find her." Despite knowing that this did not advance his agenda, Efran had to say it.

Oh, forgive the Croly. He forgot in all the hoopla.

Efran needed a few moments to think through that. The Croly wanted his forgiveness? No, he couldn't understand what that meant. He was repeating words like a parrot. Glancing around, Efran realized that the other Graetrix were listening. This was a performance, and the Croly was the star player with his human toy. Efran had

to play the part long enough to get the bottle's contents into that beak.

"All right, I forgive you. And I have a forgiveness present for you," Efran said with his most honest face.

The head high above him began descending. *You have something for the Croly?* Other Graetrix heads began bobbing in his direction. Being sated didn't prevent their wanting whatever Efran had for the Croly.

"Yes, I have something very tasty for you," Efran said, sweat pouring down his face.

But you are afraid of The Croly. The head weaved above him. What did that action mean? It was not particularly reassuring.

"A little, yes. I'm not used to seeing you so big," Efran admitted.

Ha ha yes. I could eat you. And the beak came down low, opening wide.

"That is almost the biggest beak I've ever seen." Efran gently drew the bottle out of his pocket.

ALMOST? The Croly's beak snapped shut in displeasure. Other Graetrix opened their beaks for comparison.

"Well, let me see it wide open again," Efran suggested. Blindly, he drew the cork out of the bottle almost all the way by means of the screw.

I maybe will. What have you got for me there? The beak was still shut.

"It's a sample of sheep brains that a farmer sold to me today," Efran said.

Sheep brains! That was clear enough to register with him. *That are my favorite! But not if they are mushy. Let me taste it.* And the great beak yawned at him again. But other Graetrix moved in around them. *Sheep brains!* Efran could hear the thought roll through them.

He looked down in the firelight to make sure he had dislodged the cork enough for the liquid to emerge without getting any on his hands. When he looked up again, he saw the open beak descending toward his head in a sea of other yawning beaks. He quickly tossed the bottle, streaming liquid, into the beak, and threw himself down among their taloned feet.

The Croly snapped up the bottle, but the liquid splattered on his breast and that of several others. There was a frenzy among them to get a taste, and Efran winced at a talon in his back. But it was quickly lifted as the Graetrix rose in combat over a few drops. Efran started to roll away, but another Graetrix pinned him in a cage of talons so that he couldn't move.

Meanwhile, the Croly was crowing over his gift, shaking his head. *Hmmm. Interesting bouquet. Quite a kick.* The odor of the spilled liquid was pungent, permeating the air.

"Here! I have another bottle over here!" Rigdon shouted. He was jumping up and down on the other side of the bonfire, waving something in his hand. The Graetrix turned to flap toward him, but were hindered by the fire. Throwing the object high in the air behind them, Rigdon shouted, "Go get it!" They shifted in a mass to follow its flight.

As soon as the cage of talons was lifted from Efran, Hawk grabbed his arms to start pulling him away. Rigdon

was already running back toward the hill. Efran got his feet underneath him, and he and Hawk ran for their lives from the fracas over a few drops of sheep brains.

The horses were on the verge of panic, as other Graetrix were flying in, blanketing the sky over Westford—and the road. The men drew up the reins, leaping to their saddles. “Criminy!” Hawk muttered as the three regarded the incoming Graetrix. Their horses began backing away, rearing at any suggestion of heading to the road.

“All right, we’re going to walk them,” Efran said, dismounting. He took off his sweaty, wrinkled jacket to tie it over his horse’s eyes, then began leading him on foot. Hawk and Rigdon did likewise. The horses balked somewhat, but with the men’s shoulders under their noses, they allowed themselves to be led south through the hilly terrain apart from the road.

With the incoming Graetrix streaming just 10 or 20 feet over their heads, the men occasionally froze, but the birds were not interested in horses or more man flesh when there was delicious sheep brains to be had. So the Landers kept on the move southward, leaving the fires and the plague of Graetrix behind. Then the men were able to remove the blinds, mount, and ride on to the Lands.

Upon arriving a few hours before daybreak, Efran handed the horses over to be stabled, but he did not go in, nor would he allow Hawk and Rigdon to go in. Instead, they went around the hilltop outside the fortress fencing to lie down about twenty feet from the cliffs. To the gate sentry who trailed them, Younge, Efran said, “We have to stay out here until I know we’re not infected. When Wallace is up and around, please send him out. But warn him that he can’t get close to us.”

“Yes, Captain,” Younge said, saluting from a distance. Then Efran lay down in the grass beside his companions to sleep.

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Chapter 26

Some hours later, Efran opened his eyes. “Efran. Efran.” Minka’s broken voice turned his head. She was standing about ten feet away, with Wallace, Estes, DeWitt, and a handful of soldiers beside her. “Efran, what happened?”

He shoved himself up to a sit as Hawk and Rigdon were waking beside him. “I’ll tell you, but first I need Wallace to tell me how long it will take for us to know if we’re infected with mad sheep disease.”

Minka uttered a strangled cry, but Wallace thought out, “One day, two to be safe. When did you think you might have been infected?”

“Sometime around midnight,” Efran muttered. “But we got the Graetrix infected, too. I’ll tell you all about it, but we really would like something to eat.” DeWitt gestured at two of the men at his side, who peeled away, running to the northwestern gate to the grounds. Then he said something to another man, who left and returned with a blanket for Minka to sit on. DeWitt knew she’d be here for a while.

Meanwhile, Efran told them about Justinian leading them to the old farmer, their purchase of the infected sheep brain sample, and their feeding it to the Croly. For Minka’s benefit, he made it sound much simpler than it had been. Watching him talk, Minka instinctively felt that he was not infected. So she settled down to listen. She had

already heard the horrific part, that of the birds killing men to eat, from DeWitt (whose resistance to telling her crumbled when she came up to him to ask).

After they had heard Efran's account—which Estes recognized as a redacted version—he said, “So the Croly lives.”

Efran said, “For a while. But he got most of the sheep brains.” The soldiers brought breakfast trays loaded with eggs, ham, fruit compotes, and ale, which they set on the ground for the men to retrieve. Settling down with his tray, Efran added, “I want scouts up to Tuttiett right away. Ask them also to check on Justinian at the Porterhouse Inn. He won't be infected; I just want to know that he survived the night's ride.”

“Justinian took you to the farmer on horseback?” Minka asked, smiling slightly.

“Oh, he was fearless,” Efran said, glancing up from the ham. Hawk, beside him, choked slightly. (But later, Minka repeated Efran's exact words about Justinian to everyone.)

Then she looked at the crumpled, stained remains of Efran's beautiful dress uniform. “You ruined another one,” she mourned.

He glanced down at himself. “I'm sorry. That's why I don't like to wear them.” This reminded him that he needed to talk to Elvey, which he couldn't do with Minka sitting here.

An hour later, when she had to go attend Joshua, Efran sent an urgent message to Elvey to check on pending projects that he had commissioned, and add another.

The scouts returned from Westford with an amazing account. A dozen deranged Graetrix had almost completely destroyed Tuttiett before erratically flying off to the east. When the Westfordians found them gone, an armed mob entered the house to deal with the squatters, but Awfyn and his men had left. The damage was so comprehensive that it was uninhabitable. And Bowring had unfortunately burned down the only other house that he might have occupied instead. The nobles were jointly offering a bounty of one hundred royals on Awfyn's head, and even innocent Polonti in Westford were being harassed.

Many of these Polonti came down to the Abbey Lands seeking shelter. By Efran's order, they had to prove they weren't associated with Awfyn. Any who could not offer proof of residence or earnings were turned away. And Efran considered his contract of friendship with Awfyn, their *maka*, broken. Estes and DeWitt were quietly relieved, as that left them no reason to afflict Efran any further about his association with a deranged criminal.

Justinian, having enough of crazed giant birds and crazy giant Polonti, came back that day to his old suite at the Abbey fortress for rest and rehabilitation. There, to his astonishment, he was accorded hero status due to Efran's account, propagated by Minka, of his rôle in securing the mad sheep brains to eradicate the Graetrix.

Two days later, on May 6th, Minka ran out to where the three in isolation were rolling around in unrelieved boredom. When she threw herself onto Efran to kiss him solidly, Hawk and Rigdon sat up in hope. “Wallace says it's clear by now that you're not infected,” she informed him, and them. Hawk and Rigdon ran off yelling in freedom, but Efran stayed on the hilltop with Minka for a little while longer.

When he finally went in, one of the first things he did was to order commendations for Rigdon and Hawk for their support in his efforts to get the sheep brains into the Graetrix, and survive.

Minka knew quite well that the next day, May 7th, she would turn seventeen. Her birthday last year was of

extreme importance, because proving it was what enabled her to marry Efran. But she chose not to say anything about it this year, with the Abbey's having just emerged from a near crisis. Besides, she didn't want to detract from the praise that Justinian, Hawk and Rigdon were enjoying for their part in resolving that crisis. But she was very glad at least to have Efran out of quarantine for her birthday.

So when she awoke the following morning, she was unpleasantly surprised to find that he was already up and gone. She lay in bed for a while feeling neglected, then shook it off to get dressed, get breakfast, and get Joshua. However, she arrived at the nursery to find that he was gone, as well.

"Where is he?" she asked the attendant, who just shrugged and said she didn't know. "Does Efran have him?" Minka asked, growing frightened, but again, the attendant didn't know.

Trying to contain an unreasonable panic, she rushed to Doane's cubicle. He looked up, smiling. "Good morning, Lady Minka."

"Good morning, Doane. I can't find Efran or Joshua," she said anxiously.

"Hmmm," Doane said. "I believe the Captain was headed down to look at the boys' hut, Lady Minka. You might try there."

"All right. Thank you." She turned out, restraining herself to a walk. The man at the door opened it for her, and she tried to smile at him, then the man at the courtyard gates opened them for her, and she ran out. (The fact of her presence on the switchback was quickly relayed to persons in the hut, who had to quickly find other persons and try to get them all together.)

She trotted down the switchback until she remembered that the last time she had done this, she fell. So she walked, glancing occasionally toward the new bridge across the Passage that led to the hut. She was glad that Tarrant and Toby were making good use of it, but, remembering the fear and despair she felt in being trapped there, thinking that she was going to die there, made it the last place she wanted to see again.

Then she sighed at her own selfishness. She knew that the boys were eager to show her their work; they had asked her to come see it several times. Why couldn't she put aside her irrational fears for them?

Coming off the switchback to walk up the northbound road, she felt her heart pounding. (The unseen watchers reported this progress to those in the hut, upon which small persons had to find their pants and the smallest person had to be changed.) She remembered her growing fear as the Croly, pretending to be Efran, led her into the darkness of the overhanging trees.

Reliving that apprehension as she exited the wall gates, crossing the old stone bridge, she stopped, hardly able to go on. (Her hesitation was received at the hut as a welcome opportunity for certain persons to clean themselves up.) But she forced herself to go on, turning left on the main east-west road. (This was part of the coastal highway, which dropped south to follow the coast east of the Abbey hill and west of the Passage.)

Where was Efran? Was he waiting for her there? Why couldn't he come help her over this? Then she braced herself almost angrily. She would not be a clinging vine. She would not lean on Efran to do what she should do for herself. Straightening, she walked across the new bridge over the Passage. (This action created a near panic as several persons had to dart quickly into the hut.)

When she entered the fenced playground in the woods, she was encouraged to see that the area looked much

cleaner and more open. The front of the hut looked different, too, with the door painted a cheery red. *It is a different place*, she told herself. *The children are making better memories in it.* With a shaking but determined hand, she reached out to open the door.

“Happy birthday, Minka!” children’s voices cried. Startled, she glimpsed a sea of linen and gold, then she focused on the pillar in the center: Efran, wearing a new dress uniform, stood holding Joshua, dressed in a miniature linen uniform. And around him were arrayed Tarrant, Toby, Noah and Ivy in linen uniforms with gold trim. Behind them were other children who had worked on the hut, with Connor standing off to the side, smiling.

Minka burst into tears and fell forward. The children gathered around her all talking at once, while Efran stood back with moist eyes. Minka looked around in wonder at the wooden floor, the bright walls, the table and chairs, and the tray of birthday treats from the kitchen. “This is wonderful!” she cried. “I will be so happy to come here from now on!” Then she had to hug every child there before falling into Efran’s arms.

A few minutes later, as Minka was enjoying birthday treats and viewing every little detail that the children had accomplished in the renovation of the hut, Connor came up to Efran to murmur, “You and Minka. . . It’s just—I wish I knew how you—did it.”

Efran looked up in hazy remembrance. “When I first knew her, it was Adele who was the beauty of the family. Sybil was just—the other one. But when I got to see how ugly Adele really was, I started looking closer at Sybil, and, she became Minka. The more I looked at her, the more she blossomed. And I started to see that sometimes, it’s the overlooked ones who become beautiful, with a little attention,” he said quietly.

Connor looked at him. “I understand.”

The Graetrix were never seen in the Southern Continent again.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on May 7th of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.

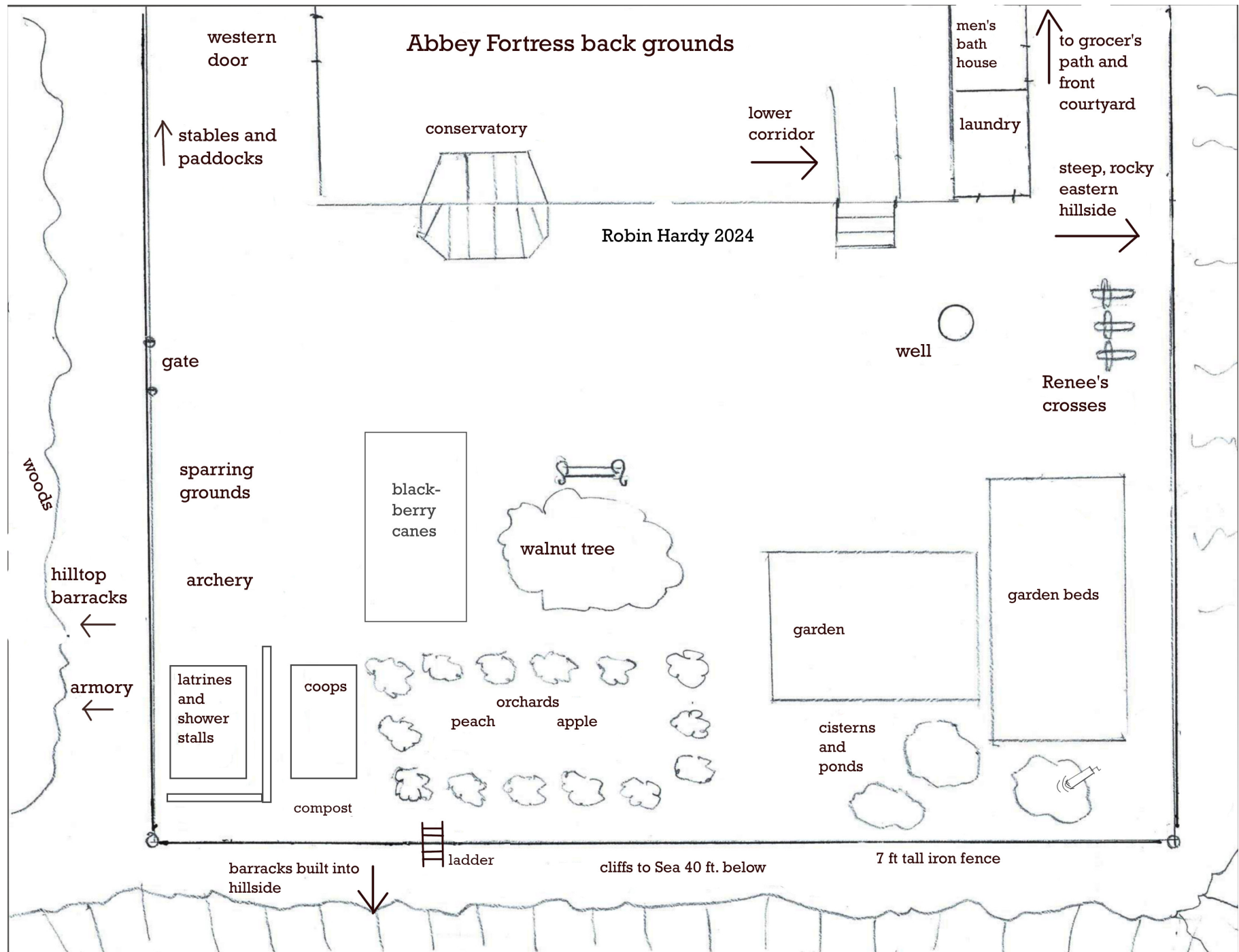
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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Graetrix* (Book 5)

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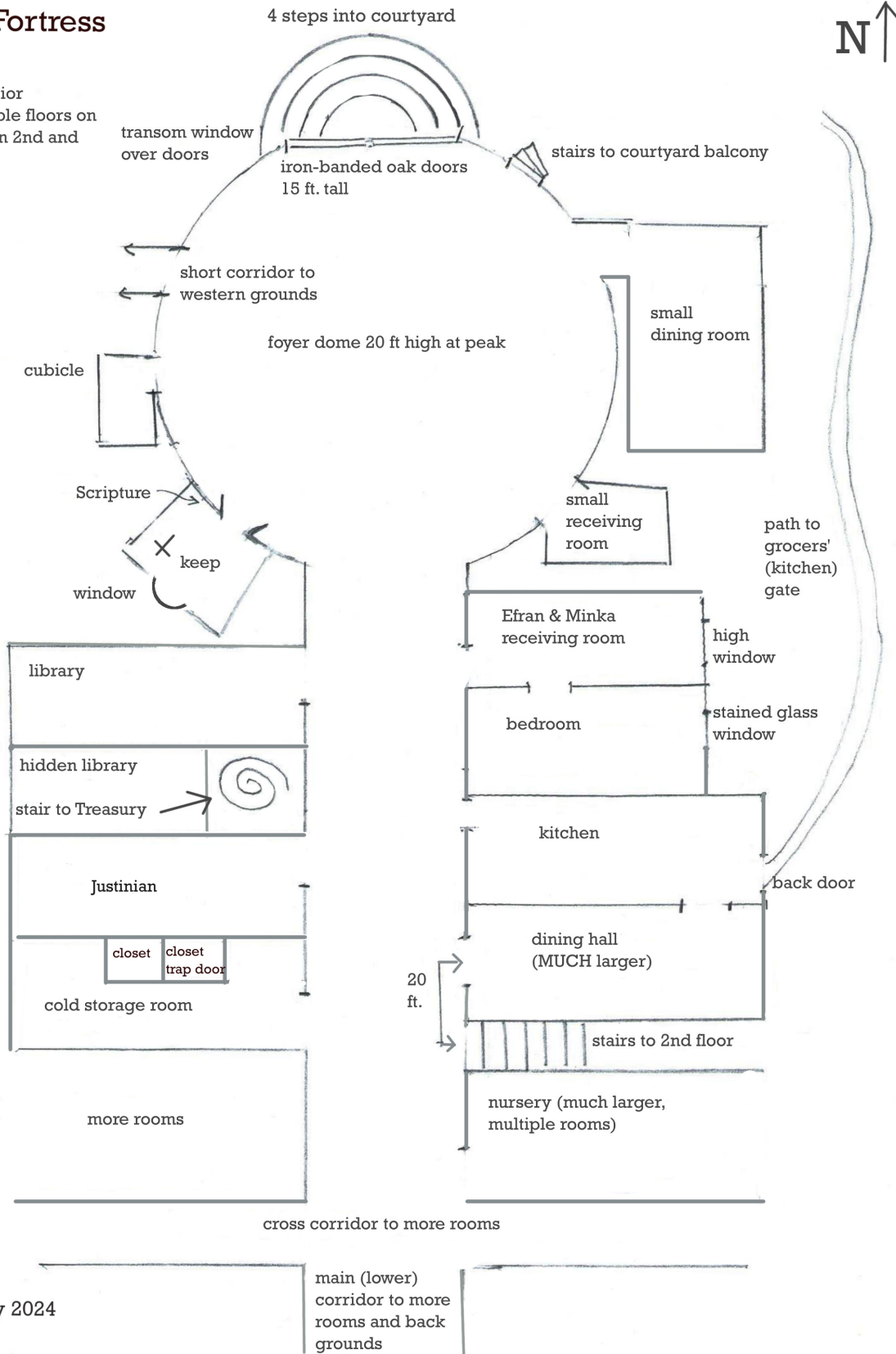
Adele—ah DELL
 aina—AY nah (child who commands animals)
 Archimedes—are kuh MEE deez
 Arenado—air en AH doh
 Ares—AIR eez
 Arne—arn
 Averno—ah VURN
 Awfyn—AWE fin
 Beardall—BARE duhl
 Bethune—beh THUNE
 Blature—blah TURE
 Bowring—BOWE ring
 Canis—KAY nuhs
 Cennick—SIN ick (cynic)
 Chior—KEE or
 Clephane—kleh FANE
 Clough—chloh
 Colfox—CAUL fox
 Conte—cahnt
 courtesan—KOR tuh zahn
 Croly, the—CRO lee
 Deneau—deh NO
 Doane—rhymes with *loan*
 Efran—EFF run
 Elvey—ELL vee
 Erastus—eh RAS tis
 esophageal—eh sah fuh JEE uhl
 Estes—ESS tis
 Eurus—YOUR us
 Eurussian—your uh SEE un
 Eustace—YOUS tis
 Eviron—ee VIRE un
 Fiacco—fee AH koh
 garderobe—GAR de robe
 Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
 Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
 Goadby—GOAD bee
 Goss—gahs
 Graduliere—gra DUE lee air
 Graetrix—GRAY trix
 Greves—greevs
 insigne—en SIN yeh
 Justinian—jus TIN ee un
 Kaas—kahs
 Keble—KEE buhl
 Kelsey—KELL seeBa
 Koschat—KOS chat
 Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
 Lowry—LAHW rec
 Lystra—LIS trah

Madea—mah DAY ah
 maka—MAH kah (friend); *maka ae*—mah kah AYE
 Marguerite—mar ger EET (hard g)
 Milo—ME low
 Minka—MINK ah
moekolohe—moh ee koh LO ee
 Monsell—mon SELL
 Nageli—nah GEL ee (hard g)
 négligée—neh GLIH zhay
 Nicarber—neh CAR bur
 Nyarko—nuh YAR koh
 Ori—OR ee
paina—pay EE nah (feast)
 Perronet—pare uh NAY
 physiology—fih zee AH luh jee
 Pia—PEE ah
 Pindar—PIN dhur
 piqued—peeked
pohaku—poh HAW koo (solid, real)
pua—PYU ah (come)
 Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
 Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
 prescience—PREE shee uhns (foreknowledge)
 Prie Mer—pre MARE
 Reinagle—REN ah gull
 Rinkart—RING kart
 Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
 Serena—sur EE nah
 settee—seh TAY
 Shaffer—SHAF er
 Stites—stights
 Surchatain—SUR cha tan
 Sybil—SEH bull
 Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
 Tourjee—TUR jee
 Tuttiett—TOO tee ett
 Venegas—VEN eh gus
 Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
 Verrin—VAIR en
 vestigial—ves TIJ ee uhl (without function)
 Webbe—web
 Weber—WE bur



Abbey Fortress
Interior

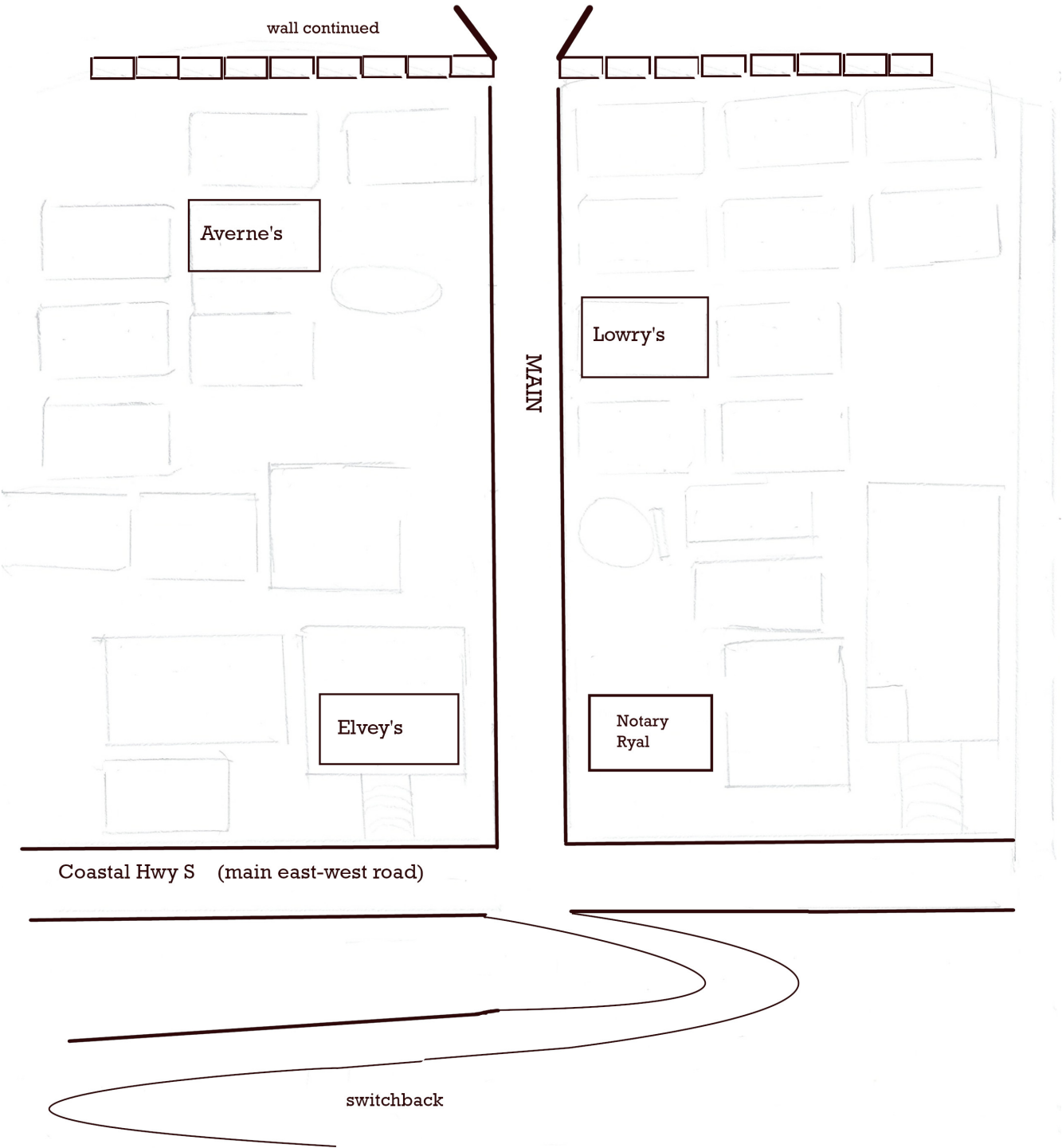
white stone interior
throughout; marble floors on
1st floor; wood on 2nd and
3rd floors

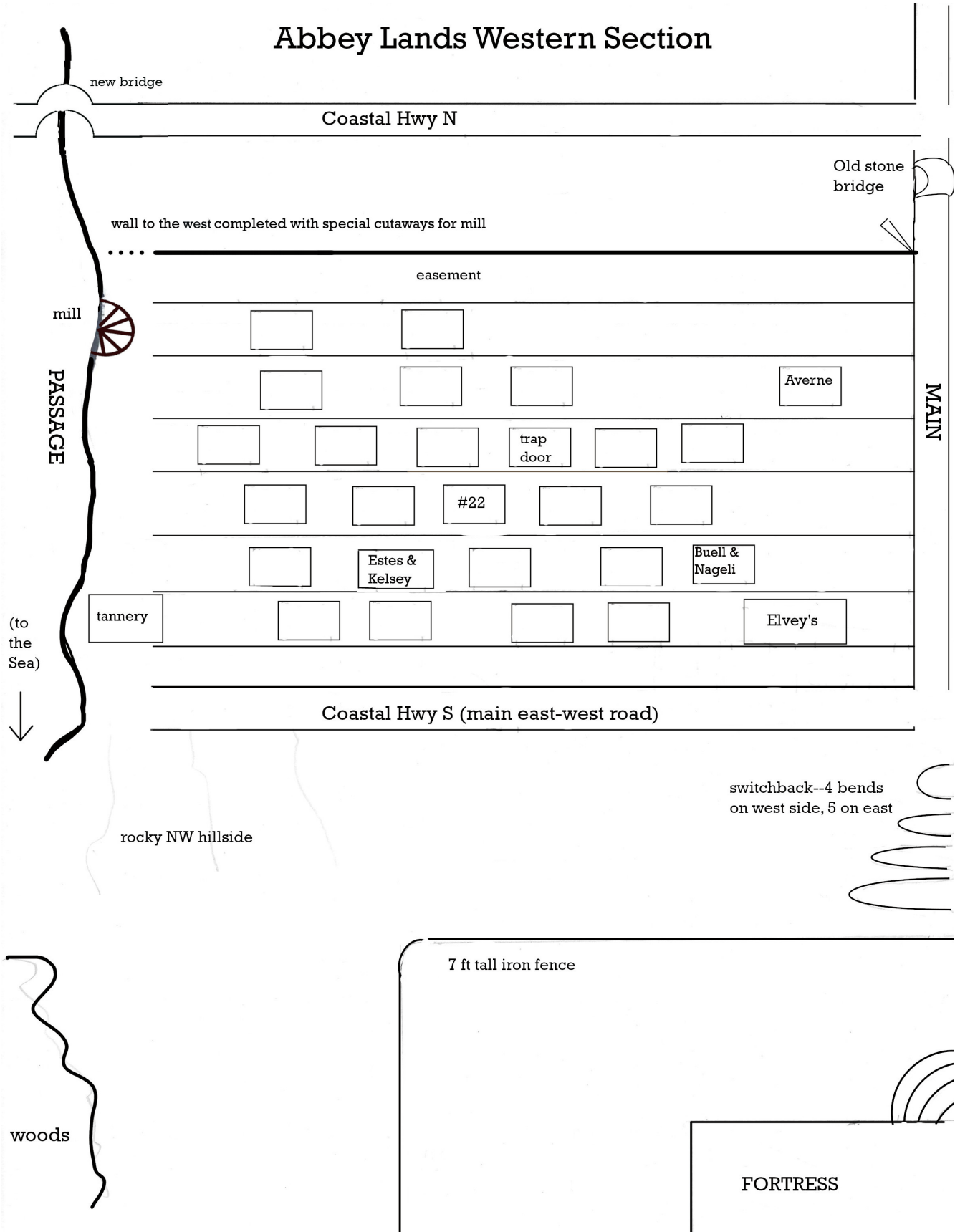


NOT TO
SCALE

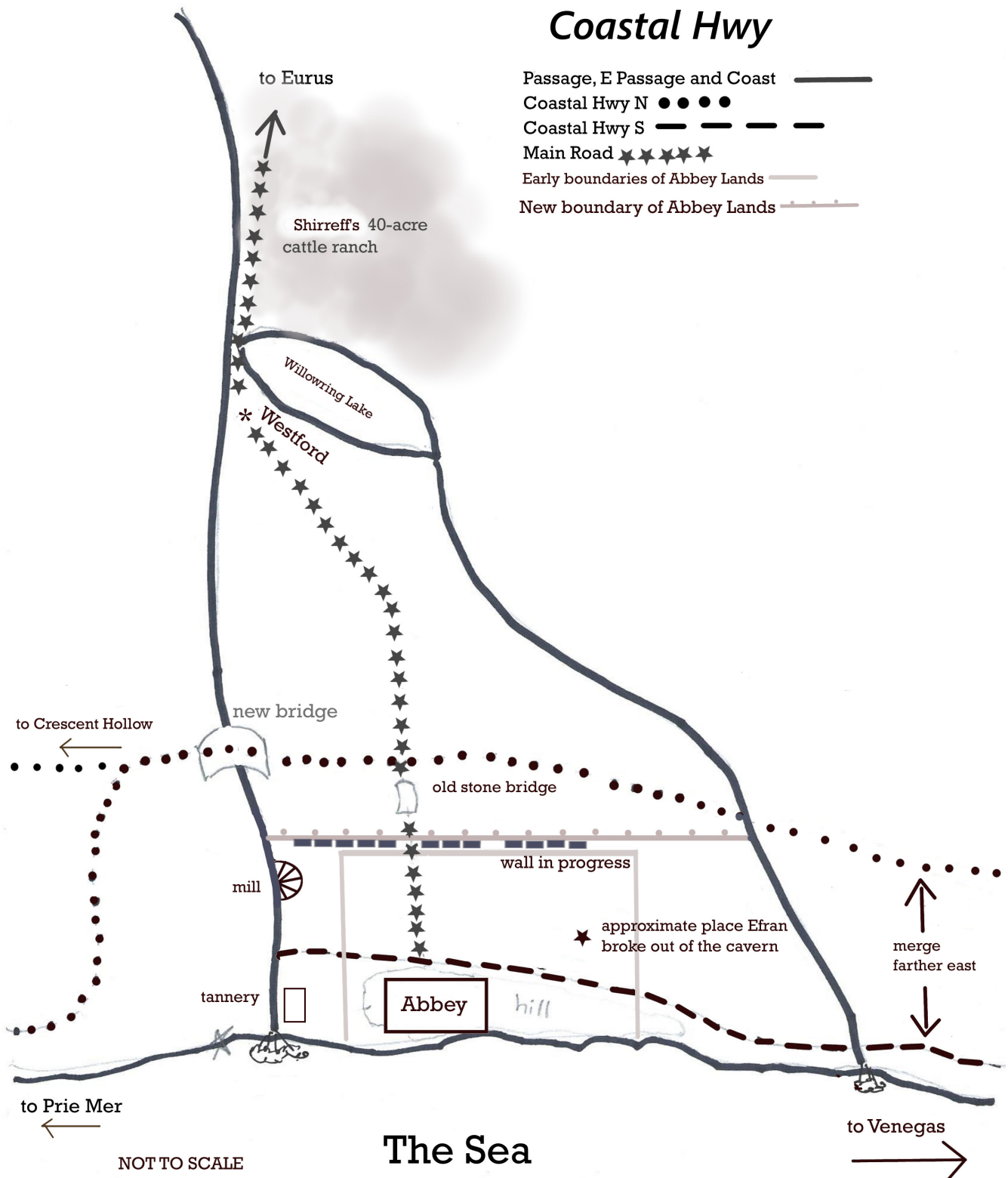
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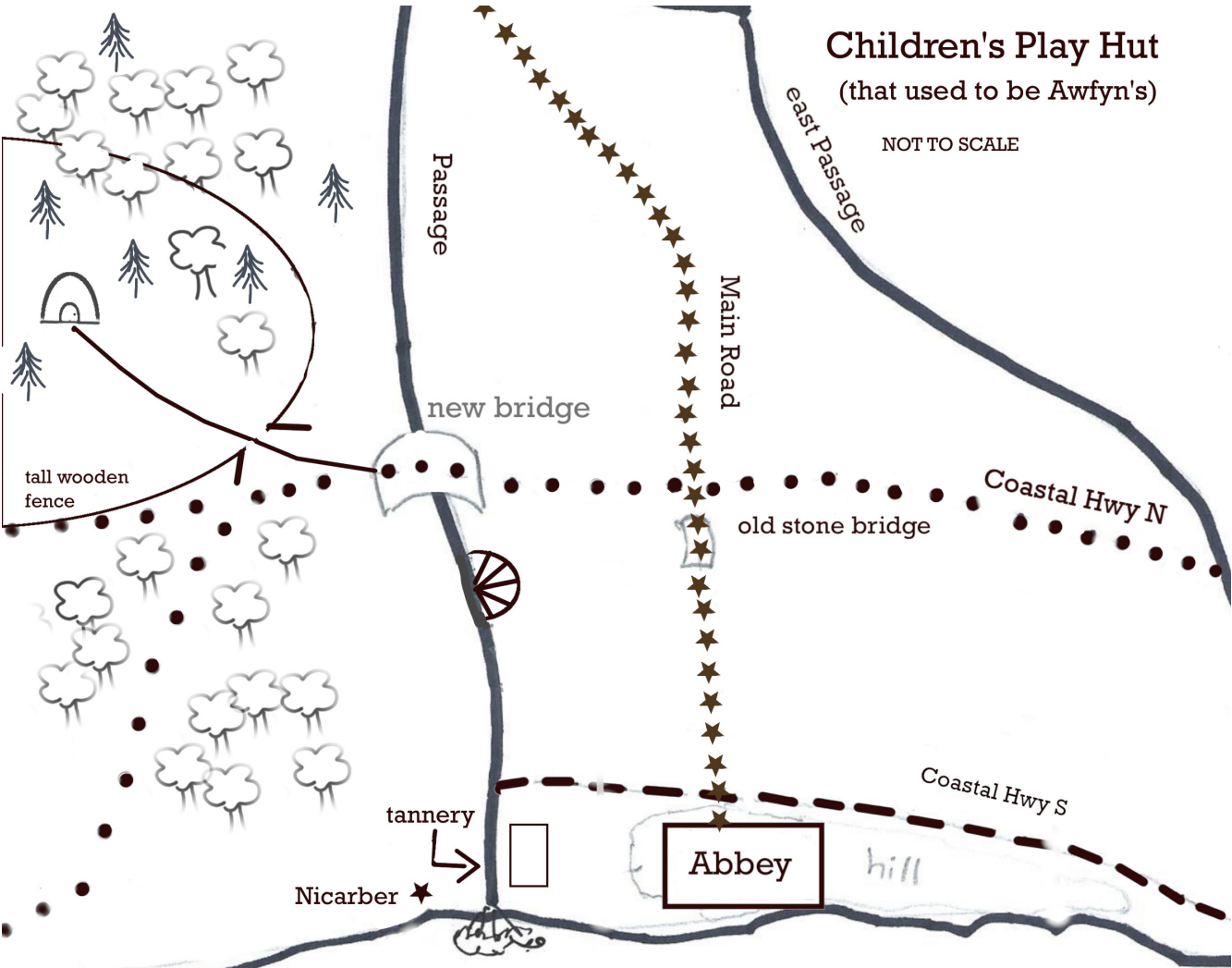
Abbey Lands Main Road

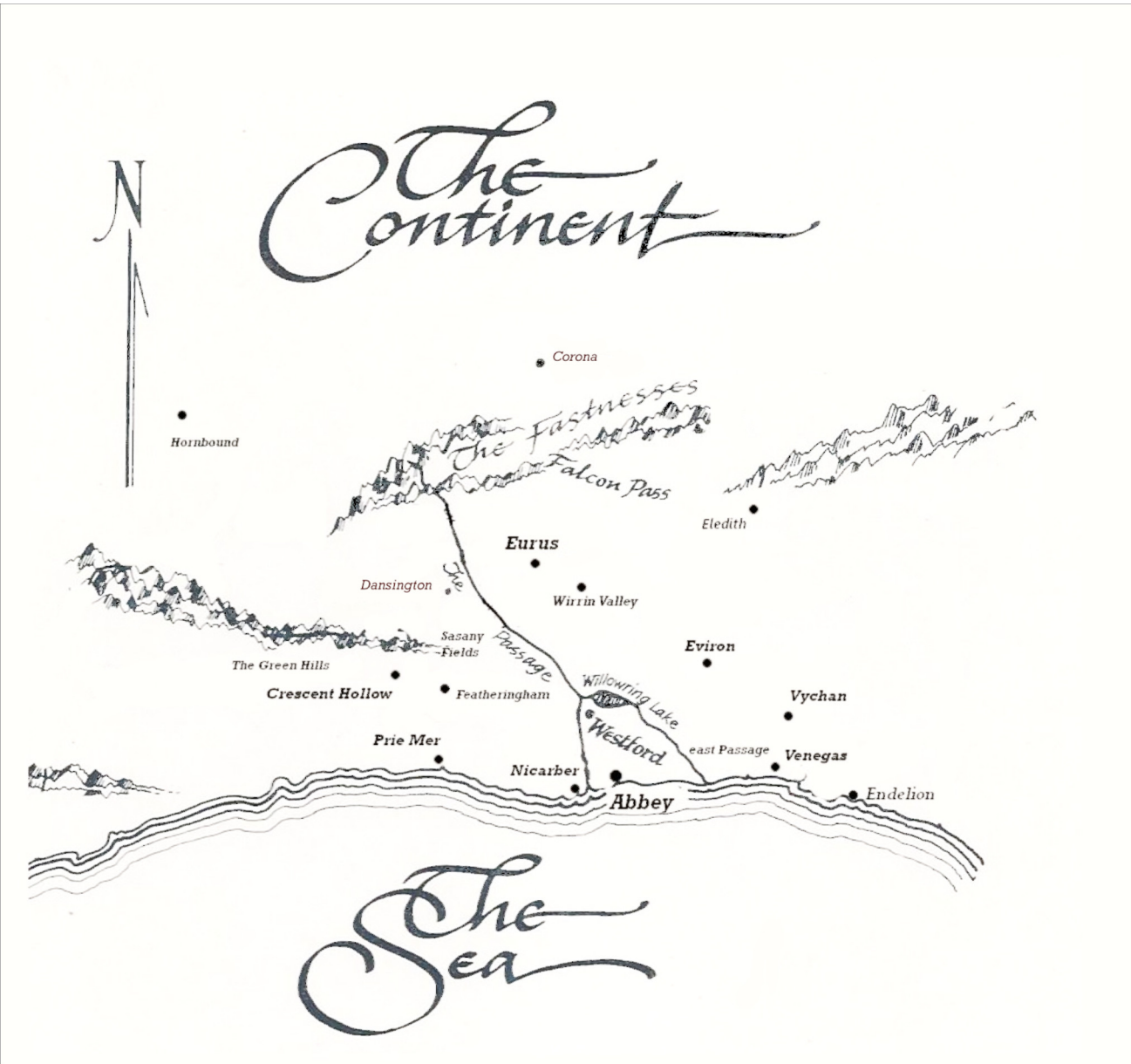




Passage, E Passage and Coast —————
 Coastal Hwy N ● ● ● ●
 Coastal Hwy S — — — —
 Main Road ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
 Early boundaries of Abbey Lands ————
 New boundary of Abbey Lands —●—●—●—●—



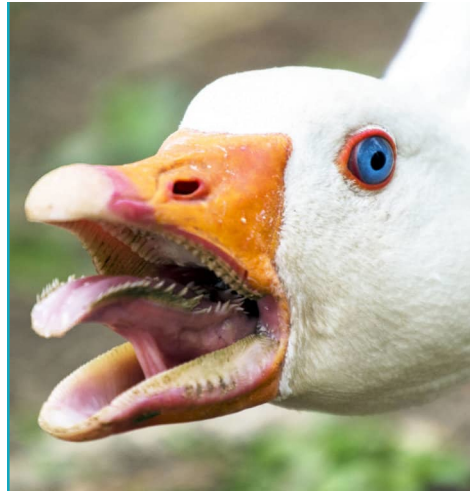




The Graetrix (Book 5:
Lord Efran and the Graetrix)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



If you're wondering why the Graetrix look so much like geese, there is a reason. Geese are hilariously dangerous. See [JustBirding](#), with explanations, photos and videos of geese attacks. (From that site, below is another strong contender for Graetrix affiliation.)



I won't attempt to explain their territorial aggression, but you will note what looks like teeth in my Graetrix's mouth (which is a [real goose head](#)¹, by the way). The [body](#)² is just as formidable, and high resolution as well. As a backdrop, the [night sky](#)³ is magnificent. Oh, and don't overlook the bonus (highly simplified) cutaway view of The Croly waiting for dinner in the Graetrix's entrails.

Robin Hardy
April 15, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

1. From the site ironically titled "Sad and Useless."
2. On Pixabay, the photographer [No_Name13](#) includes a note in German which Google translates as, "Photography has become a passion for us. Life is colorful & we see too many beautiful things to choose a genre - so EVERYTHING will be represented, sometimes one thing, sometimes the OTHER. We hope you enjoy our pictures and look forward to your likes, comments or a small coffee donation. Thank you."
3. Photographed by [marko_aim](#) on Pexels.