

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

Book 35

Lord Efran's
Guaranty

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

His head on Minka's lap, Efran lay on the east-facing bench under the walnut tree on the back grounds of the hilltop. This bench was favored not only for its long view of the Lands and the Sea, but also for the near view of the pond. Despite Efran's repeated warnings to the children to stay out of it, the boys tended to plunge in to rescue tadpoles from predators. Thus both Calix and Elwell discovered toe biters. Fortunately, Toby was there to see that Joshua didn't follow their lead, and the guardians stood by to see that nothing worse happened.

Today, May 10th, Isreal and Donovan were sitting on the grass in front of the bench. It had been twelve days since Donovan's arrival at the fortress, and six days since his former gang had tried to take him away. Two of those members, including the leader, were now dead. One was apprenticing with Tallmadge the printer, and the other (the only Polonti besides Donovan) was being mentored for the Abbey army—successfully, given his gratitude to be alive.

Donovan's mother Wissowa was also residing on the Lands with her housekeeper Flores—not only residing, but conquering. For Wissowa was riding a wave of fame in Lands' society due to her history of not only sleeping with Lord Efran, but producing a son by him. (And her finally discovering that he was not merely a captain, but Lord of the Abbey Lands, produced giddy shock and fury that she hadn't known this fact earlier.) Her breathless account of their one night together, when he wouldn't even tell her his name, had now been heard in full by hundreds of Landers.

In addition to that, having also slept with Lord Justinian, Wissowa not only recounted their private sessions, but offered comparisons of his performance with that of Efran's. Knowledge of this in all its particulars greatly helped Justinian in his vow of chastity (sworn upon his deliverance from Wissowa's demand of a thousand royals for breach of promise), as he was forced to drop out of the social scene entirely for a while.

Efran, never a part of the social scene, suffered as much from the smiles and sidelong glances whenever he showed up on Main Street. So he tried to avoid Main for a while, which was impossible, but still—it was all worth it to get Donovan.

Although the boy, about ten years old, had stopped trying to kill himself and Efran, he was still struggling with his place here. He not only had a father, but an extended family who treated him as though he belonged. And his new mother, Minka, enveloped him with such love that he almost regretted throwing milk in her face.

But the worst part was, he didn't know what to do; he didn't know when all this—the food and the attention and the kindness—would blow up in his face. Efran kept telling him, "Just do what I tell you." But that was too easy; there had to be a catch.

That was when he really began to lean on the Polonti boy with the scarred lip. Polonti respected scars, and there was something deep and calm about Isreal. He was only a little bigger than Donovan, but could shoot almost as well as a grown man, which awed the new kid.

Today, they were sitting on the grass between the bench and the pond, where all the other children were clustered. Donovan kept flinching every time Hassie screamed, but Isreal petted Nakam, who was stretched across the boy's legs with his eyes closed. Kraken was lounging in his favorite dirt spot ten feet away, keeping an eye on his human and all his auxiliary humans.

As Efran raised his hand to cover Minka's hand on his chest, Donovan glanced again at the stitches on his arm from Potton's knife—the one who was mentoring for the army, with Efran's approval. When the gang had come to get Donovan, he didn't really want to go, being afraid of Eagle, but he didn't know that he was supposed to stay here. It was only when his father came after them, and Donovan saw him leaping toward Eagle—

"You have to go to class, Donovan," Efran said.

"I don't understand what they're talking about," Donovan said sullenly.

"What, the stories? The numbers?" Efran asked. He sat up, glancing at Isreal.

"All of it!" Donovan said, agitated. "I don't know anything but stealing and staying alive."

There was a moment's silence, then Minka said thoughtfully, "Donovan may need a dedicated tutor to get him caught up with the other children, Efran. Mistress Hazeldene is wonderful, but she has her hands full with a whole class."

She and Efran glanced again at Isreal, who had come to them just as handicapped, if not more so, than Donovan. But they were only now beginning to appreciate that the mountain trolls who raised Isreal had imparted something to him, some intangible ability to perceive and learn.

"You're right," Efran said, looking over the grounds. Seeing Earnshaw, he whistled. But when a score of heads turned and men began running over, Efran told those around him, "Wait here." Waving the other men back, he got up to begin walking toward Earnshaw. Kraken raised his head to look. Seeing that another horse was not involved, he lay back in the dirt, huffing.

Meeting the Captain in the middle of the grounds, Earnshaw saluted. "Yes, sir?"

"Earnshaw, I need your recommendation for a tutor for Donovan," Efran began hesitantly, glancing back to his family around the bench.

"Oh, we have one, Captain," Earnshaw said, looking around the grounds. "Yes, Potton's on his way now. Yo! Dango!" he called, waving. Seeing him with the Captain, Dango nudged Potton to a lively trot toward them.

Arriving with a salute, Dango said, "Yes, Captain?" Potton saluted as well, though he was too scared to speak.

Earnshaw asked, "Are you taking the boy to the tutor?"

"Yes," Dango said, glancing between Earnshaw and the Captain. "Today is Potton's third day with him."

Efran asked uneasily, "Is this Dolivo?" This was a popular language tutor for the new Polonti. He was mildly abusive in his style, which would not encourage Donovan.

"No, Captain," Dango replied. "His name is Mowinckel; he's a book-learned gent what came down from Westford to get a house here, and takes in all kinds of students. The men needing to learn to read and write have done well with him."

Efran looked down at Potton. Like Donovan, his lime-washed white hair had been shaved off to allow his natural black hair to emerge in spikes. Efran asked, "How do you like him, Potton?"

"He's good, sir," Potton whispered. Here they were, just talking after Potton had slashed him, and the Captain had hit him hard enough to make him empty his stomach.

"Well, we'll see how that works," Efran muttered, gesturing to his family around the bench. Minka, Donovan, Isreal, and Kraken came over.

With an acknowledging glance at Minka, Efran said, "Donovan, Potton goes to a tutor to learn reading and writing. Do you want to go with him today?"

Potton and Donovan looked at each other, and he nodded hesitantly, whispering, "Sure."

Isreal said, "I will go, too." Donovan visibly relaxed.

Efran agreed, "For today. I want to hear about it when you get back."

"Yes, Papa," Isreal said with the glimmer of a smile, and Potton looked at him in wonder.

"Very good. Dismissed," Efran said. To Dango, he added, "Get you a partner to go with them."

"Yes, Captain," he said, turning with a jerk of his head to indicate direction. As the three boys followed him, Dango whistled, motioning to Quid, who ran over to accompany them. Earnshaw saluted the Captain and resumed his errand.

After they were all gone, Efran stood fidgeting. Minka asked, "Do you want to go watch?"

Efran winced. "Yes, but, I'm afraid my being there would put too much pressure on him, not to mention the tutor."

She murmured, "Then, maybe go peek in a window?"

He clicked his teeth in consideration. "As long as you suggest it, we may as well stop by Firmin's when they get out. Let's take Joshua." Whistling, he called, "Joshua! Pie?" Joshua glanced over, but had a handful of tadpoles which interested him more right now. Pained, Efran asked the other children, "Who wants to go to Firmin's?" Their bodyguard Cudmore began to raise his hand, but dropped it again when the other bodyguard Doudney muttered something.

No one answered Efran before Alcmund said, "Look! Guppies!"

Toby turned regretfully. "Maybe later, Efran." The fortress kitchen fed them so well, they couldn't really be allured by more food.

Efran looked in pained disbelief to Minka, who shrugged, "The boys who are coming out of tutoring will have to sit with us."

"Good," he grunted.

Dango and Quid walked Donovan, Potton and Isreal down the old switchback to Main. Past the community well, they took the narrow side street between Lemmerz' construction office and Delano's Brewery. Next to Froggatt's sat a nondescript building whose windows stood open. Dango led up the walk to open the door, and they looked into a large room that appeared to be entirely papered with drawings and symbols. Standing in front

of a desk stood a man with a beaked nose and long white hair. He was wearing a neat suit that was about fifty years out of date.

“Ah. Five more. That’s all now; no more this afternoon,” he said, clipped. The ten students already sitting at long tables in the room looked over to the newcomers. Each student had a placard hanging on string around his neck. “Potton,” said the teacher. “Find your name.”

“Yes, sir.” Potton went over to a side table to sift through all the placards lying there, then picked one up. “I think this is it.”

Pulling blank placards out of the desk, Mowinckel glanced over. “Potton. Say the letters.” (All of the following words and letters have been transliterated from the Southern Continental language into what you are reading now.)

Concentrating, Potton spelled out, “P-O-T-T-O-N.”

“Good.” The white hair waved slightly as the tutor stuck his hand in a large pocket to toss something at him.

Potton caught it, grinning, to put it in his own pocket, whispering to Donovan, “Candy.” Donovan looked interested. Potton draped his name card around his neck like the others, then sat at a table in satisfaction.

Mowinckel gestured at Isreal. “What is your name?”

Coming to the desk at which he stood, the boy said, “Isreal. I-S-R-E-A-L.” As the tutor eyed him from under his bushy white brows, Isreal said, “It is not a mistake. My name is Isreal.”

“Write it,” the tutor said, turning the placard toward him with a wrapped piece of charcoal. Taking it, Isreal wrote the letters fairly well. “Good.” The tutor slapped a piece of candy on the placard, gesturing to it. Isreal pocketed the candy and hung his name around his neck. Then he went to sit near Potton.

Mowinckel gestured at Donovan, who began trembling. “My name is Donovan. I don’t know how to write it.”

“Donovan,” the tutor said, writing on another blank placard. Then he enunciated each letter: “D-O-N-O-V-A-N. Repeat that.”

As Mowinckel pointed to each letter, Donovan repeated, “D . . . O . . .” Having gotten stuck, he stopped.

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Chapter 2

“N,” said the tutor.

“N . . . O . . .” Donovan got stuck again.

“V,” said the tutor.

"V . . . A . . . N," Donovan finished.

"All together," the tutor instructed Donovan.

He took a deep breath, then spelled out, "D-O-N-O . . . V-A-N."

Handing him a piece of candy, Mowinckel said, "Now you know your name. This is the beginning of the most important thing you will ever learn: who you are, and what your path is to be." Glancing dubiously at him, Donovan hung the placard around his neck and put the candy in his pocket to go sit by Isreal.

Having dispensed with the boys, Mowinckel gestured to Dango. "What is your name?"

"I'm a guardian; not here to learn," Dango said.

"Then wait outside," the tutor said.

Dango balked, knowing his duty. "My name is Dango." He held his hand out for the charcoal, which the tutor gave him. Dango competently wrote his name on the placard, draped it around his neck, and went to stand against the wall.

The tutor turned to the last newcomer, who said, "My name is Quoid, sir." Receiving the charcoal, Quoid wrote his own name with which he festooned himself, then took his place beside Dango against the wall. (Since they were all obviously from the fortress, the Fortress would pay for their tutoring. The vast majority of Mowinckel's students were soldiers.)

"Very good." Mowinckel took up a long pointer to stalk over to the wall and slap the tip against the first of a long line of pictures gummed just below the ceiling. They depicted letters with amusing, crudely drawn illustrations. "What is this?" he cried.

The students shouted, "'A' for adder!" The accompanying illustration showed a snake biting a man's arm.

Whacking the next, Mowinckel demanded, "This?"

"'B' for blood!" they cried. The drawing showed a warrior reeling under a sword thrust that produced torrents of black charcoal. The exclusively male, and predominately Polonti, class appreciated that.

As the tutor went down the line, slapping each, the students called, "'C' for crab! [pinching someone's finger] 'D' for drunk! [one such man reeling, cross-eyed] 'E' for eelfish! [shocking a man spreadeagled, wide-eyed, his hair fanning out] 'F' for fire!" [showing a man running, engulfed in flames.] By this time, Dango and Quoid had to get out of the way or get whacked. The illustration for "H" was a googly-eyed hare on a spit, which made both Potton and Donovan snort, as "Hare" had been Potton's gang name.

The tutor took the class over the letters several times, then Mowinckel called for volunteers to read the alphabet forward and backward. The two who read it most competently got candy thrown at them. Meanwhile, he instructed, "You all have paper and charcoal on your tables. Copy the letters in order." Donovan looked at Isreal in panic; Isreal showed him how to hold the charcoal, and how to write out each letter, demonstrating four at once with "HARE."

Donovan began with "A," "B," "C," and so on, but it was just too hard. Halfway through the alphabet, he looked off, wearily shaking his hand. He threw down the charcoal in rebellion, then caught a glimpse of something right

outside the window. So he picked up the charcoal again. Just to appear to be working, he wrote "HARE" over and over. He liked that word; it was an easy one.

When they were mostly done with the alphabet, the tutor went over to a large paper pinned on the wall that showed lines of letters grouped together in words, and the pupils went silent. Directing his pointer to the words, Mowinckel said, "You will repeat each line after me: 'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.'" He pointed to each word as he spoke it, and the class said the lines all together.

Then he progressed, "'A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to reap; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.'" [Ecc. 3:1-8] The students repeated the words of each line.

Going to the wall of slate behind him, Mowinckel picked up a piece of chalk to write, "A time to—" Turning to the class, he asked, "What can you add to that? Give me something new."

They were silent for a moment, then Quoid said, "A time to hold on, and a time to let go."

Mowinckel turned to write that on the slate board. "Copy that down as best you can," he said with a glance at Donovan. Dango and Quoid did not write; they continued to stand, watching the doors, the windows, and the students. Quoid nudged Dango, nodding toward a sliver of white shirt outside one window.

When the class was mostly done writing that line, Mowinckel said, "Let's hear another."

A young man across the room, said, "A time for snow, and a time for rain."

Mowinckel paused. "I believe these refer to actions by men."

Potton blurted, "A time to cut your hair, and a time to let it grow."

He looked surprised at the laughter, but Mowinckel said, "Excellent point, Potton." And he threw a piece of candy at him which sailed unseen over Potton's head, bent over his paper.

Scrambling after the candy to put it in his pocket, Donovan was seized with inspiration. As the tutor was eyeing him anyway, he took his chair again and declared, "A time to steal, and a time to not steal." The class looked at the tutor, who scowled. He opened his mouth with a likely reproof, but Donovan was on a roll: "A time to lie, and a time to just not answer."

Someone across the room asked, "Can you tell the truth?"

Donovan glanced toward the suggestion in horror, then went on, "A time to run, and a time to hide. A time to start fires, and a time to stamp them out. A time to hit, and another time to run. A time to laugh, and a time to swear. A time to—"

Heads swiveled toward the open window, where the Captain was leaning in, arms on the sill, to study his son in concern. Donovan finished, "A time to talk, and a time to shut up."

The tutor inhaled in wrath or exasperation and the Captain withdrew from the window. Mowinckel said, "That's all for now. But you see how reading and writing enlarge your thoughts. To finish, write your name on your paper and take it to show your superiors. Leave your name card on this side table."

Donovan took off his name card in relief to look at it in order to copy his name. Then he flipped the placard toward the table, but it fell short. Mowinckel slowly raised piercing gray eyes, and Potton elbowed Donovan. He quickly went over to pick up the placard and place it on the table. The steely eyes lowered again.

As the students began leaving, Mowinckel said, "Dango and Quoid." They turned attentively, and he said, "You may tell your Captain that he is welcome to come watch from the inside."

Quoid coughed and Dango said, "Yes, sir."

On the way out, Quoid muttered, "Are you going to tell him?"

"Are you nuts?" Dango laughed, and Quoid shook his head. The boys glanced at each other; somehow, this was dangerous.

As the bodyguards directed their charges outside and up the alley past Delano's, they saw the Captain and Lady Minka directly across the street at Firmin's, waiting for them at a streetside table. Donovan began to dart heedlessly across the busy street. Efran almost stood, but Dango caught the boy by his shirt to haul him back. "At the crosswalk, Swifty," Dango said.

He and Donovan both looked to where Isreal, Potton and Quoid were safely crossing in the yellow walk a few feet away. Efran eased back down, exhaling. Donovan just altered his course to run through the crosswalk with his papers.

Landing at his parents' table, he looked between them to announce, "I can write."

"That's wonderful, Donovan!" Minka said, looking over his papers.

"Yes, I saw you working," Efran noted, turning one sheet right side up. Potton and Isreal joined them as Quoid and Dango saluted. Efran nodded the bodyguards to the table behind them.

Daring to do what the bodyguard quailed to do, Donovan told his father, "The tutor said you can come watch from the inside." Efran raised up, laughing. Pleased with himself, Donovan dug a piece of candy out of his pocket and tossed it in his mouth.

Efran began, "How many—?" but they all paused as Wissowa came swishing down the sidewalk toward them. Efran lowered his eyes, leaving the question unfinished, and the traffic on Main seemed to slow.

As she paused before their table, Efran turned his face away, clenching his jaw, but Minka and the children looked at her frankly. If she recognized Donovan—which she might not have—she didn't show it. She was wearing one of Windry's newest dresses in pastel spring colors which went well with her golden-white hair. Unwilling to cover her hair with the straw hat, she merely carried it by the brim, swishing it as she walked. It made for an eye-catching ensemble, given the tight bodice.

An eternity seemed to pass while she lingered in that pose, and street traffic almost came to a halt. "Oh. Hello, Efran. You didn't tell me your title, else I would've asked for ten thousand royals. Maybe I still will; I don't know. Oh, and, tell Justin hello for me." She puckered at him and turned to resume her walk.

Donovan took the piece of candy out of his mouth and threw it at her retreating form. Efran raised a hand too late to stop him, so they all watched the candy land on the back of her head, welding itself into her hair. They

contemplated that for a moment, then Donovan resumed, "I can read the paper to you. That is my name: 'Donovan.' And this says, 'A time to hold on, and a time to let go.' For candy, too. This next line says, um. . . ." And Lilou had to wait to take their order until he had finished reading everything more or less as he had written it down.

Meanwhile, Wissowa had begun walking back up Main on the opposite side of the street. She stopped to chat or flirt with someone frequently, but no one of Efran's party looked up this time. Minka had one arm around Donovan, attending his recitation carefully, and another arm around Isreal. He leaned his head contentedly on her fragrant shoulder while Potton watched in unconscious envy.

Across the street, Wissowa fluttered her fingers at someone who must have been directly in front of Efran, for his eyes flicked up at the movement. Having made him look, she sauntered off. The thought came to him, *She doesn't have anyone to forgive her.* And he looked at Minka snuggled with Donovan beside him.

She was saying, "That is amazing work for your very first time writing, Donovan. Your father can write beautifully when he wants to. Isreal, you and Potton show me what you've done now." Isreal indifferently looked toward his papers on the other side of the table, being content where he was, but Potton eagerly extended his. And she had to admire the beauty and elegance of Potton's writing until Lilou brought over their chicken fritters and water.

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Chapter 3

The following day, May 11th, it was jointly decided between Mistress Hazeldene, Efran, Donovan and Isreal for the boys to continue going to both classes—regular school in the morning and tutoring in the afternoon along with Potton, since it was short but effective. (Potton had army training in the mornings.) Isreal did not need the afternoon tutoring, but he went to support Donovan. And after that day's class, Efran pledged that he and Minka would take them wherever they wanted to go within walking distance.

So after the second day of Mowinckel's tutoring, the boys told Efran that they wanted to see the new shop of genuine Polonti artifacts crafted by Pia's friends that Efran had kicked off the hilltop. This shop happened to be just to the east of Twombly's, one block over from the tutor's house. (With the improvements on the East Lands, some of the early businesses right off Main who were feeling cramped moved east, leaving a number of vacancies that were snapped up. Supported by DeWitt and Conte, Pia's Polonti were one such group to acquire an existing building.)

For his part, Efran was flabbergasted to walk in and find it a functioning business, as it had only been a week since he had evicted the native Polonti from the hilltop woods. But Donovan, Isreal and Potton, all Polonti themselves, were in Polonti heaven. (Efran deliberately ignored that Donovan was half-breed, just as he ignored that Ella and Joshua were.) Accompanying him, Minka, and the boys were Krall and Enon, also Polonti.

Upon entering, they just stopped and stared at displays of all kinds of merchandise, arranged by their use: one section was of baskets, pottery, wooden bowls, bags, rugs, games, decorative weavings, and cloths made from mulberry tree cores. Next to that were flutes, rattles and drums of many kinds.

There was a large section of weapons: slings, shields, flint knives, stone axes, bows and arrows, clubs and spears

made with bear or wolf teeth. There were saddles and tack, including saddle blankets woven in native patterns (which were currently being bought up by aggrieved soldiers whose horses had to wear florals). Next to these were bird nets, fish nets and weights, poles, hooks, and decoys.

Gripping Efran's arm, Donovan cried, "Will you buy me something or do I have to steal it?" The other two boys looked at him cautiously.

"Here. You get three royals each, that's all," Efran grunted (which was a great deal of money for trinkets). Given his three, Donovan ran toward the weapons. Isreal took his three to the musical instruments and games. Efran held out three to Potton, who just stared at his stitched arm. Efran exhaled, "Take it. Minka said you did good work." Squinting at him, Potton took the royals, then stood blankly in the middle of the shop for a few minutes.

Efran was recognized then, and a large group of former hilltop Polonti ran over to fold their hands and bow to him. As other customers, both Polonti and Southerners, turned to look, he said, "No. What? No, don't bow."

The one in front said, "We are grateful for this place, Captain Efran."

"You're Unnik," Efran said, that being the only one brave enough to answer the enraged questions he was sputtering on the hilltop.

"Yes, Captain Efran, and this will make us to live and send money back to families," Unnik said.

"Your families? Where?" Efran asked.

"In camps outside Westford," Unnik said.

"All right; that's good," Efran said distractedly as Pia ran over. She pulled on his arm to make him lean down so that she could kiss his cheek. "Are you happy with this, Pia?" he asked wryly.

"Yes, Efran," she said, and he didn't know when he had ever seen her glow like this. She was wearing an intricately beaded sheath dress with fringe along the armholes and hem, which extended below her knees. A single feather was clipped onto her hair, which was clean and brushed. She explained, "They feel useful, and many Southerners like what they make, and learn about Polonti."

"I see," Efran said, glancing over the number of Southerners, particularly women, who were looking over everything thoughtfully. "Who's helping them with their bookkeeping?" he asked with a twinge of concern.

"Koschat," she said, turning to point. Efran stared at the Polonti in native dress behind the money counter. He was carefully explaining something to one of the hilltop Polonti in their language.

Accompanied by Krall and Enon, Efran went over to look closer, and Koschat saluted with a faint smile. "Captain."

"I don't think I've ever seen you out of uniform," Efran said. "So DeWitt must be in this somewhere."

He began scanning the shop for the administrator, and Koschat half-laughed, "Yes, Captain; he gave me a week off from regular duty to help them get started."

"I suppose this was something else overdue," Efran murmured. Then Donovan ran up to the counter to slap down a sheathed knife along with his three royals. Koschat looked to Efran, who picked it up to draw the flint

blade out of the sheath. It was well knapped and very sharp, with an antler handle.

Bending to Donovan, he said, "If you draw blood with it, you lose it." Donovan nodded in comprehension, then Efran asked Koschat, "Is three royals enough?"

"Yes, Captain," Koschat said, giving Donovan change in silvers. Donovan kept the change.

At that time, Isreal came up with a drum—not a war drum, it seemed—and a section of dried reed almost an inch in diameter. These he placed on the counter with his royals, of which Koschat took only one. "What have you got, Isreal?" Minka asked. She put a painted gourd on the counter with a royal, which Koschat placed in a bag along with the gourd: Moiwahine would be charged nothing. No one noticed for watching Isreal.

He said, "This is a dance drum." And he tapped it lightly, rhythmically, and they listened to its reverberations.

"It sounds like rain," Donovan said.

"Or a brook," Efran said.

"The wind in the trees," Pia said behind him. "But you need the *ohe* with it."

Isreal picked up the reed and handed it to her. She took it, nodding to him. He began tapping the drum while she blew into the reed, raising and lowering her fingers over the holes. And the whole shop was transported to a balmy evening around a low fire with gentle waves lapping in the near distance.

When she closed out her song, Isreal stopped, and the others blinked, stirring. Minka said, "I feel like I've just woken from a summer dream."

"I remember that song," Isreal said as Pia handed him the flute back. "I don't know how long ago, or where, but I remember hearing it."

"Me, too," Efran barely whispered. Then, seeing Potton, he asked, "What have you found?"

Potton came over to lay a gorgeous beaded and fringed vest on the counter with his three royals. Koschat said reluctantly, "It's five royals"—which was a steal, given its intricacy. While Efran was reaching into his pocket, Isreal shoved over his unused royals to make up the deficit, which Koschat accepted.

Then Potton lifted the vest in shaking hands to present it to Minka. She gasped, "Potton! Is that for me?"

"Yes, Moiwahine," he said. Krall, Enon, and the other Polonti in the shop watched the second verse of the song play out.

She looked to Efran, who took the vest to help her put it on. It was only a little big. Laying a hand on the beading, she said, "Thank you, Potton," and reached up to kiss his cheek (as he was an inch or two taller than she). Then she hugged Isreal, and Donovan, and Pia. The whole group of them, with their bodyguards, left the shop in satisfaction. As it was getting close to dinner, they brought Pia with them, who obeyed Efran's instructions to sleep in the girls' room at the fortress.

As they turned south onto Main, Donovan asked, "What is Moiwahine?"

"The Queen," Efran said, glancing at the attention that Minka and Pia were drawing in their native dress. "The

Abbey Lands Polonti decided some months ago that Minka was their Queen, which someone told Potton." He looked off, still basking in her acceptance of his gift. Meanwhile, a number of women they passed closely evaluated the beadwork.

The friendly scrutiny was intensified at dinner, which bothered Minka not at all, since everyone's attention was on the handiwork and not on herself. She happily told them that the ex-gang member had bought it for her, pointing him out at Captain Chee's table. (Potton could hardly remember to eat after watching her nod to him and seeing all the heads turn to him.) And since Pia was sitting at Efran's table as well, Minka made her stand up several times to show off her ensemble.

Rondi told her, "Minka, is it possible for you to bring your vest and Pia's outfit to The Lands Clothing Shop tomorrow? Windry told Racheal that she wants to make dresses based on native designs, so Racheal would like to see some of them."

"That's fine with me," Minka said, then asked Pia down the table, "May I borrow your dress tomorrow? I won't let them keep it."

Pia nodded, looking happier than Minka had ever seen her. And she thought about the unforeseen blessings of the near-disaster of Donovan's gang trying to take him—not only did Donovan see how very much his father wanted him, but they also got Potton, and new opportunities for the hilltop Polonti.

Minka asked Efran, "You don't mind if I go to the shop tomorrow, do you?" Her steady gaze indicated that he'd better not object.

Swallowing, he grinned. "Take two men, besides Rondi's two men."

She promised, "Only the bravest and the best, who can endure my prattle." Some men had to duck their heads to not laugh, which would have been disrespectful to Moiwahine.

Meanwhile, Donovan cut up everything on his plate with his new knife. He kept a wary eye on his father to his left, and Joshua on his lap. Eating his custard, Joshua complacently watched his older brother's operations. But when Efran laughed at something, Donovan accidentally nicked his finger.

He quickly sheathed the knife and hid his finger in his napkin. Then he looked at his father sidewise, who had his head turned talking to someone else. Joshua craned his neck, looking for the blood. So Donovan kept his left hand on his lap while he ate.

When Efran faced forward again, he extended his hand toward Donovan, who scowled, "What?"

"You can have it back in a month," Efran said. Groaning, Donovan surrendered the knife. Despite Joshua's request, Efran wouldn't let him play with it, either.

The next morning (May 12th) the students resumed their new regular schedule. With Isreal along, Donovan had no objection to being tutored, and Potton was still basking in the recognition of his gifting Moiwahine. After Law class, Minka set out with Rondi and their bodyguards Routh, Suco, Corwyn, and Capur, the last one being designated carrier of the dress and vest in a satchel. Rawlins glumly watched them pass by Firmin's, where he was sitting, still.

Arriving at the shop, Minka and Rondi greeted everyone, and they all gathered around the satchel that Capur had

placed on the counter. “Oh, you won’t believe how amazing these are,” Minka said, unwrapping the vest and the sheath dress from the protective paper. Then she spread both out on the counter. There were some gasps.

Racheal held up the dress by the shoulders, shaking her head. “It’s clearly a special ceremonial dress. It’s so heavy, there’s no way anyone could wear it all day.” She laid it back on the counter to examine the vest. “So exquisitely worked,” she murmured. “How much did your young man pay for it?”

Minka glanced aside to think, then said, “Five royals.”

“Oh, for the work involved, that was cheap,” Racheal said. The ladies looked on a little grimly—they knew the amount of labor required to produce such a piece, as they had worked many hours on clothing of similar complexity.

“Well, no wonder Windry admired them,” Racheal said, refolding them carefully in the paper. “There’s no way we could produce anything similar for sale—we’d have to charge something outrageous—fifteen to twenty royals—just to cover the labor, not to mention the materials.” She gently repacked them in the satchel.

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Chapter 4

Handing the satchel to Capur, Minka looked at the serious faces around her and said, “So, you tell Windry it won’t work. Why is that a problem?”

Racheal glanced at Sosie, who raised her brows. “Welllll,” Racheal began, “Windry seems to feel that she should have more say in what fabrics are chosen and what we charge for the dresses. She doesn’t really understand the expenses involved in running a store, which we have to keep staffed, and keep clean. I’m afraid if we tell her ‘no’ on these, she’ll walk away from the agreement.”

“Again, why is that a problem?” Minka asked, lips flattened.

Racheal looked uncomfortable. “My understanding was that the Fortress needed us to keep her occupied.”

Minka waved impatiently. “That was months ago, when they were all trying to figure out how she was involved in the Time tides. That’s all been resolved; you’re not required to do anything more with her if it hurts your business.”

“Ohhh,” Racheal said, and there was a general exhalation. “That’s good to hear. I don’t want to drop her entirely; she does such beautiful work. But, she can’t be queen, you know.” She said it innocently, having no knowledge of—or not remembering—Windry’s ruling Minunni.

“Don’t let it worry you,” Minka advised. “I have to get Pia’s dress back to her. Have a good day.” She glanced at Rondi, who smiled, and the other ladies cheerfully told her goodbye. So Minka left with Capur and Corwyn.

In the second-floor workroom of the fortress, the administrators DeWitt and Estes were somewhat settling down to work while Efran, feet on the table, leaned back in his chair to open a book the Librarian had recommended. It

was a slender book, which Efran appreciated after wading through books approaching 800 pages, but—it was written by a woman.

Now, Efran liked women. He could appreciate Marguerite's abilities and Madgwick's faith, but, the only woman who could ever teach him anything was Minka. (He never thought of Sister Therese as a woman. She was his tutor. He was only now beginning to realize how much she taught him.)

Anyway, feeling inclined to procrastinate here, he observed, "After seeing the Polonti's shop, my men are now wondering why they themselves are army grunts when they could be business owners under DeWitt, raking in the gold."

Estes glanced up to tell him, "The shop has committed half of their gross income to the Widow's Fund."

Efran dropped his feet to the floor. "Half?" he whispered. Any Lands resident who contributed 30% of his net income to the Widow's Fund was exempt from taxes altogether, and . . . eligible for nobility. So Efran's next question was, "Who's the owner? Have you titled him?"

DeWitt replied, "A group of three, led by Unnik, are joint owners. For the time being, at least, they've declined the honor of a title. They don't feel worthy of it."

Mildly scowling, Efran lowered his head. "Are you trying to make me feel bad for parading them down to lock-up?"

"Oh, no, it was good for everyone involved," DeWitt said, perusing another sheet.

Efran was muttering something when Soames entered with a folded parchment that had a broken seal. "Good morning, Captain. Administrator. Steward." He was smiling wryly.

The three studied him. Efran demanded, "What is that in your hand, Soames?"

"A letter, Captain," he said. "It was addressed to Lord Ryal on the outside and the Lord Sovereign on the inside. And it's from Lord Shaffer."

Estes and DeWitt laid down their quills and Efran sat back, arms folded across his chest. "Read it."

With a sigh, Soames began, "'To Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, from Lord Notary Shaffer of Westford.

"Dear Sir: My client Lady Wissowa has informed me of your subterfuge in concealing your full title and status while in the process of answering her suit against you regarding the paternity of her son Donovan. Given this misapprehension, she was deterred from claiming the full amount she should be owed from your callous refusal to even give her your name after the incident of conception. The fact of your prompt payment indicates the negligibility of the amount rendered.

"Therefore, my client has submitted a revised suit against you in the amount of ten thousand royals. This is to be paid into her account which her fiduciary Plonse is handling.

"Sincerely yours, Lord Notary Shaffer.' He misspelled Ploense's name," Soames noted. Then he looked up at the three.

DeWitt asked, "What did Ryal say about it?"

Soames half-laughed, "He was utterly flummoxed, as am I. It's unprecedented. There's nothing that remotely addresses it in the Law. It is not a crime for the Captain to withhold from her his title—or even, his name," he added awkwardly.

Estes asked, "Did she ask your name at the time, Efran? Did she give you hers?"

"No and no," Efran laughed. "She only asked me to come see her in Westford, at her house—" He raised his face to the ceiling to think. "I can't remember the name—wait. Entwistle! The name of the house she shared with her husband was Entwistle. I remember because that was also the name of barkeeper of the Porterhouse. Yes, she gave me the name of the house, but not her name."

"Does she have any other children?" Estes asked.

"I don't know. Not that I've heard," Efran said.

DeWitt said thoughtfully, "If she had no children with her husband, she might have thought she couldn't conceive. Let's check that with Ploense." Since Neale was one of the soldiers waiting in the corridor, DeWitt sent him up to Ploense's room with the question.

Shortly, Neale returned to salute and report, "Administrator, the accountant says that Wissowa stated that Donovan is her only child."

DeWitt turned lazily to say, "Congratulations, Efran. You defied the odds."

He leaned back to laugh, idly scanning the faerie-tree branches twining across the ceiling. "We won't pay it, but we've got to answer it somehow. You know, she warned me—two days ago, when she caught me with my family at Firmin's, she told me that she should have sued me for ten thousand royals, and may still. I don't know why I didn't take her seriously," he murmured, thinking.

Estes posed, "Because it would be the most hypocritical, ungrateful, outrageous act after you saved her from losing everything in Westford and possibly getting killed over what you did send her?"

"That could have something to do with it," Efran admitted, then they all looked up as Ryal entered the workroom. Efran said, "And here's my salvation."

"I don't know about that," Ryal said with a glance, then turned to Soames. "I apologize for asking you to go, but I don't like to leave Giardi alone in the shop."

"Just tell me what happens and I'm good with that, sir," Soames said, nodding to the administrators as he left.

DeWitt said, "Sit, Ryal, and tell us what you think."

Taking the chair around the corner from Efran at the head of the table, Ryal said, "I took a few minutes to look through the appendices and other obscure sections of the Law, but no; there's no stipulation that the defendant in a suit must apprise the plaintiff of the upper limits of his ability to pay. There are a few oblique references to the conditions attached to the plaintiff's acceptance of the defendant's compensation, but since the acceptance itself indicates that the demand has been satisfied—and has since time immemorial—there is nothing in the Law that states *what* guaranties the acceptance of a defendant's compensation, or prohibits a plaintiff from suing a second

time over something stemming from the same issue. The Law merely states that compensation puts to rest all parts of a complaint.”

DeWitt wondered, “The question may be, has Shaffer covered her on that by claiming *this* suit is for Efran’s actively hiding evidence of his ability to pay a far greater amount than she suspected?—which could be construed as lying.”

Efran laughed, “Shaffer knows my title! Let her sue him!”

The other three looked at each other, and Estes said, “Yes, why didn’t he point out to her your title?”

Ryal asked, “How did he address Efran in the original demand?”

DeWitt got up to locate the file on Wissowa, then pull out that first letter to read off: “‘Lord Efran of the Abbey Lands.’ It’s incomplete, but still indicative that he knew your status.”

“But didn’t tell her, or even show her his demand letter. So again, let her sue him,” Efran said.

Ryal leaned back. “She can’t hope to get a thousand out of him, much less ten thousand. And anything you gave her on this claim would be a win for her, and him.” Given that certainty, they sat back to think some more.

“We’ve got to throw this back on Shaffer, somehow,” Efran insisted.

Estes threw up his hands. “We’re overthinking this. Here we are, scrounging through the Law to find a reason he can’t do it, when *he* has to demonstrate that he *can*. Just have Ryal call her to his shop and say, ‘I’m sorry, but you can’t sue us because Shaffer already knew Efran’s rank’—give Ryal the original demand to show her. And then offer to sue Shaffer on her behalf.”

DeWitt said, “But she can’t get nearly as much out of Shaffer.”

“Why not, when she won’t get anything more from us?” Estes asked. “And what if the point isn’t the money, but revenge?”

“Now that sounds like Wiwohsah,” Efran said.

The others looked at him. “What?” DeWitt said, squinting.

“Wissowa. What did I say?” Efran asked.

Ryal said, “Regardless, that’s the best plan I’ve heard. Let me take that demand letter to show her, DeWitt. Efran can bring it back up.”

As he stood, Efran hesitated. “I’m not sure I should be there, but I want to hear.”

Receiving the demand letter from DeWitt, Ryal said, “You can listen from our bedroom off the interview room. If she wants you in on our discussion, you can slip out the back window and come around front.”

“Good, let’s do that,” Efran said, escorting him out. On their way downstairs, Efran asked him, “How did you come up the switchback?”

"Lowry gave me a ride in his cart," Ryal said.

"Oh. Then you can ride Kraken down," Efran said.

Ryal almost stopped in his tracks as they exited the front doors, the door guards Ellor and Graeme saluting. Trotting down the steps, Efran whistled, then pointed to someone. "Saddle Kraken. Yes, there he comes."

"I . . . don't know that I—" Ryal began, visualizing their bringing out the mounting block for him to get on that massive horse, and the humiliation thereof.

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Chapter 5

Ryal began expressing his preference to walk down the switchback, but Efran was telling the gate guards Skalbeck and Goss, "I'll be down at Ryal's, but don't tell any women that." As Goss started choking on laughter, Skalbeck looked at him in alarm but Efran clarified, "Except Minka, of course. But she'll probably know, anyway."

Shortly, Squirt had Kraken all geared up, and he came loping by himself to the courtyard, drawing up to Efran. Before Ryal could decline a ride, Efran had lifted him to the saddle and began walking at Kraken's head. "Oh—did you hang on to the demand letter?"

"Yes, Efran," Ryal said, though it was a little bit crumpled.

When they had reached Ryal's shop, he dismounted quickly before Efran had a chance to lift him down. But Efran was whistling to Shane and Fischer across the street. They ran up, saluting, and he told them, "Go tell Wissowa that Lord Ryal wants to talk to her. Don't mention me."

"Yes, sir. Where would she be, Captain?" Shane asked.

"Check her house, number thirty-five there behind Whately's. If she's not there, her housekeeper will tell you. Oh, and, Wissowa has the white hair," Efran said.

"Yes, sir," Shane said. They saluted before running off, and Efran took Kraken around to Ryal's backyard.

Meanwhile, Minka and her bodyguards were walking their horses up Main toward the fortress. Corwyn nodded, "There's the Captain at the notary's, Lady Minka."

"Oh." She looked over to see him leading Kraken around back. "I've got to take the dress and the vest back up to the fortress, but then I'll check back at Ryal's. I know you have other duties, so don't wait on me."

"Yes, Lady Minka," Corwyn said, and Capur batted away the faerie tree branches that poked inquisitively at the satchel.

About this time, Windry had entered The Lands Clothing Shop. Glancing around, she asked Meena, "Where is Racheal? Did she get a chance to see the Polonti dress?"

"Yes, she's in the back. I'll go get her," Meena said.

Windry nodded, only a little impatient. She went to the corner with the pretty cursive sign that announced, "Designs by Windry." She began straightening the items on display, checking to see what had sold.

Racheal came up to her. "Hello, Windry. As you can see, your clothes have been selling very well."

"Why isn't the display closer to the front?" Windry fretted.

"To give you more room," Racheal replied. "We can only put small displays up front, to allow visitors an instant view of the store."

"Well. Did you see that amazing beaded dress that the little Polonti girl was wearing?" Windry asked.

"Yes, I did. And it was certainly exquisite. Unfortunately, it's not something that we can produce," Racheal said.

"Why not?" Windry asked, brows knotted.

"The beading takes so much time, and that's not counting the time spent adapting and transferring a pattern to the dress," Racheal said regretfully.

"Oh. Well, just get me more girls to do it," Windry shrugged. "We can have them working around the clock."

Racheal sighed, "But then we would have to pay so much for their labor that the dress would cost more than anyone would be willing to spend, and that's assuming that we found someone just the right size to wear it. What we're thinking instead, Windry, is to use the beading on gloves, belts, bags and hatbands that would go with—"

"Who did the work on that girl's dress?" Windry asked.

Racheal slowly shook her head. "Some of the Polonti that run the shop, I'm sure."

"What shop?" Windry asked, narrowing her eyes.

"They don't have a sign up yet. It's the new shop of Polonti crafts behind Twombly's," Racheal said.

"Oh, the Polonti." Windry waved. "They'll work for practically nothing. Get them to do it."

"We would have to pay them the same that we paid anyone else, if not more. That's only fair, and the work is exceptional," Racheal said.

Windry regarded her a moment, then decided, "I'm going to go look at this shop." As she turned to march out, Meena rolled her eyes and Racheal gently exhaled.

About that time, Shane and Fischer were escorting Wissowa up the steps into Ryal's shop. "Oh, good!" she exulted. "This must be about my new claim on Efran. Isn't it?"

Shane replied, "We don't know, miss; we were only directed to escort you here." She nodded, confirming to herself that her new claim was producing results already.

As they entered to the tinkling bell, Soames said, "Thank you, gentlemen. Hello, Wissowa. Step back here, if you will." He stood at the door of the interview room.

Swishing past him, she informed him, "I'm about to be Lady Wissowa, for the wealth I'll have." Soames did not reply, only going to the amanuensis table in the back corner.

Ryal stood from the interview table. "Thank you for coming, Wissowa. Have a seat here, please." She plopped into the chair indicated, draping her hat with matching band across the back of the chair next to her. Ryal said, "Wissowa, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this interview?"

She paused in alarm, then considered that this might be a necessary part of the suit. Glancing warily at Soames waiting with dipped quill, she said, "Yes."

"Thank you. Now, Wissowa, I received this letter from Lord Shaffer this morning in regard to a new action he is pressing against Lord Efran in your name." He laid the demand letter before her, which she barely glanced at. He added, "I'm afraid that the action is null and void, Wissowa."

Her head snapped to him. "What? Why?"

Indicating the demand letter again, he said, "The whole rationale of this action is Lord Efran's purported duplicity in not informing you of his status as Lord of the Abbey Fortress, with the supposed wealth behind it. But there is no law that Lord Shaffer can cite, nor that I can find, to justify this action. Moreover, even if you did not know Efran's status, Lord Shaffer did. Here he uses Efran's title in the demand letter he sent for the first claim, which Efran paid." And Ryal laid that letter in front of her.

While she stared at it, he said, "Therefore, the one who is at fault here is Lord Shaffer for not telling you what he himself knew, going so far as to file a frivolous claim based on thin air. I assume that he is charging you for this pointless action, which means you have a more valid claim against him than against Efran."

She turned her eyes to him, the wheels behind them spinning furiously. But Kraken, in back, discerned that his human was inside this little box. So he mounted the back steps to begin chest-bumping the door to the interview room. Wissowa startled; Soames peered out the back window and returned a cautionary look to Ryal, who sighed.

About this time, Windry entered the Polonti shop to look around in deep concentration. One of the Polonti stockers approached her to bow, then returned to his duty arranging displays as Koschat had taught him. (Even now, Koschat was watching her from the pay counter.)

Seven or eight other patrons were in the shop at this time, and one woman brought an armload of highly polished wooden bowls and plates to the counter. Koschat tabulated them, then said, "That will be twenty-six [silver] pieces, please"—four silvers short of one royal.

She gasped, "Is that all?"

Koschat went over his numbers again, then said, "Yes, madam."

"Wait a moment," she said, and rushed back to the display to grab up all the other wooden pieces she could find. These she deposited with her original purchases, asking, "How much is all that?"

He tabulated again, then said, "One royal and twelve pieces, madam."

She pulled out her sturdy leather bag to hand him a royal and count out twelve silvers to go with it. As Koschat wrote out her receipt, he gestured over a worker who began wrapping each piece in paper to put in a canvas bag. After handing her the receipt, Koschat helped the young Polonti pack the pieces, showing him the best way to wrap and stack them in the sack.

This he presented to her with a bow. "Thank you, madam."

"You're welcome," she said, clutching her new dinnerware to her chest as she left the store.

Watching, Windry smiled. As she supposed, things were cheap here. So she went over to the textiles to begin looking carefully.

There were no dresses like the one she saw on the little Polonti girl, but there were two embroidered and beaded shawls. Lifting these, she thought, *YES. We can just cut them up into panels to sew them onto the dresses. Quick and cheap.* So she took those to the counter, opening her purse.

Koschat said, "That will be twenty-two royals."

"What?" She gazed at him in shock.

"Each shawl is eleven royals. That makes twenty-two for both," he explained.

After gaping at him a moment, she let down with a laugh. "Oh, you Polonti. You don't know Southern Continental money, do you? No, dear, each is worth—oh, I'll give you two royals apiece. That makes a total of four for both." She took four royals from her purse to place on the counter, then reached out for the shawls. Part of her misconception was due to the fact that, again, Koschat was wearing native clothes to work.

But Koschat had a hand on them. "Twenty-two royals," he repeated.

She smiled in strained patience. "You don't know who I am, do you? I'm the designer and dressmaker Windry, and if you let me have these for a more reasonable price, I'll give you credit in the creations I make from them."

She reached out for them again, but Koschat said, "No." His Polonti assistant was attending carefully, and others looked over from around the shop.

"Oh, well, now you're just being unreasonable," she fumed. "All right, eight royals for both."

"Twenty-two," he said. A line of customers with their desired purchases had formed behind her.

"Don't be stubborn—the publicity you'll get for your shop being affiliated with my dresses would be worth fifty royals. Let's say, twelve for both," she said.

"Twenty-two," he said.

"All right, twenty-two," she exhaled. Searching through her purse, she muttered, "Oh, I don't have quite that much. Here are eleven, so with these four, that's—eighteen royals. I'll send you the remaining four when I get home."

But Koschat had put one shawl under the counter while shoving four royals back at her. Then he began writing

out a receipt. "What are you doing?" she said. "You Polonti don't know numbers. That's fourteen royals!"

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Chapter 6

Koschat, who did calculations for DeWitt in his spare time, lined up the remaining royals on the counter to count them out loud from one to eleven. A few people behind Windry snickered, and he asked, "Do you want the shawl for eleven royals?"

"No, that's too much!" she insisted.

So Koschat put the remaining shawl under the counter with the first, shoved the eleven royals to one side, and said, "Next."

As the man behind Windry put his selections on the counter, she pushed him away, insisting, "You give me those shawls! You don't know who I am and what I can do with them!"

"You may leave now, and if you do not, I will take you to Lord Ryal," Koschat said, expressionless.

"Don't be an idiot," she said dully. "Don't you understand what I can do with these? Once women see my creations with your handiwork, you'll be famous. Everyone will want your wares. You'll sell out this whole shop, everything in it!"

Koschat summoned, "Unnik," gesturing him behind the counter.

As Windry continued to rant at Koschat, he took her arm to begin walking her out. "Stop that! What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Taking you to the notary for creating a disturbance," he said.

She struggled, shouting, "Thief! That's robbery! You kept my money and now you're taking me—"

A Polonti shop worker ran up to them with a handful of royals. Koschat instructed, "Count them into her purse."

So he counted out fifteen royals as she watched, then she murmured, "I thought there were eleven. Oh, all right. Let me go, now—" But Koschat continued to drag her toward the notary shop.

As Kraken was continuing to bump Ryal's back door, which began issuing warning creaks, Efran came out of the bedroom to open the door and shove him back. Wissowa turned in her chair. "Efran! Sit down and talk to me." He looked over with deep reluctance, then left the door open for Kraken to block it. He was too big to enter through it.

Efran threw himself into a chair at the table like a boy who was expected to get his homework done.

About that time, Minka was descending the switchback on Dustbin in the company of Fellowes and Youshock. "Uh oh," Youshock said, and the three of them paused to watch Windry shouting and slapping at a native

Polonti—Koschat—as he dragged her down the sidewalk toward Ryal's shop. Casual spectators to this drama, attempting to put a context to it, generally decided that this was part of a native mating ritual in which the Polonti dragged his woman of choice to the notary for a marriage license. This, in turn, made a fabulous precursor to the insanity which unfolded in the coming weeks.

"What in the world—?" Fellowes muttered.

"With Windry, you never know. Let's go see," Minka said, and they continued down the switchback, watching Koschat haul Windry up the steps into the shop.

The front door slammed open with a violent tinkling, which startled not only Giardi at the front counter but Soames, Ryal, Efran and Wissowa in the back room. Kraken made a concerted effort to get in, but he was just too broad. All those who couldn't see Windry still heard her ranting at the filthy Polonti who escorted her forcefully to the door of the back room.

Koschat said, "Lord Ryal, this woman created a disturbance in the Polonti shop by demanding goods at a discount and refusing to leave."

While he was explaining this, she was vigorously denying it and scanning the room. Kraken's efforts to enter made so little impression on her that she didn't stop ranting until she saw who was at the table. "Oh, Wissowa! That dress of mine is a good choice with your complexion. Now, where's the hat—? Efran! Get out of that chair! You're squishing the hat!" Minka and her bodyguards had entered the shop to listen with Giardi in the front room.

As he began to rise, Wissowa said, "Sit, Efran; I'll put the hat here." And she draped it over the back of her chair.

Looking from her to him, Windry asked, "What are you all doing here?"

With a heavy-lidded glance, Wissowa purred, "It's a private matter."

Unheeding, Windry sat in the fourth chair at the table. "It will have to wait a moment. Ryal, I want charges brought against this Polonti for manhandling me."

Ryal had opened his mouth when Wissowa laughed, "Who do you think you are, to break into a private conference with your own little demands? You may wait in the outer room until we're finished."

Windry returned her a pitying look. "You may think you're entitled, being one of the few who can afford all my creations, but I'm about to produce something that will strain even what Efran gave you for his son." Efran leaned back in utter exasperation so that Kraken was able to reach inside far enough to snuffle his hair.

With that lightning strike, Wissowa gaped at Windry. Of all the ripostes surging through her brain, the reply that forced itself out was the one born of curiosity: "What is that?"

Lowering her chin, Windry said confidentially, almost seductively, "'Native Beaded Designs by Windry.'" They both glanced at Efran, who went pale.

In the ensuing silence, Wissowa's breathing deepened. "Do you have sketches?"

"Not yet, but the designs are bursting out of my head. I have to get right home to start sketching," Windry said meaningfully.

"May I offer input?" Wissowa asked as an acolyte.

"Why not," Windry murmured with arched brow. In the next instant they were both rushing out of the room, Wissowa barely pausing to snatch up her hat.

While the abandoned men sat silently in the back room, and Koschat stood at the door with his hands hanging, another customer entered for Giardi to wait on.

Minka came to the door to survey the dazed men. "Whoever got them started on dresses deserves a commendation," she observed. However, once Windry reached her house and discovered that she could not design with a worshiper hanging on her every stroke, she evicted Wissowa with the promise to entertain her opinions on early designs. Wissowa accepted this, returning home on the assumption that matters concerning Shaffer's new lawsuit had been settled.

Apparently, she was right. Ryal sat up to dip his quill, declaring, "Here's what we'll do, then." He paused to ask Koschat, "Oh, but first: did you wish to file charges against Windry?"

Koschat looked at him for a moment, then said, "No, sir. Captain." He saluted Efran and left the shop.

Ryal returned to the paper in front of him. "Now, then. I'm writing Shaffer to the effect that we reject his claim as there is no justification for it in Roman's Law. Moreover, Windry—excuse me, Wissowa—having learned that Shaffer knew of Efran's status without informing her, thus depriving her of the incentive to sue for more, is now considering charges against him for negligence. After receiving this, I sincerely doubt he'll pursue the matter."

Efran reached up to stroke the black nose that hovered over him. "How can I go back in time ten years to beat myself senseless?"

"Why?" Minka asked. "You're helping the Polonti sell their wares, and Windry to sell hers. Plus, you have Donovan and Potton now. Isn't that all worth it?" He closed his eyes to nod in acknowledgment, and she said, "Well, then." But he was not comforted. Nonetheless, he consented to get up and remove Kraken from Ryal's backyard. But because Kraken refused to back out of the doorway, Efran had to go around the long way to get him.

Since all of the children were still in class, Efran, Minka, Youshock and Fellowes rode out to the East Central Lands to look around. Efran was shaking his head: "It's almost as crowded here as it is around Main. Good thing DeWitt paused new construction when he did."

"Even Cavern Lake shore is packed," Fellowes noted.

Minka looked south over her shoulder. "Oh, but they have the pond near Lemmerz' new inn landscaped. Let's go see that." Without waiting for a consensus, she turned Dustbin's head. The others followed easily, as Dustbin was slow.

They drew up to the pond, only about thirty feet in diameter, to see a newly planted willow at its edge, as well as ferns and cattails. "Oh, this is sweet," Minka said. She dismounted to sit a few feet from the edge.

When she bent to look over the water, Efran said, "No, no pets in this one; it's just been dredged."

"Just looking," she reassured him as Youshock and Fellowes settled down beside her. They let the horses range

around the pond to drink and paw in the water. Regarding the cattails, she asked, "Can you eat those?"

Youshock nodded and Efran said, "The bulrushes? Yes, the lower stalks and the roots."

"What about the sausage?" she asked, bending a stalk toward her.

"I wouldn't *eat* it," Efran said. He reached over to break open a brown head, from which white fluffy seeds exploded to expand to an impossible volume.

Minka laughed in amazement, and Fellowes scooped up a handful of the excess fluff to toss it into the air. "Snow in May," she murmured, reaching out to finger the fluff. Efran leaned back against the willow tree to watch her.

Youshock stood, waving to a rider who was circling his horse to look all around. "Captain's here!" Youshock called.

The rider, Tomer, loped over to draw up, saluting. "Captain, the Notary Lord Ryal has the letter ready to go to Notary Shaffer, and wished to know if you want to see it first."

"No," Efran murmured.

"Yes, Captain," Tomer saluted to lope away with the message. He was one of the many earnest young Polonti who had come practically all at once about a year and a half ago, and were still looking for great deeds to prove themselves. Anyway, Ryal dispatched the letter to Shaffer that day, keeping a copy for his files and sending a copy to the fortress workroom.

But the message seemed to depress Efran all over again. He muttered, "Just because Wissowa got distracted by dresses doesn't mean she forgot about the money. She's not interested in suing Shaffer, and he knows it. She wants the mother lode."

Minka snorted, "Let's see her get past the dragons guarding the treasure—DeWitt and Ploense."

He shrugged, then his eyebrows drew together and he looked at her quizzically. "You left out Estes."

"Estes is more a guardian of the people in our care," she said, smiling.

"So, Polonti aren't capable of guarding gold?" he asked.

"What?" she said blankly. The bodyguards looked confused.

He exhaled, "Nothing. I'm being stupid." When he wanted to punish himself, he sometimes got irritated at her relentless cheerfulness, especially as she was always right.

She warily regarded his foul mood, given that he seldom let himself get that way. "What . . . do you want to do?"

"Not answer any more questions," he said.

"All right," she said. They sat there a few minutes longer, then she got up. "I'm going back to the fortress." He nodded, and Youshock sprang up to help her mount Dustbin, then leap up on his horse.

When Fellowes hesitated between them, Efran said, "Go with her."

“Yes, Captain,” he said, mounting to ride after her and Youshock.

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Chapter 7

Kraken came over to nudge Efran, and he reached up to pat his neck. “I’m just going to sit here in a childish pout for a minute.”

Kraken did not approve, nudging him again, harder. “Stop it,” Efran said, pushing him away, upon which Kraken kicked him over with a hoof. “What?—what are you—” But Kraken continued to push him. “Why don’t you just tell me?” Efran said irritably. Sometimes Kraken talked, and sometimes he didn’t, and Efran didn’t know why.

But since he was facing that way, Efran suddenly looked south past the pond and the construction to see Minka and her bodyguards riding east on Chapel Road—away from the fortress.

For some reason, Minka, Youshock and Fellowes appeared to be heading toward the far East Lands, toward the fields, pens, Choules’ group, and beyond that, the contested area where Tourse’s enforcers had to keep burning down unauthorized structures.

Leaping up on Kraken, Efran muttered, “What are they doing, going out that far without me?” So he and Kraken followed at a fast lope.

Passing the barricade on the left, with the barbed-wire fencing rolled up on either side of the road, Efran momentarily lost sight of them. He streaked down the road, scanning all along it, especially to the north. Here, past the barricade, the road was no longer paved, and meadowgrass began to dominate again.

Just as he was fighting down the nausea and self-condemnation for letting her ride away without him, he spotted her and her bodyguards ahead at one of the animal pens. Yes, it looked as though they were talking with Hereward, who was in charge of the Fortress cattle out here. Hereward was on foot inside the pen, while Minka and her bodyguards were still mounted.

As Efran pulled up to them, they all turned. Hereward said, “Oh, good, Captain; you got the message. Lady Minka told my man she’d get you out here.” Efran glanced at his innocent-looking wife while Hereward continued, “Here, let me show you. Lady Minka, please stay outside of the pen with your men.”

“All right,” she said warily.

Efran slid down from Kraken onto the jackleg fence, then hopped off the other side to begin walking with Hereward toward the milling herd. Hereward explained, “We’ve had three cows go missing over the last two weeks—that is, two bullocks and a heifer. Our first problem is that we can’t figure out how they’re getting out, whether they’re wandering or being stolen. We’ve been over every inch of this fence, and it’s sturdy all the way around. There are no gates, except where the fence ends at the barn doors you see on the far end. That’s also where our herdsman and dogs sleep at night, so anyone trying to bring a cow from the pen through the barn would have to walk right over them.

"Now, a couple of times in the last ten days or so, the men have been awakened in the middle of night by the dogs barking like crazy. The men let them out, then followed with lanterns. There was some kind of storm that drenched them and their lights. When it cleared up, the dogs were quiet again, so they all got back to sleep and then checked the herd in the morning. That's when they found, or believed they found, that several were missing. The tags sometimes fall off," Hereward said apologetically. They continued to walk as Hereward related all this.

"Then there was this left last night," Hereward said, lifting a heavy canvas cover that had been staked to the ground. He and Efran looked down on a partial pile of bovine bones. "You see that yellow tag in it with the number forty-five? Yeah, that was one of the bullocks that we lost."

"What is that—stinking mess they're lying in?" Efran asked.

"Don't know, but it does reek, don't it?" Hereward said. "But I'm thinking it does look like maybe their entrails."

"Huh," Efran acknowledged. He began scanning the area around it. The grass was mostly eaten down here, so there was little but dried mud, replete with bovine hoofprints. Efran walked around these, looking, until he spotted something different a little ways off. Hereward followed while he walked over to something in the midst of the hoofprints, something that had obliterated them.

Efran and Hereward stared down at an impression in the mud that was about ten inches deep, four feet long, and three feet from edge to edge. There were three lobes, each about a foot in width at the widest part. At the extremity of each tapering lobe was a single deep circular impression. Looking down into one of these, Efran saw that it was not only tapered to a point, but curved, like a . . . claw.

The first possibility that flashed through his mind was Symphorien, the Leviathan that had flown off with her three babies a year and a half ago. Had she returned?

"What the devil is that?" Hereward whispered.

Wetting his lips, Efran glanced around. "I . . . don't know. But if you lose any more cows, or the dogs wake you again, summon me immediately." Hereward nodded, and Efran began walking from the forepaw (if that's what it was) toward the theoretical rear of what had made the impression.

Hereward followed. "Over here," he said abruptly, pointing. Both men went over to look down on another impression at least 20 feet away from the first. Extending about 8 feet, this one showed the same three clawed forward toes, plus something like a spur on the back. And Efran could almost visualize Symphorien sitting on her haunches.

By this time, Youshock came over to look with them. Saluting Efran, he said, "By the order of Lady Minka, Captain." Efran nodded, lifting his face to her pensively. She just watched from her horse outside the pen.

The three men surveyed the ground from there, and Hereward said, "Look, that whole portion of the pen has been smoothed out, like—like—"

"A sweeping tail," Efran said.

Hereward breathed, "Does that mean Leviathan is back?"

Youshock looked quickly to the Captain, who said, "I don't know. But, summon me."

"Yes, Captain," Hereward said, saluting. As Efran and Youshock walked back to the others, Efran glanced in amusement at Youshock's determination to not ask questions.

They climbed back over the jackleg fence and remounted. Drawing Kraken beside Dustbin, Efran drank in the alert blue eyes fixed on him. "I've no excuse for being rude to you," he said.

She replied, "Then I'll ask questions: what did you find?"

Inhaling, he turned Kraken back west, and the other three followed. "They've had several cows mysteriously go missing. Do you . . . sense anything of Symphorien?"

She looked startled. "No, but I don't know that I would. And I don't know why she would come back now."

"Well, something is definitely snacking on our cows," he said.

Youshock was chewing his lip by now, but Minka asked Fellowes, "I know that Youshock wasn't, but were you here when Symphorien knocked the fortress down in making her nest in the hillside?"

"Yes, but, I never hardly understood much," he said.

With a glance at Youshock, she replied, "Well, hang on for some high-quality prattle about Leviathans." As they walked their horses back west, she told the bodyguards all about Symphorien's nest building, and getting her egg stuck, and having three babies who liked to play with people. Then when the babies were big enough to fly, Symphorien had flown away with them to their feeding grounds, wherever that was, and would return in another hundred years to lay more eggs.

When they arrived back at the fortress, Efran went up to the workroom to tell Estes and DeWitt about Symphorien's possible return. Then he and Minka went with the bodyguards to pick up Donovan, Isreal and Potton from tutoring and take them to Firmin's for snacks.

All was quiet on the eastern Lands, and no cows went missing that night.

The next day (May 13th), when the children were out of morning class and had finished their midday meal, Donovan watched the others almost wistfully as they streamed out the back door to go play. Beside him, Isreal glanced the other way, toward the foyer. "We have to go to tutoring now."

Donovan groaned, "All I do anymore is sit in class. I'm tired of it."

Mathurin approached from the foyer. "Your bodyguards are waiting, gentlemen." Donovan eyed him sullenly, but went, as did Isreal. Potton, not requiring bodyguards, would have walked down separately after having been dismissed from morning training.

In the courtyard, Goss and Elowen, both Polonti, began escorting the boys down the old switchback toward Main. Goss was an old-timer, one of the Forty who had served under Captain Efran in Westford before following him here. Elowen was newer, but not green, having served in the Lands for over a year now.

As they came off the switchback to begin walking up Main, Donovan's eyes were sweeping the street, seeking escape. He drew the slightest breath to see a voluptuous white-haired woman swinging toward him. She was not

looking at him, however; with his short-cropped black hair, she didn't recognize him. All she knew was that those Polonti had better clear the sidewalk for her to pass.

Leaping forward, Donovan cried, "Hello, Mother!" She startled, and the bodyguards drew up menacingly close behind the boys. Isreal, grimacing, stuck by Donovan. He continued, "I cut my hair, Mother. Do you like it? Hey, are you down here now? Where are you living?"

She peered down at him. "Donovan?"

Goss said, "You'll have to talk to your mum after tutoring, Donovan."

Wissowa bristled, "He can talk to me whenever he likes." Placing an arm around his shoulders, she said, "Yes, I'm down here too, Donovan. Would you and your friend like to see my house?"

"Yes, we would, Mother!" Donovan said. Isreal groaned, but followed as the lady pranced through a crosswalk with her arm around her son. While she chatted, Donovan glanced back frequently at Isreal trailing them, and the bodyguards close behind.

"Here we are! Number thirty-five!" she said, unlocking her door. "Oh, do you like the flowers?" she asked, as he was looking all around.

"Yes. Can we have something to eat?" Donovan asked, pulling Isreal up beside him.

"Of course you can," she puckered. Entering with the boys, she turned to shut the door in the bodyguards' faces.

"Get around back quickly," Goss ordered Elowen, who leapt off the front steps to run around the house.

Wissowa led the boys through the small house to the nook off the kitchen. "Have a seat here, and I'll bring you something." She turned into the kitchen while Donovan was peering out the back window. "Now then, what would you like?" she called, checking to see what Flores had out. "There's some barley bread here," she observed dismally. "Oh, but there's butter! We have butter for the bread! How's that?"

Not hearing a reply, she stuck her head into the nook to see it empty and the back door standing open.

Elowen, pursuing the boys in between Whately's and Imelda's, issued a piercing whistle to his senior partner, who came running from the front of the house. And the chase was on.

Donovan was fast and agile, almost hooting in joy as he scrambled over fences and under parked wagons. He zigzagged between Firmin's and Croft's stableyard, working his way south in a generally random pattern. Glancing back at Isreal, he called softly, "Keep up, or I'll leave you behind!"

"They're going to catch us. Talk to Papa; he will help," Isreal panted.

"I don't want to," Donovan grunted. "This is more fun." He zipped across Main outside the crosswalks, then slipped between Minogue's and the back grounds of the chapel house.

As Donovan leapt across the front entrance of The Lands' Best Inn, Isreal glimpsed Elowen right behind, and Goss trailing him.

Zipping across New North Road, Donovan veered away from the unoccupied Elvey's outlet. After passing a

muddy rice field protected by a low fence, the next fence they came to was a high wooden one. They couldn't see through it or over it to know what was behind it. Isreal stopped dead, but Donovan laughed, "Come on, coward!" He leapt up to grasp the top of the fence, scramble up it, and throw a leg over.

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Chapter 8

Barely balancing on the top edge, Donovan looked down in surprise. Below him, Isreal heard a reedy barking, not like a dog's, then Donovan started kicking at something. "Get back! Stop—!" And he fell over on the inside. There was an immediate splash, followed by Donovan gurgling, more splashing, and louder barking, with cackling and hissing.

Isreal was trying to climb the fence after him when Goss and Elowen ran up. "He's drowning!" Isreal cried.

Elowen leapt up to scale the fence in one bound. That was followed by a large splash with much angry hissing, honking and grunting. Then Donovan, soaking wet, was thrust up over the fence for Goss to catch on the way down. Meanwhile, Wissowa was opening her front door to receive a letter from Notary Shaffer in Westford.

At this time, Efran, Minka and Joshua, with their bodyguards Jehan and Coish, were waiting at Firmin's for the boys to get out of class. Minka had tea; Efran and the bodyguards mild ale, and Joshua custard while they waited. But Efran asked Lilou to hold off bringing the cheese sticks until the boys came. (Firmin's was experimenting with new variations on cheese balls, which everyone was tired of.) Coish stood abruptly upon seeing two figures streak across Main to the south of them, followed by two soldiers in red. He squinted, muttering, "Couldn't be."

The tutor's door opened for men, mostly soldiers, to pour out, Potton among them. He saw the friendly faces at Firmin's and hesitated, but Moiwahine bade him come. So he did, sitting beside her. "Let me see your work," she demanded. He handed her the sheets, looking over in vague dread at the Captain.

"Your hand is getting smoother every day, Potton," she declared.

"Thank you, Lady Minka," he murmured.

Efran glanced over, nodding, but looked to the door again. The flow of exiting students had ceased. The tutor Mowinkel appeared briefly at the door, glowering in their direction, then shut it.

Efran put down his ale, then he, Minka, and the bodyguards stared at Potton. Efran demanded, "What happened to Isreal and Donovan?"

"I don't know, Captain; they never showed up," Potton said.

Minka turned to Efran with a gasp. He turned around to begin issuing instructions to Jehan and Coish, who stood. But Minka said, "There they come!" The others looked to where she was pointing down Main.

Goss (damp) and Elowen (soaking wet) were walking Isreal (dry) and Donovan (dripping) toward their table. Stopping before the seated party, the bodyguards saluted as the senior said, "Goss and Elowen reporting with

their charges, sir. They attempted to skip class by means of a detour through Donovan's mother's house to Dufton's yard."

Scowling, Efran said, "Dufton's yard is little more than a pond with an island in the middle for his ducks and geese." Minka's face was frozen in her determination to not laugh. But Joshua cackled and Donovan grinned at him.

"So our charges discovered, Captain," Goss said.

Muttering under his breath, Efran said, "All right, everyone sit. Donovan, you get to explain yourself." The boys' bodyguards sat at the table behind them, where Jehan and Coish congratulated them on their catch. Before having Donovan talk, however, Efran beckoned Lilou over with food and more drinks for the additions to their party.

Slumping into the chair between Efran and Minka, Donovan picked up his father's ale. Efran took it out of his hand for Lilou to give him a cup of water instead. On Minka's other side, Isreal happily received cheese sticks and water. "Talk," Efran told Donovan.

"I'm sick of class. No one else has to go in the morning and the afternoon, both. I know I need to learn to read and write, but can't I do anything else besides that?" Donovan grumbled.

Efran thought about that. "How did you know where your mother lives?"

Donovan shrugged. "We just met her on Main, and I played up to her. She took us to her house and shut the bodyguards out, so Isreal and I ran for it." Minka quickly put her napkin to her face to begin making noises in it. Everyone looked at her in alarm, but when Donovan realized she was laughing, he grinned at her.

She cried, "Stop that! You look just like your father!" On her other side, Isreal leaned on her arm to grin at her a little crookedly, given his scarred lip. She dropped the napkin to hug him and kiss his face. "Oh, what are we going to do with you?" she demanded, apparently addressing them both.

Isreal didn't care, locked up in her arms as he was. Potton was smiling, just watching. The four bodyguards shot confirming glances at each other: Lady Minka had ensured there would be no punitive repercussions from today.

Efran looked away, sighing, which everyone, even Donovan, recognized as capitulation. "All right. Goss, you and Elowen are dismissed. Go get cleaned up."

"Thank you, sir," Goss said, standing to salute. Elowen did likewise, and they took their ales to begin down Main toward the fortress.

Efran leaned over with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped, for a minute. Then he looked up at Donovan. "Hereward called me over to his cattle pen yesterday; it looks like a dragon, maybe Symphorien, has been picking off our cows. I'll take you and Isreal out there to look around." The boys looked shocked for joy.

Potton blurted, "May I come sir?"

"Haven't you got duty?" Efran asked.

"No, sir, I'm off today," Potton pleaded. "Captain Chee says I've been doing really well. You can ask him," he added desperately.

"All right, then." Efran leaned back, slapping his thighs. "Jehan, Coish—I'll need you to get Lady Minka and Joshua up to the fortress."

Jehan emitted an involuntary whine. Coish hissed at him, "Shut up, stupid," then said, "Yes, Captain." Standing, he said, "If you'll wait a moment, Lady Minka, we'll get your horse—"

"I don't want you," Minka said. "Here comes Graeme; see if he's free, Efran." As an explanatory aside to her pets, she added, "He knows more gossip than you do."

Jehan and Coish gaped at her in adoration, then looked cautiously to the Captain. He raised his face, laughing, "Minka wins every time." Then he whistled at Graeme. Handing him Joshua, he instructed Graeme to walk Lady Minka on her horse up to the fortress, which task he had no objection to. While waiting for her horse, he taught Joshua how to blow raspberries, which he picked up on immediately.

As Coish brought out their party's horses from Firmin's and Averno's shared stables, Jehan ran to the lower stables to get a horse for Potton. Efran lifted Minka to Dustbin's back, then placed Joshua in front of her. The toddler demanded the reins, and Efran stepped back to watch Graeme walk at Dustbin's head. Minka ordered, "Tell me what you know." He obliged, and Efran caught snatches of her laughter all the way up.

When Jehan brought a sturdy gelding for Potton, Efran handed a small pouch to Lilou, who hugged him in gratitude. Then he turned to evaluate mounts and riders. Isreal was learning to ride, but still a novice; Donovan had only ridden once, on Kraken. So Efran said, "Donovan, you'll ride with me. Isreal, you ride with Jehan. Potton, you're being trained on a horse, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir; I can ride," he said.

"Good. Mount up, everyone." Efran lifted Isreal to sit behind Jehan, then hoisted himself up on Kraken. Donovan stood beside the great black body with no fence to climb on. But when everyone else was settled, Efran just leaned down to pick him up and set him behind the saddle. "Hold on to my waist," he instructed. Donovan did, tightly, and they started out.

Doubled up as they were, Efran just had them walk, so he was able to tell them the complete history of yesterday, and why he thought it must be Symphorien. Although Jehan and Coish had joined the Abbey army in time to see the Leviathan, they had never heard the whole story before.

As they progressed east at a walk, curious riders approached, some of them Administrator Tourse's enforcers who wished to know what the Captain required. He sent a few of them back to Tourse to tell him what they were doing, and a few more to Barracks A to tell Commander Wendt the same. (Minka would tell DeWitt and Estes.) But anyone who wished to accompany the Captain's party was allowed.

He warned, "We're just going to see some big footprints and cow bones in stinking entrails, but, if you don't have anything better to do, come along." A growing number of them did, given that many of them remembered Symphorien.

In fact, Lwoff rode out to join them. As keeper of the hilltop armories and wild animal expert, Lwoff was the first, besides the Captain, to see Leviathan up close. Hearing this, Donovan cried across to him, "What did she look like?"

"Ah! The biggest, most beautiful beastie I'd ever seen. I'll never forget watching that head rise up over the cliff

where me and Cap'n were just barely hanging on. Wasn't that right, sir?" Lwoff demanded, and Efran nodded, smiling.

Lwoff elaborated, "Up comes this giant snout with nostrils the size of ovens, huffing hot air that laid us right out. Then ten feet behind and above the nostrils are these green eyes as large as lighthouse braziers, with black slitted pupils the length of yer arm. She's flappin' her great fins like wings above the cliff, spanning almost the whole width of the hill, for she can not only swim, but fly. And her golden chest is plated with spikes like a threshing sledge.

"Along her head, she's got these siphons like an octopus has, and when she brought those up at us, we had to fall quick afore she blasted us with steaming sea water, hey, Cap'n?" Lwoff asked.

"Yes," Efran said firmly.

"Her whole body is huge, gray-black and plated, with green undertones of the sea. She's gotcher four legs and clawed feet like any lizard, and a great tail with spikes on the end that could pierce armor," Lwoff said in satisfaction.

Stourt said, "I was one of the lucky ones at the fortress when Captain got word about 'er trapping Lady Minka and Martyn by Cavern Lake, and we rode down there, having to stand off while the Lady unstuck her eggs!"

"Tell us about that!" Donovan cried, jostling Efran from behind. Groaning, Efran had to relate that episode in uncomfortable detail while the riders pressed close to listen.

When they arrived at the jackleg fence around the cattle pen, Efran sent Cyneheard around to the barn to tell Hereward what they were doing. After letting Donovan down onto the fence, Efran dismounted and climbed over. "Let me take just the boys and their bodyguards first, so that we don't spook the herd. Oh, and Lwoff," Efran said, glancing at the number of men on horses. "In fact, if you ride around this way, you can see the rear footprint from outside the fence." A number of men began trotting over there.

Meanwhile, Isreal, Potton, Jehan, Coish and Lwoff climbed over the fence as well. Efran said, "First, I'm going to show you some lovely cow bones in rotting entrails." They began walking over to the tarp on the ground.

Before they reached it, Lwoff put a hand out. "Wait a tick, Cap'n." The group of them paused as Lwoff squinted ahead. "Did the herd do that when you were here the first time?"

Everyone looked over where the cows were milling together, lowing, to get into the barn. They were not stampeding yet, but they were nervous. "No, I don't think so," Efran said. "But there are more men here now."

There was a sudden uncomfortable warmth in the air, with a slightly disagreeable odor. Then from the south, from the Sea, arose a great black shape that loomed beside the hilltop, blocking half the sun.

While horses began bolting behind them, Efran threw an arm back. "Boys, walk slowly and quietly back to the horses and get away." They were paralyzed at first, but Jehan and Coish pulled them firmly away at a walk, and then a run, toward the fence. Potton moved off to give the Captain and Lwoff room, but did not leave.

Chapter 9

All of the men—including the three remaining in the pen—were staring at the black monstrous winged shape as it approached, airborne. The wings, spanning at least a hundred feet, were working laboriously; the long, sinuous neck weaving. The massive jaws gaped open and closed again and again, exposing five-foot-long fangs. Lwoff whispered, “It’s not Symphorien, Cap’n; it’s far larger, but kin to her. And a male. And he’s—”

It issued a bellow that shook the structures nearby and sent the cattle and the horses into a panic. Fortunately, the cows surged into the barn while the horses ran away. Only, Kraken kept trying to jump the jackleg fence to reach his human, but it was both too broad and tall for him to get over.

The men covered their ears, but in the next instant, Lwoff shouted, “Watch yer head, Cap’n!” And Leviathan’s siphons unloaded forty or fifty gallons of steaming sea water onto the humans trapped in the pen—Efran, Lwoff, and Potton, the boy having declined to run.

The deluge knocked them to the ground. Pushing himself up, shaking water out of his eyes, Efran lifted his face to see the thundering monster land in the pen. Its mouth hung open wide for the long, greenish tongue to loll out between the teeth. Watching the head bob up and down, Efran squinted in confusion. For all the display, this was not aggressive behavior. The flapping fin-like wings were raised high over his head, extending far beyond both sides of the pen. Lwoff gasped, “Cap’n, he’s—”

But Efran had scrambled to his feet. He shouted, “As Lord Sov—” Before anyone could blink, Leviathan stretched out its neck to snap him up in its jaws.

The men were rendered immobile for the horror. Then a few who still had horses turned to ride wildly back to the fortress. Isreal and Donovan were pinned against the jackleg fence in shock. Coish began pulling them up. “Come, we’ve got to get you back to the fortress.”

“No!” Donovan cried. “Let us see him come back out!”

Jehan and Coish looked at each other in dismay, but Isreal said, “Let us wait here.”

Potton shook the stinking, stinging water out of his eyes, then got up to stumble toward Lwoff, who was also rising. The creature had stopped roaring, and was now moving its mouth. Potton leaned over to help Lwoff up, breathing, “What were you about to tell the Captain?”

“That it’s in pain,” Lwoff said thoughtfully, and they both looked up at the open mouth with the tongue working purposefully.

After hearing the soldiers’ panicky message in the fortress, Estes stepped out onto the back grounds. Looking around, he gestured to Salk. The young soldier came running over to salute. “Yes, Steward?”

“Lady Minka is there at the training pens, watching Jasque with the colt. Bring her to the courtyard,” Estes said.

“Yes, Steward!” Salk said, turning to run. Taking a deep breath, Estes turned back into the fortress.

Minka arrived with Salk, curious but unalarmed. The grim hubbub in the courtyard made her wary, and she looked down the switchback at heavily armed men riding east. DeWitt came out of the fortress to converse with

one of the soldiers for a moment. Then he placed a fatherly hand on her shoulder and said, "Minka, we're going to the cattle pen on the far East Lands. It seems that another Leviathan has appeared, and it has . . . swallowed Efran."

Minka stared at him while the courtyard dissolved around her. DeWitt's face became a blur. Her love, her life, her security were swept away in a stroke. Something inside her protested, *No, God is my security, as He has always been*. But she was too far under to heed it.

DeWitt was asking, "Minka, can you ride?"

"Yes," she said without comprehension, and someone nearby helped her up onto the dun mare.

She was unaware of riding down the switchback and east with DeWitt, Estes, and a number of men. The mare loped hard to keep up, and the administrators glanced over frequently to make sure that Minka was secure in the saddle. She knew none of this. But in the blankness of her mind, there was a voiceless, wordless whisper that conveyed, *Minka, I have preserved Efran, and will give him back to you. You will know this by the yellow flower you see in the field—it will be the only flower in the whole field. You will see Efran standing where that flower is*.

She lifted her face to the sky, and then down to earth as her horse slowed. She saw the huge, greenish-black Leviathan sitting on its haunches, mouth agape, swinging its head from side to side. She regarded it in placid curiosity, then craned her neck to look at the field in which it sat. But she couldn't see for the men crowded in front of her.

So she kicked her horse, balking, right up to the fence, and climbed off the saddle onto it. Numerous hands reached out to stop her, but she said, "I only want to look. Let me see!" They fell back so that she could gaze around the field while Lwoff was indicating something to Potton.

"There!" she cried, pointing. Fifty heads spun to the Leviathan, but they saw nothing new.

Cautiously, Estes asked, "What is it, Minka?"

"There it is! The yellow flower in the middle of the field! Do you see it? There's not any other flowers out there of any color, just that one!" she cried.

The men looked at her in sorrow and pity, but Estes asked, "Why is that important, Minka?"

Inhaling in victory, she said, "It's a guaranty. God has given me a guaranty that Efran is all right, and He told me, 'You'll see Efran standing where the yellow flower is.'"

Teary-eyed, DeWitt said, "I'm glad, Minka."

"You'll see," she said, lifting her face in certainty.

Inside that slimy, restlessly working mouth, Efran was struggling to get a foothold or a handhold somewhere, which was impossible. Not only was there no room for him to stand, but the living tunnel around him was surging in all directions—the tongue whipped beneath him; the jaws worked around him, and the muscles strained before him to bring him deeper into the mouth. Then there was the tossing of the head that threw him from side to side against sharp teeth, and the swaying of the neck that added another dimension of nightmarish movement he could not negotiate.

There were flashes of daylight from beyond the teeth that faded to the blackness of the open throat three yards away. Covered in saliva and the stinking remains of cow flesh stuck between the teeth, Efran felt himself blacking out. He gasped, "I can't—God of heaven, I can't—! Help me." And his consciousness asserted itself.

But the jaws closed out the light; the tongue pressed him up against the roof of the mouth to lie flat, and the throat muscles drew him to the opening of death at the top of the esophagus. Choking on saliva, Efran thought, *Why is he not chewing me?*

Somehow, he managed to stretch his head up so that his face was clear of the saliva. His intuition was telling him to lie still. When he did, he felt the tongue manipulate him purposefully. And it occurred to him that the beast had not snapped him up in rage or hunger, but . . . to use.

Besides Minka, who refused to surrender her post, Estes, DeWitt, Commander Wendt and Gabriel were the only ones that the string of soldiers allowed to the jackleg fence surrounding Leviathan. Jehan and Coish had coaxed Isreal and Donovan out of the pen with promises to let them stay and watch. So they climbed up on the fence with Minka. Potton remained inside with Lwoff, as no one even tried to go over and get him.

Seeing the administrators and Commander arrive, Lwoff and Potton walked over to meet them. The two soldiers saluted, and DeWitt asked, "Is he still alive, Lwoff? What do you think?" The other men pressed forward to listen.

Lwoff grimaced, "It's hard to say, Administrator—first, he may still be in the mouth, as I didn't see the beastie swallowing. The action of the head there, with the gaping and the waving, might mean something's stuck in his mouth, which could be the Captain. But the beastie was in distress before he ever picked 'im up; in fact, that may have been the reason he did. How he figures that this human can help, I don't know."

Estes asked, "Is this a Leviathan like Symphorien?"

"Yes, Steward, or a close relation," Lwoff said. "Only it's a male, which are far more unpredictable."

Estes pressed, "But if it's in distress—that sounds like Symphorien trapping Minka and Martyn when she needed help with her egg."

"It does, don't it?" Lwoff admitted. "Only here, the Cap'n can't get out unless the bugger spits 'im out. If he settles down on his haunches as though to take a nap, we'll know that watching any longer won't avail."

They looked over to see Marguerite ride up to the fence. Minka turned to tell her breathlessly, "Auntie, it's all right! He'll be all right! God has promised me; He said, 'You'll see Efran standing where the yellow flower is.' There! Do you see it! That's what we have to watch. Nothing else matters." Isreal and Donovan listened, and when she pointed out the flower, they all looked to it: a small, bright banner in the otherwise muddy, trampled field. Without waiting for a response, Minka settled steadfast eyes on the spot of yellow.

Drawing up beside Marguerite on his horse, Wendt asked her quietly, "Do you sense anything of him?"

Surveying the creature, she winced, but breathed, "He's alive."

There was a general exhalation of relief. Minka nodded in vindication. Sitting on the fence, Donovan demanded of Marguerite, "What is he doing?"

With a brief, sympathetic smile to him, she looked toward the yawning Leviathan again. Hesitantly, she said,

"He's . . . thinking." Concentrating on the great black shape, Marguerite suddenly put a hand out, crying, "No!" And the beast roared.

Efran had been lying still in the binding muscles, trying to keep his face out of the stream of saliva. Then all at once he felt himself being drawn backwards, head first, toward the open grave in the wet darkness. He couldn't tell where it was, only that it was close. As he felt his head descending, his shoulder brushed against something hard and stationary.

He reached out to this, wrapping both arms around it to stop his descent. It held, eliciting a shuddering roar that blew past him from below. Shielding his ear, he clung to this anomaly with both arms and legs, and felt the trembling of the body around him. Whatever Efran was hanging onto was hurting him.

Efran readjusted himself to align with the slight curve, his back to the dragon's mouth. His anchor was smooth and hard, though not a tooth, being too long and slender. It curved slightly outward. Stretching out a hand, he felt nothing. But when he stuck out his left foot to the side, the toe of his boot touched the dragon's throat, triggering a gag reflex. When Efran pulled his foot back, the beast shuddered.

Then he realized, *This is something caught in his throat, probably a bone*. It was too long to be a cow bone; it had to be something from the sea. And every time the dragon attempted to swallow, the sharp, curved ends of the bone pricked deeper into tender flesh.

When Efran reached out again, he found himself slipping, so he quickly tightened his grip on his anchor. Thinking hard, Efran extended his right leg directly in front of him, finding that he could place his foot against the back of the dragon's throat. The beast yawned at this irritant, but it didn't seem to hurt him. It also shifted some of Efran's weight off the bone. Cautiously, he brought up his left foot, placing it against the back of the throat as well. It was close enough so that his legs were flexed.

He was now straddling the bone, caught by its sharp ends in the dragon's throat. And with the ends pointing away from him, he apparently had leverage to free it by pushing with his feet and pulling with his hands. But that also meant. . . .

When Leviathan yawned again, letting in a little light, Efran was able to look down at the black abyss beneath him. He was hanging onto the bone directly over the open throat. Should he dislodge the bone, he and it would drop right down into the esophagus. If it stuck again there, it would make no difference to Efran's condition; he would die regardless where he landed.

He lifted his face to a heaven which he could not see. Was he willing to die to relieve Leviathan's pain? But there was no way out—whether the beast had snatched him up in the hope that he would remove this irritant, Efran couldn't know. However, he already knew that Leviathan was instinctively swallowing, drawing him in, so that going out by way of the mouth was not possible.

Tightening his hold on the bone, Efran closed his eyes.

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Chapter 10

If Efran was going to do it, he had to do it soon; his grip was slipping in the saliva, which was burning his skin as well. If he dawdled until he lost his hold, he'd die without relieving his host in any way.

"I will love you forever," he whispered to her. He shifted his hold to grasp his arms around the bone, locking it in his embrace. With it pressed against the side of his face, he drew his knees up to his arms and rammed his booted feet into the back of the throat as hard as he could. At the same time, he straightened to pull on his anchor with all his strength—and felt it dislodge.

"We want to kill it, Commander," Gabriel was arguing. "We have harpoons that will do it. But if it's swallowed the Captain, we have to do it quickly before he suffocates or drowns." He spoke quietly, well out of the range of Minka's hearing. But the boys were listening unseen, perched on the fence nearby.

"Minka has a guaranty he'll come out," Wendt observed, nodding to her.

"It could be because we used the harpoons to kill it and then cut him out," Gabriel said tightly.

Unaware of this conversation, Minka asked Marguerite, "What did you see, Auntie?" Alarmed by Marguerite's cry, Minka's faith in the guaranty was wavering.

"I'm not sure. I thought I saw him falling. It may not be what we think, dear," Marguerite said, searching. But in her heart, she knew that's exactly what she had seen: his falling down the throat—with something clutched in his arms, strangely. Then she abruptly raised her head to look.

Turning, Minka could only look at the flower. She was aware of the great reeling blackness behind it, but kept her eyes locked on that tiny spot of yellow. As long as she could see that flower—

Wendt asked Gabriel, "And what if you harpoon Efran?"

"We have to try, Commander," Gabriel pleaded with tears in his eyes.

They all jumped as Leviathan reared up to gag and vomit. In the stream of saliva, digestive acid, and cow bits that erupted from its yawning jaws, the Captain appeared. He rolled on the ground, wrapped around something long and white. As the stream subsided around him, he staggered up. Men started vaulting over the jackleg fence with a roar.

Rising to his knees, he braced himself with one hand while raising the other. "Stop! Water. Bring me water, a lot, now, first." The dragon's stomach acid was burning him all over.

So the men turned to roar at each other instead, and soon a stream of them were riding to the wells and the east branch of the Passage. Efran stood, shaking mucus out of his face so he could see through fiercely watering eyes. He picked up the fish bone to let the saliva drip from it, noting the sharp, bloody points at either end. It was at least five feet long. He was unaware of the yellow flower that had emerged from the flood between his feet.

But everyone around Minka saw it, and wheeled to look at the glistening victory in her eyes.

Donovan cried to his father, "What is that? What happened?"

"I had to unstick a bone in his throat," Efran called back, holding it up.

They stared at him, then looked quickly at Leviathan behind him. He also was straightening, shaking himself. He arched his head on his long, curving neck to study the human holding the fish bone. Then he turned to begin running, stretching his broad wings to rise. The deflected air knocked Efran down again, and almost dislodged the onlookers from the jackleg fence. Wheeling south, Leviathan rose slightly before dropping over the cliffs into the Sea.

Following, everyone felt free to run through slushy mud and grass to the Captain. The first at his side, Lwoff, said, "He's obligated to you now, Cap'n, as Symphorien was obligated to the lady."

"Then don't eat our cows!" Efran shouted after the dragon, now disappeared. One of the soldiers, Pleyel, had taken off his own shirt to give to the Captain, who began wiping his face off with it.

Running up to him, Minka cried, "Stop! Don't trample it." And she bent to pick the common yellow dandelion from out of the nasty sludge around it.

She raised her eyes to her husband, who lowered the shirt to watch her in moderate confusion, because he knew Minka and that she did peculiar things sometimes. Gently cleaning the dandelion on her dress, she glowed at him. "It was my guaranty."

As the men began bringing buckets of water, Efran shooed everyone back so that he could douse himself. Shortly, he walked over to a somewhat fresh patch of grass, where he started removing the stinky, acidic clothes to bathe. Stripping down to the skin, he washed himself vigorously, and someone even brought him soap.

Minka stood in front of him to shield him from onlookers while he bathed. She washed her yellow flower in the streams from the buckets, getting considerably wet herself. Nobody particularly cared that Lwoff and Potton were still wet with seawater. (Donovan had dried off by now.) They and everyone else stood back a pace to allow the Captain a bit of privacy.

Finally clean but naked, Efran stood there watching Minka while she told him about her guaranty. Fennig ran a bundle of clothes to him, which he put on. They fit him well enough, though the pants were too short and the shirt too tight. Still, he sighed over his ruined boots with the eelfish bite holes. Clean, clothed, and barefoot, he paused over the bone in the grass to pick it up. Then he put an arm at her back to walk her toward the jackleg fence.

Now that he was dressed, Potton joined them. Efran glanced wryly over to the young man. "You have to write all this up for Captain Chee, you know."

Potton grinned. "Yessir, I can do it."

When they reached the fence where Lwoff stood with Wendt, Gabriel, Estes, and DeWitt, Kraken stretched out his nose from the other side in an attempt to snuffle his hair, but Efran pushed him away. "I've had all the snot I need for today." He extended the bone to Lwoff. "What is that, do you think?" All the men pressed forward to look, though Potton, Isreal, and Donovan were the closest.

"Cripes, Captain," Lwoff muttered, examining the bone. "That's got to be from a whale, which is too big a mouthful for even Leviathan. He got properly chastised for his greed, I s'pose. How'd you do it?" He handed the bone back to him.

"It was nasty," Efran grinned, looking to Minka. Laying her head on his chest, she held the little yellow flower in supreme contentment as he told them all about sloshing around in Leviathan's mouth until he got swallowed to the point where he could hold on to the bone. "It was stuck in the just the right position for me to pull it out. Then I started falling down his throat, as I knew I would, but the bone must have got caught crosswise, so he puked it up with me hanging on."

Donovan stood to launch himself off the fence onto Efran, who dropped the bone to catch him as he cried, "You're the best father ever!" Isreal was standing as well, but Donovan was hogging their dad.

"Then this is what we'll do," Efran said. "You'll go to class in the morning and work with a good attitude. Then once or twice in the afternoon, we'll find something special to do with you and Isreal, Toby, and any of the other boys that want to come. But I can't guaranty a Leviathan every day."

There was light laughter, and Efran looked at the soggy older boy, standing by unnoticed. "Potton will come with us, if Captain Chee allows."

"Thank you, sir," Potton said, trying not to tear up.

"Now everyone mount up," Efran said, putting Donovan back on the fence and taking up the bone again. "It's got to be close to dinner. I've got my appetite back. Commander." Efran saluted Wendt and patted his administrators, who nodded to him while contemplating Minka with the dandelion.

Wendt smiled. "At ease, Captain. Well, I suppose we don't need the harpoons now, Gabriel. Have the men return them to storage."

"Yes, Commander," Gabriel said in deep relief, turning to give instructions.

The large group around them began breaking up, and one of Hereward's field helpers brought over a canvas sack with the Captain's dripping clothes and boots (which the cows had begun to eat). Eymor bravely took charge of the sack, and Efran winced, "Don't tell the laundresses that they're mine."

"Your clothes are marked," Minka reminded him sweetly, still cuddling him.

"Wonderful," he grunted. (But days later, his treasured, nearly decrepit boots with the eelfish bite holes were returned to his quarters, cleaned.)

With Donovan behind Efran on Kraken and Isreal behind Minka on her mare, they all headed west at a walk. DeWitt, riding beside him, said, "I don't know how you do it, Efran. I wasn't seeing any way you'd survive being swallowed by a Leviathan."

Estes, riding beside Minka, asked, "Then did he pick you up deliberately to get the bone out of his throat?"

Contemplating the long white fragment in his left hand, Efran said, "I'm wondering. He was manipulating me in his mouth, but I couldn't see the bone until I landed on it, so, I don't know. And if it were stuck in almost any other position, I wouldn't have been able to remove it."

"It was ordained," Minka said dreamily, still caught up in the glory of her guaranty. The others glanced at her.

Upon their return to the fortress, everyone had just enough time to wash up before going in to dinner. Efran was now a bright red practically all over his body due to the acid. While he stripped off the borrowed clothes, Minka

got out her lanolin. She made him lie down so that she could spread it all over him. He enjoyed that.

But men were knocking at their door, so he redressed and brought the bone into the dining hall. Word of his encounter with Leviathan was just now going around here. Only wanting to eat, he declined to recount the whole thing again. So the men who had been there did the talking, especially Potton and Lwoff, who had seen it all from the beginning.

Donovan, also, proved himself an adept storyteller. He had their whole table spellbound as he narrated how Leviathan spewed seawater to immobilize its quarry, then scooped Efran up into its immense jaws "just like me cleaning my plate! He was that big. And all we saw was him chewing away, and we said, 'Welp, that's it for the Captain!'"

A half-dozen heads spun to Efran, who almost choked on his mouthful laughing. Swallowing, he said, "He was working his mouth, all right, but it wasn't to get me between his teeth, it was to get me to the back of his throat where the bone was stuck." He nodded to the whale bone making the rounds. "Now eat," he told Donovan.

Rondi's large eyes went to Minka. "I can't imagine what you were going through! And you're so calm now!"

"Wait for it," Efran murmured, taking another bite.

Minka smiled, laying the withered remains of a dandelion blossom in the middle of the table. "Because I had a guaranty," she said, enveloped in the promise all over again. She told them very simply what had happened. All the men who had heard her make the claim, and then seen the spot of yellow between the Captain's feet, were nodding in accord.

As Efran was inspecting Joshua's bowl, Durgin came around with a steaming basket from the kitchen. "Crab, Captain?"

Efran's head shot up. "Crab? From Nicarber?"

"Yes, Captain," Durgin said, placing a nice large crab on his nearly empty plate.

"That's beautiful," Efran breathed.

"Yes, it is. And your cracker and fork, sir," Durgin said.

"Excellent," Efran breathed, picking up the whole crab to remove the top shell, clean out the organs, and break off the legs. Half the table, the male half, closely attended the tutorial while the female half cringed, looking away.

As Efran broke open the middle to get to the meat, Durgin asked, "Who else here wants crab?" Numerous hands went up, so he had to make several trips back and forth from the kitchen. But everyone who asked for crab at the back tables got it.

Ella watched humorously as Efran fed Joshua, on his leg, bites of crab. The boy (almost 30 months old now) had looked disinterested until Isreal leaned over for a bite. Then Joshua almost bit Efran's thumb in making sure he got all of it. So Efran dug out more crab meat for all of his boys.

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Chapter 11

When the cups of drawn butter came around, Efran instructed, "Here, try it in butter." To Isreal, he murmured, "Use the claw to get the meat out of the leg." And he demonstrated how to break off a claw to pry meat out of the narrow channel. On his other side, Donovan got up on a knee to watch. "Dip it in the butter," Efran said.

Isreal did, leaning over to catch drips of butter from the leg meat. Then he looked at Efran with shining eyes. Donovan cried, "Give me crab with butter, too!"

"All right, sit down," Efran said, enjoying himself. The next thing he knew, the boys had eaten all of his crab. "Well, looks like we'll have to go to Nicarber tomorrow afternoon. Do you want to come?" he asked Minka.

"Yes," she smiled. Then she considered: it wasn't a wonder that she was so calm, but that he was. After almost being digested alive, he was happily engrossed in showing the boys how to dismember crabs. In fact, this happened frequently: Efran had been subjected to almost inhuman trials, and had survived each one with his sanity and sense of humor intact.

It was the children, she decided. His God-given love of children anchored him against storms of all kinds, and buoyed him against the lingering effects of trauma which tended to wash back over and over again. He rose above it, over and over.

So the following afternoon (May 14th), Efran checked with Mistress Hazeldene to confirm that Donovan had worked to the best of his ability. She affirmed this with only slight prevarication, as Donovan was tensely hanging on her answer. There was no need to ask her about Isreal's work.

Then Efran took them out to the back grounds where the other children were playing. Whistling lightly to get their attention, he told them, "I'm taking Isreal and Donovan out to Nicarber to see their fishing industry. Who wants to come? Any of you can come with us that want to."

Most of the children turned back to their play. But Toby paused, questioning Alcmund, who nodded. When they two ran over to join Efran, Donovan and Isreal, Toby told Efran, "Alcmund and I want to go." Alcmund confirmed this, although he eyed the wild Polonti kid a little warily. They had all heard about Leviathan, and Toby—smarter than many adults—didn't want to miss out on anything else.

"Excellent," Efran smiled. He then sent Tourle to Captain Chee to request that he release Potton from duty in order to make a scouting trip to Nicarber with him. Thus the boys set out happily for the courtyard, where Efran requested horses.

Shortly, Tourle ran up to salute Efran with, "Captain Chee thanks you for the request, which he'll allow. But he says that Potton is in tutoring right now."

"Of course," Efran said. "We'll just stop by and pick him up when he gets out." He then put out a call for bodyguards, sent one man up to the workroom to inform his administrators, and sent another man after Minka.

She arrived in her denim pants and snakeskin boots, ready for another adventure. He kissed her, observing, "We'd better be done with Leviathan."

"Why? He has to serve you, now," Minka grinned.

"No, thank you." Efran looked over to Squirt bringing their horses while four mounted bodyguards approached: Connor, Detler, Ley, and Ure.

They were discussing whether to put the children on horseback or in a cart when Allyr returned from the workroom with a request from DeWitt to take some supplies to Nicarber that Mura and Pewsey needed. (These were sisters from Craghead who had volunteered to work with the Picti in making the wrecked harbor town livable again.)

Arne had the list of supplies needed, which were in the western storeroom of the fortress. So after Arne brought the large two-horse wagon around, the bodyguards stacked sacks of grain and boxes of household necessities in it, then lifted four excited boys into the wagon as well. Preceding it down the switchback were Efran on Kraken, Minka on the dun mare, and two of the mounted bodyguards, Connor and Ley. Detler and Ure followed the wagon with a spare horse for Potton. They carried light arms—knives, bows and quivers, just in case.

To not obstruct traffic on Main, they detoured onto the side road between Delano's and Lowry's to reach Mowinkel's house. While Arne parked the wagon in front of the house, Efran sent Ure to check a window and see if class was in session.

Blocking practically all the light coming in, Ure wiped away dirt from a pane to peer inside. Then he turned. "Yes, Captain; the men are working on papers."

Glancing away, Efran said, "I hate to interrupt them, but we can't wait. Summon Potton."

"Yes, Captain." Ure opened the door to announce, "The Captain requires Potton."

There may have been some irritated muttering on the part of the tutor, but Potton exited quickly, gripping his papers and glancing at the mounted men in alarm. Then he saw the boys in the wagon waving to him, and Efran said, "We're going to look around Nicarber. Want to come?"

Potton grinned, saluting, and Ure showed him his horse as he himself remounted. Minka greeted him, too, demanding to see his papers, which he gave her. When they resumed their expedition, Potton rode alongside the wagon to talk to the boys.

They regained Main to exit the gates under Rawlins' appraising eye. Still seated in Firmin's outdoor dining area, he muttered, "I knew it. They've got too many kids at the fortress now, so they're exporting some of them. At least they're not making 'em walk."

Efran's party then crossed over the Passage at a leisurely walk, so they could talk. Coming upon the trolls' compound with the high wooden fence, Toby called, "Let's check on our trolls, Efran! We haven't seen them for weeks!" Alcmund agreed, though Isreal looked confused. Toby asked, "Isreal, have you ever met our playground trolls?"

He looked blank, so Toby told Efran, "Isreal hasn't even met them! So we have to stop and see them. Donovan won't know them either."

Donovan stared at Toby, whispering, "You play with trolls?" He hadn't ever seen any, either—he just knew that they were horrible maneaters.

"They're good trolls. They rescued Rondi from her evil uncle who was trying to kill her," Toby told him. Donovan sat back, regarding him in new respect.

"Very well, we're right here, anyway," Efran said. "Ley, open the gates for us." Ley dismounted while Arne merely directed the wagon off to the side. The boys immediately clambered out of it to run to the gates that Ley was pulling open. Rushing inside the compound, they stopped to look around. Efran rode in to look, as did Minka.

It was utterly deserted. Not only were the trolls gone, but their families, their pygmy hogs, and all their tools and supplies had disappeared. Toby ran into one hut to gaze at its emptiness. He ran back out, crying, "They left, Efran! Where did they go?"

Efran was shaking his head. "Maybe—back to their lands, now that the maneaters are gone."

"But I thought they liked it here," Toby objected, taking it as a personal rejection.

"I did, too," Efran admitted. "They may turn up again. Back in the wagon, now."

Dejected, the boys climbed back in to sit among the supplies. Donovan asked Toby to tell them about their trolls, so he kept them entertained all the way to Nicarber with stories about the funny way they talked, and their digging the sewers, and how Detler took one little troll girl to Twombly's—Almund abruptly stood in the wagon to grasp the back rail and demand, "Detler! Tell us about the little girl you took to Twombly's!"

Riding behind them, he laughed, "Gallie taught me that some trolls are just like people, because she's as much a little woman as any I've ever seen." And he told them about finding her trying to spend her royal at Twombly's, and how that had led to Twombly's carrying a wide selection of little girls' dresses.

By this time, the foremost riders of the group—Efran, Minka, Connor and Ley—had ridden onto the main street of Nicarber to look around. And the sight reduced them to silence.

The debris from the hurricane of four years ago had finally been cleared away. But the structures that the Picti were supposed to build when they arrived two months ago were nowhere in sight. All that was here was a hodgepodge of thatched huts and Picti running around in loincloths.

Connor breathed, "Wha—? I myself saw loads of lumber delivered here for their housing weeks ago."

Efran was shaking his head, dumbfounded. Then a broad, fair woman in a cotton sheath came out to the cart. "Ah! Very good," she said, looking over the supplies. She turned to call several names, and four or five men in loincloths ran over to empty the wagon and carry the supplies at the woman's direction. The boys quickly got out so that they would not be carried away or conscripted to help.

"Ah, Mura?" Efran asked, dismounting.

"Pewsey," she said happily. "Mura is baking fish for dinner. Much good fishing here."

"Yes, we appreciate very much the seafood we've been eating. But, what happened to the—? Weren't they going to build—?"

She laughed gaily. "This is how they want to live." And she turned to direct the supplies to another hut.

Looking toward the coast, Connor shaded his eyes to ask, "Isn't that Thrupp?"—the senior fortress engineer.

Efran squinted. "Yes, he's directing the harbor construction here. Let's see how that's going." He remounted to lead the other riders to the proposed harbor site. The boys scrambled back into the wagon for Arne to drive them down there, as well.

Thrupp and Gerard—another engineer—were standing at the coastline beside their horses. Dismounting, Efran walked over to greet them: "Thrupp. Gerard. We were just wondering—"

He broke off, looking around. There was nothing here. There had evidently been some dredging and site preparation, but, there was no ongoing construction nor materials. Efran stammered, "What—why—is there—what happened?" Minka, the bodyguards and the children crowded around them to listen.

Thrupp and Gerard looked at each other, and Thrupp exhaled, "We don't know, Captain. We've had work crews out here three times, with all the materials they need. They'd do a day's work, go home, and then come back the next morning to find everything undone and everything gone. I'd almost think the gods of the coast don't want a harbor here."

"That's—that's—" Efran was still sputtering. He looked back at the Picti's huts, which appeared to be of such rudimentary construction that they used neither lumber, nor nails, nor concrete. And everyone looked around as though stacks of wood and sacks of mortar might have been hidden under brush or dune grass somewhere.

But a few of the boys were sniffing the air. "I smell smoke," Isreal said.

"From over there," Potton said, looking west down the coast.

Detler said, "Yes, there's a plume of smoke just down the coast here." So Efran leapt back up on Kraken to begin loping him down the sandy shoreline west.

Immediately, the other riders followed, including Thrupp and Gerard. The boys scrambled back into the wagon, and Arne tapped the horses to follow along the shoreline. While everyone was curious about who was burning what over there, it was a very pleasant ride. They were even close enough to the water for a little sea spray to blow into their faces. And— "Something smells good!" Alcmund said.

They all caught up to Efran, who was sitting on Kraken staring landward. Shortly, they were all regarding a very fine, sprawling, one-story house built on concrete piers. In front of it, facing seaward, was a campfire being tended by a brightly dressed man with a bulbous nose, skinny arms and legs, big feet and hands, and wiry hair. He looked up to beam at the Captain. "Ah! Da Effen! Have fish, Effen! Da Curly Hair! Come, kids!" he called happily.

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Chapter 12

Climbing down from the mare, Minka cried joyfully, "Krug! What are you doing?"

"Fish bake!" he said, handing her a plate.

And the other playground trolls poured out of the house: Krug's wife Zaya, Irtz, Urpèd and his wife Votaw and their son Kobza, Schuchard and Sheuf with their wives and children. They came screeching in delight to see the visitors. Toby greeted Kobza, Milik, and Akko, introducing them to Isreal and Donovan. A little girl in an elegant dress came streaking toward Detler with her arms out: "Deetler! Deetler!"

He hoisted her, laughing, "Gallie, only you would dress up for a fish bake!"

There was a great deal of talking and laughing as the wives passed around genuine tin plates with baked fish: rainbow wrasse, bonito, red mullet, and others. Krug threw more on the fire while Sheuf expertly filleted them. The troll children brought everyone an ale, which the fortress children opened and drank before Efran could even see them. He was staring at fishing nets drying on the grass, and dinghies tied off on jetties. "You're the ones who've been supplying the fortress with seafood!" he said.

"Da!" Krug said. "Tanks for wood." He gestured to the beach furniture made from Lands lumber which the children were climbing all over to sit and eat.

"Krug, the fish is delicious!" Minka cried in genuine amazement.

"Da," he acknowledged complacently.

"We don't want to eat your dinner," Efran said, watching his men scarf down platefuls.

"What you mean, we got lots!" Krug said, waving over the ocean. "And you let us haf all dis." His wave encompassed the house, the beach, the jetties and dinghies.

Efran looked helplessly to Thrupp and Gerard, both of whom were eating. Gerard shrugged, "There's your fishing industry, Captain."

"I suppose so," he sighed, eating his mullet. It was good. Kraken was nosing in the beach grass. The boys, human and troll, were running and laughing in the spray, tackling each other in the sand, and flopping in the chairs to eat and drink.

An hour later, Efran surrendered his tin plate and called, "All right, everyone, mount up. We've eaten everything they've got. Time to go." Arne instructed the boys to go around collecting ale bottles to return to the Lands' gaffer. This they did, weaving and chortling. Then they all waved happy goodbyes to their troll friends, who waved happily back.

All the way home, the Landers were looking at each other in disbelief. Connor said, "Remember when they first came, and offered us eyeball stew?"

"Yes!" Minka cried.

As a counterpoint, Ley said contemplatively, "That was really good fish."

Potton studied Efran. "You let everyone come here."

"No, I draw the line at Leviathans," he said stubbornly. Glancing over at Minka's cocked eyebrows, he added, "Hush."

When the party arrived back at the fortress courtyard, Detler had to carry Alcmund to the boys' quarters, as he was sleeping off his ale. But Donovan, Toby, and Isreal crashed the other children's play around the pond, Donovan even jumping in (though he swore it was accidental).

Minka took Gaul and Mohr with her to The Lands Clothing Shop to tell the ladies all about the trolls' new home and livelihood, and Efran took himself up to the workroom to tell his administrators the same. DeWitt, Estes, and Pieta were all there to laugh in disbelief at Nicarber's new industry. "They even have 'wharves' if you don't try to dock anything bigger than a skiff," Efran said.

"So that's where all the wood and concrete went to," DeWitt mused.

"I have to admit, for the seafood, it's worth it," Efran confessed, adding, "and they're sporting some really colorful threads. I wonder if they're Windry's." Estes almost spewed his water.

Then Ryal and Whitgift both walked in with letters in hand. Ryal also carried a file. "Hello, all," he said. Glancing at Efran, he added, "I'm glad to hear that you came out of Leviathan in one piece, Efran."

"With a souvenir bone," Efran said, eyeing their letters.

"Sit, both of you," DeWitt said, nodding to the chairs in front of them. As they did, he observed, "I gather that Notary Shaffer has responded."

Ryal admitted, "Comprehensively. I'll let Notary Whitgift read his missive first."

As all eyes turned to the young notary, he smiled hazily. "This is rather exciting."

"Most people receiving such a letter would be alarmed," Ryal observed.

Whitgift waved. "I have you, the Captain, and the administrators watching out for me. What more do I need?"

"A miracle, sometimes. Read the letter," Efran said.

"Yes," Whitgift said, shaking it out. "It's dated yesterday, May thirteenth. 'From Lord Notary Shaffer,' et cetera. 'Dear Sir: The owner of the property which you were leasing has filed suit for extensive damages as a result of your tenancy. Therefore, you are required to pay compensation of thirty royals to me no later than the twentieth of May of the year eighty-one fifty-six from the creation of the world. If you fail to meet this deadline with a complete payment, interest will accrue on the unpaid portion. Yours,' et cetera." Whitgift looked up for their reaction.

Estes rose to begin rifling a cabinet while Efran leaned back, snorting, "The whole property is not worth thirty royals."

"No, it's not," DeWitt said, pulling paper over to him. As he wrote, he asked, "Did you happen to bring your notary stamp with you, Whitgift?"

"No, sir," he replied, a shadow crossing his face.

"Is your assistant there?" DeWitt murmured, writing.

"Colpe. Yes sir," Whitgift affirmed.

DeWitt whistled, and Lund stepped in, saluting. "Administrator?"

"Yes, Lund. Ride out to the Last Road Notary Shop just north of Tourse's Enforcement barracks and get Whitgift's notary stamp," DeWitt said, eyes on his paper.

"Yes, Administrator." Lund saluted again and left.

Meanwhile, Estes was standing at the cabinet to fill a pouch with thirty royals, which he slid across the table to Whitgift, who asked in shock, "You're—paying it for me?"

DeWitt replied, "Yes, but this is what you have to do—what's the name of the owner?"

"Armerding, sir," Whitgift replied.

"An old money name. Do you know where he lives?" DeWitt asked.

"Yes, sir. He just built a large new house in my area," Whitgift said, getting an inkling of the plan at hand.

The administrators stared at him. "He's not in Westford?" DeWitt demanded.

"No, sir, not any longer, though he still owns the shop in Westford," Whitgift replied.

"Huh." DeWitt shoved the sparsely written paper to him. "You take the payment to him, not Shaffer. Get him to sign the receipt, which of course says that the payment satisfies *all demands* he has on you or the Abbey Lands. You notarize it on the spot and bring it back here to me. And we're done with him."

"Thank you, sir," Whitgift said, receiving blotting paper from him as well.

DeWitt whistled again, and Verrin entered to salute. "Administrator?"

"Yes, Verrin—Whitgift here needs a horse and an escort to Armerding's house in the Far East Lands. We'll just wait on Lund, who is coming with his notary stamp," DeWitt said.

"Excuse me—I do have Podro here," Whitgift said.

"Then he just needs the escort and his stamp," DeWitt amended.

"Yes, Administrator. This way, sir," Verrin said.

"Yes," Whitgift said, rising with the pouch. "Thank you again, sir. This is fun."

Light laughter followed him out. Efran observed, "That was the easy one. Now for the next chapter of Wissowa's blackmail."

Ryal's faded blue eyes shot up to him. "Just so. It's addressed to you and me, Efran. 'Dear Sirs: Despite your efforts to brush away Lady Wissowa's complaint of Lord Efran's duplicity in the matter of payment regarding his paternity of her son, the lady avers that my cursory knowledge of his status did not rise to the level of comprehension she required to make an informed decision as to the amount due her. Because of his attempts to evade such responsibility, she now requires payment of twelve thousand royals, delivered to me in Westford. Your full compliance is required no later than the twentieth of May of the year eighty-one fifty-six from the creation of the world. If you refuse to comply, then she requires full custody of Donovan returned to her.'"

Once they had absorbed that, Efran asked, "What if I just ignore this?"

Ryal winced. "Then that leaves Shaffer—and Wissowa--a clear field to attack you with lies and innuendo. If we don't douse little fires, they blow up into big ones."

"All right," Efran said, leaning his head back on the chair to look up at the faerie tree. "Can Wissowa have the suit dismissed?"

Ryal said, "Yes, of course. But there's no way she'll let go of the chance to receive even a portion of the money. Obviously, she—or rather, Shaffer—is merely using Donovan as leverage to make you pay."

Efran slumped in acknowledgment of that, then slowly sat up. "So . . . what if I give her back Donovan?"

Estes looked up in horror and DeWitt began, "Efran, I know you're joking, but—"

Efran said, "No, I'm not joking. There's something in the Law, Ryal—Soames covered it in class a few days ago, in the section on—on—custody of children." He got up to tell whoever was at the door to bring up the book of the Law. Sitting again, he said, "I'm not entirely sure it's applicable, but—"

"You must be referring to the Rule of Custody of Minor Children," Ryal said thoughtfully. "It's so convoluted, however, I don't recall that I've ever seen it invoked. I'll have to read it again."

They waited quietly for Suco to bring up the big book of the Law, then the three administrators watched Ryal turn pages. "Here it is, in the chapter on Divorce: 'In cases which the parents are separated and both demand the custody of a minor child, they shall negotiate with the local notary for shared custody. If this is unworkable, the notary shall assign custody to one or the other. The aggrieved party who is denied custody may demand payment from the custodial party for the loss of the child. If the custodial party relents and waives custody of the child, payment shall be waived. Then if the aggrieved party finds herself or himself unable to keep the child, it shall be returned to the first party, and no payment shall be required.' The rationale for it is apparently to force the parents to cooperate with each other," Ryal ended.

"That's it. Doesn't it cover our situation?" Efran asked.

"You mean that you intend to give up Donovan to her to avoid paying? Yes, but—what is it going to do to Donovan, when you fought so hard to keep him?" Ryal asked.

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Chapter 13

"I explain to Donovan that this is how I get him back for good," Efran said. "And how he has to help."

The administrators nodded in comprehension and Ryal said, "You mean that when he turns out to be more than she can handle, she returns him to you, thus negating the requirement for you to pay her?"

"Possibly," Efran smiled.

Ryal admitted, "If you and he can actually pull it off, then there's the answer. In fact, Shaffer has overstepped himself here, in that he's no longer associated with Wissowa or this suit: she's now a resident of the Lands, having purchased a house here, and I am the resident notary."

DeWitt said, "I understand the need to answer it, but why do we have to play by Shaffer's rules?"

Ryal hesitated, removing his glasses to clean them on his shirt. Replacing them, he said, "That's a good question, DeWitt. We could refuse altogether on the grounds that he is trying to represent a Lands resident without residency himself. But, for conscience' sake, and for our continued blessing, we must be careful to abide by not just the Law, but the spirit of the Law—in this case, giving the mother every opportunity with her son, especially if she sees how she has erred in the past. Wissowa's demand for a thousand royals, while crass, was actually justifiable. But her inflated demands, encouraged by Shaffer, are ridiculous. However, now that she's brought custody of Donovan into question, we must settle that decisively. But that also means that her custody must meet the Law's demands. Giving her another chance with Donovan does not mean we have to stand by while he's endangered."

Efran agreed, "Yes, and that's how we win—she doesn't care about him any more than she ever did. What do you need of me?"

Ryal replied, "Our next step is to have her, you, and Donovan to my shop to explain her resumption of custody. So we'll do that tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow afternoon, Ryal. I have to talk to Donovan first. He's got class in the mornings, and he's too sotted tonight," Efran said wryly.

"Tomorrow afternoon it is, then," Ryal said.

Shortly thereafter, Whitgift returned almost dancing with the notarized receipt from Armerding.

As the children came out of class the following morning, May 15th, Efran walked over to meet them, smiling.

They gathered around him while Calix demanded, "Are you fighting dragons again today, Efran?"

"Yes," he admitted. "Only, this one wears dresses." The children laughed and he added, "You all can go play; I just need Donovan for a minute." They ran off, though Isreal looked back at Donovan a little apprehensively.

Walking with Efran, Donovan muttered, "This is about Mother, isn't it?"

"Yes. Let's go sit down." He took Donovan to the east-facing bench under the walnut tree, which afforded the

best view for thinking. When Donovan had plopped down, Efran sat beside him and said, "I got another demand from your mother yesterday, this one for twelve thousand royals."

Donovan gazed at him in shock. "Twelve thousand—twelve thousand royals. There's—not that much money in the whole world! Why—why—"

"Well, the short story is, the first thousand I paid her was not enough, according to her," Efran said.

"The first thousand—for what?" Donovan demanded.

"For you," Efran said. "That was to give me sole custody of you. But she decided that wasn't enough, and asked for ten thousand, then upped that to twelve."

"So you can keep me?" Donovan whispered.

Efran admitted, "That's her thinking, but—"

"You can't pay it," Donovan said, pale.

Efran winced. "We *could* pay it, but it would hamper our operations and prevent our helping other families who need it more. So, we're not going to pay. But if I don't, I have to give you up to her."

As tears appeared in Donovan's eyes, Efran leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "Listen. There's a catch." Donovan regarded him intently, and Efran said, "If she decides she doesn't want you after all, she can give you back to me. If she returns you to me voluntarily, then I don't have to pay her, and she can't take you again. Now, do you think you can make her not want you?"

The boy's eyes took on an evil glint and he smiled. Efran nodded, waving. "Yes, I've seen what you can do. But you have to moderate, Donovan—you can't hurt her, or break things, or steal. You just have to let her know that you're unhappy. We're going to meet her at Ryal's shop in a little while, and he'll explain more about what that means for all three of us. Regardless, the end result will be that you come back here to me. But we have to do it the right way, according to the Law, because that's the only way to make sure you get to stay. Do you understand?"

Donovan lifted his face, nodding. Efran stood. "All right, then. I need to—"

Donovan clutched his hand. "Since I can't see you again for maybe a long time, can you just stay out here with me until it's time to go to Ryal's?"

Efran eased back down to the bench. "Yes, if you stay out of the pond. How are your bites?"

The boy crooked his elbow to look at several red spots on the underside of his arm. "Aw, they're fine." He turned thoughtful. "Can I take some of the toe biters with me to Mother's?"

Efran laughed, putting an arm around him, then paused. "Let me think about that."

Not much later, Efran took him to the courtyard to ask that Kraken be saddled. Minka watched sullenly. "Why can't I come? Donovan is mine, too." The boy hugged her, then stood on the balls of his feet to raise himself almost to her height.

Efran smiled at them, but shook his head. "You'd just be a distraction for her. She'll get so caught up in criticizing your riding dress that we'll be there hours longer than we need to be. I promise to tell you all about it."

"How long will he have to stay with her?" she pouted. Donovan liked that.

"We don't know yet," he said, watching Kraken trot up. Efran turned to mount, then Cudmore hoisted Donovan up behind him.

Holding onto Efran, Donovan looked down at her disgruntled face, and promised, "I'll be back." She pulled him down far enough to kiss him, and he almost fell off. Efran hauled him back up and turned Kraken to walk down the switchback.

They arrived at the notary shop to be greeted by Ryal and Giardi. She smiled warmly and he said, "Ah, good timing, Efran; we're not terribly busy right now. Hello, Donovan. Will you stick your head out the door and tell Cyneheard and Henris to bring your mother?"

"Yes, sir." Donovan opened the door and shouted, "Notary says you're to bring the dragon in a dress now!"

Those inside the shop heard the men laughing, "Yes, sir!" Efran stroked his face innocently and Giardi laughed.

"I'll give you points for making Lady Giardini laugh," Efran muttered to his son, who accepted it as high praise.

"Come have a seat, you two," Ryal instructed. "Soames, will you get set up back here as well? Thank you."

Soames sat at his small amanuensis table in the corner, bringing out his note-taking materials. Donovan put his head down on the interview table as if to go to sleep. Ryal brought the fat file on Wissowa (loaned from DeWitt) to the table and sat. Efran crossed his arms over his chest to wait, watching the outer door.

While Ryal was thumbing through the file, Donovan raised up, watching. Then he asked, "What is that?"

Efran looked over as Ryal raised the letter in his hand. "This?" In reply, Donovan nodded. Ryal said, "This is a letter from Lord Shaffer to your father on behalf of your mother. It's the first demand she made for money."

Studying the unintelligible markings, Donovan said, "I can't read yet. Will you read it to me?"

So Ryal read, "'Lady Wissowa of Westford has informed me that you admit paternity of her son Donovan. Therefore, in compensation to her for the expense and inconvenience of providing for him thus far, she is bringing suit against you in the amount of one thousand royals.'"

Donovan considered that, then took the letter to finger it. "What is this?" he asked, feeling the lump.

Ryal said, "That is the seal, that keeps the contents of the letter private. Only the person to whom it's addressed, or his secretary, may break the seal. But once that's broken, anyone can read it." He did not mean that it was permissible for anyone to read it, only possible. Donovan returned the letter, and Efran saw the same concentration as he had shown in the cell barracks, before he threw the lantern.

"Where's the letter on ten thousand royals?" Donovan asked.

Ryal pulled out that letter out to read, "'Dear Sir: My client Lady Wissowa has informed me of your subterfuge

in concealing your full title and status while in the process of answering her suit against you regarding the paternity of her son Donovan. Given this misapprehension, she was deterred from claiming the full amount she should be owed from your callous refusal to even give her your name after the incident of conception. The fact of your prompt payment indicates the negligibility of the amount rendered.

“Therefore, my client has submitted a revised suit against you in the amount of ten thousand royals. This is to be paid into her account which her fiduciary Plonse is handling.” He laid the letter down to look at the boy.

Donovan swiveled quickly to look at his father, who raised his brows. The amounts were just what he had said. Donovan asked, “Is there another for—twelve, uh, twelve thousand?”

“Yes,” Ryal said, pulling another sheet from the file to read the letter they had just received yesterday.

Listening intently, Donovan said, “The more money he asked for, the bigger the words he used.”

Efran laughed ruefully and Ryal agreed: “Also, the weaker the argument, the more words he used.”

Donovan studied him. “You must be a very smart man, to understand all that.”

“Yes, he is,” Efran said.

Minutes later, they heard her complaining as she approached: “I don’t know what gives you the right to simply drag someone out of a shop when I have every right to be there and am not overspending my budget at all, as far as I know. And there’s not enough allocated for Flores! I couldn’t live without her.”

The door slammed against the wall upon opening. The lady’s escorts brought her to the door of the interview room, saluting. Cyneheard said, “Wissowa as requested, Captain.” Donovan studied the kind of dress that dragons wore.

“Thank you. Dismissed,” Efran said.

They drew back as Wissowa stared into the room. “What is this?”

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Chapter 14

Ryal said, “Thank you for coming, Wissowa. Have a seat, please. We’re going to address your latest demands on Lord Efran. Now, Wissowa, Efran, Donovan—do you swear on your souls to tell the truth in this hearing?”

“Yes, Lord Ryal,” Efran said.

He nudged his son, who murmured, “Yes, sir.”

They all looked at Wissowa as she took the last seat. Glancing behind her, she said, “Shaffer warned me not to say anything to you without his being present.”

Ryal said, "I'm sorry, but Lord Shaffer is no longer a part of these proceedings. When you moved to the Abbey Lands and bought a house, that made you a resident here, where Lord Shaffer has no standing to act as notary. I am senior Notary of the Lands, and if you refuse my judgments, I am empowered to dismiss your complaint."

Efran watched her hesitate, and Donovan lifted up in hope. While he didn't understand all the words, he perceived the threat. "Well, then," she said uncomfortably. "If you're so determined to take advantage of a widow, I suppose I have no choice."

"Do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?" Ryal repeated blandly.

"Yes," she murmured. "But I'll write Shaffer and tell him everything," she threatened.

"Which is your prerogative," Ryal said, opening his folder. "Now then, as regards your demand of twelve thousand royals, Lord Efran states his inability to pay that amount without crippling the vital functions of the Fortress. Therefore—"

"Ten thousand, then," she said.

"Therefore," Ryal resumed, "he has appealed to Section One Hundred Ten of Roman's Law, 'Rule of Custody of Minor Children.' If you are not familiar with this section, I can read it to you, or you may read it for yourself."

Eyes glazed, she said, "You read it."

"Very well." Ryal stood to consult the old book of the Law, where it lay open on its stand to the relevant section. This he read out loud, then sat again. "Since Efran professes his inability to pay as you demand, he is relinquishing Donovan to your keeping."

She stared at him, uncomprehending. "What?"

"Since Efran can't pay, you get Donovan," Ryal said.

Almost panicking, she looked from him to her son, who stared back at her in hostility. "Well, let's talk about this," she said. "We can negotiate the amount."

Efran inhaled, but left it to Ryal to say, "That is the problem, Wissowa. In acknowledging his paternity of Donovan, Efran paid the amount you demanded, one thousand royals. In accepting that payment, you also gave him custody of his son. Then you came back to demand ten thousand royals, then twelve thousand royals. The demands must stop, so Efran is resorting to the Law and giving up his son to make the demands stop."

She stared at him, breathing heavily. "Well. Let me—talk to Shaffer, and then—"

"Wissowa, again, Shaffer has no standing to hold up our legal proceedings. Efran is entitled to a resolution on the question of what he owes you. Therefore, you must either decline or accept custody of your son today. There is no more money to be made off him," Ryal said in his legal voice.

She stood angrily. "Very well, then, come!" she barked at Donovan.

Ryal said, "One moment, Wissowa."

"What now?" she shouted. She was unaware that three customers in the outer office had suspended their transactions with Giardi in order to listen. Giardi was listening, too.

Extending a sheet to her, Ryal said, "Here are the conditions for maintaining custody of a minor child according to Roman's Law. You must read this and sign it."

She took it from his hand to slap it to the table. "Where's your quill?"

Reclaiming the sheet, Ryal said, "If you will not read it, I will read it to you. It says, 'Minimal Requirements for Sustaining a Child under Twelve Years of Age'—Donovan is ten, I understand?"

"I don't know," she said irritably.

"Donovan is ten, then," Ryal said. "The requirements are numerated thus: 'One: The child must be given appropriate nutrition, rest, and clean clothing for his age and needs; he must be nursed when ill, and taken for treatment when injured. Two: The child must be supervised according to his age and needs. He is not to roam streets unattended; the supervising parent must know where he is and what he is doing at all times. Three: He must not interfere with anyone's work, nor create a nuisance, nor vandalize or destroy any property. The supervising parent shall be held liable to pay for any such damage.'"

Donovan darted quick eyes to his father, who subtly shook his head. With that promising tactic put out of play, Donovan settled down to listen to the rest with the same concentration.

Ryal continued, "'Four: The child must be schooled in reading, writing, and numbers, and be given the opportunity to learn and do meaningful work. Five: Any complaints about any of the above that come to the attention of the district notary shall be investigated. If they are found warranted, the supervising parent may be fined or forced to give up custody of the child to an approved caretaker.' Here I will tell you, Wissowa, that if it's not working out with you and Donovan, you may simply bring him back to me," Ryal said.

"If I give him up, do I get the money?" she asked.

"No," Ryal said. "There will be no more money forthcoming."

Indignantly, she asked, "Then how can I support him on the budget I've got now?"

Ryal looked to Efran. Finger at his lips, he said, "DeWitt will inform Ploense of your new obligations, and he'll adjust your budget accordingly. But aside from food, he'll require receipts for everything you buy him." It was almost scary to see the wheels turning behind Donovan's eyes as he looked back to his mother.

Staring down at the paper, she murmured, "Shaffer warned me not to sign anything without showing it to him."

Efran said, "Because that cuts him out of the deal. How much of that twelve thousand was to be his take? And he took such good care of your thousand royals that we had to come get it and you out of Westford."

Without looking at him, she exhaled, then picked up the quill and signed. Tossing it down to the table, she directed to her son, "Well? Come on so I can figure out what to do with you!"

"See?" Donovan said to Ryal. "She doesn't want me. She never wanted me; she never fed me or took care of me; I'd've starved if it weren't for Flores, and she complained that my mother wouldn't give her enough money in her grocery budget to feed me."

Wissowa paled, and it appeared that she might relinquish custody right then and there. Ryal leaned forward to tell Donovan, "If you have any complaints, come tell me. We're very close to your mother's house."

"Thank you, sir," Donovan said, then turned angry eyes to his mother.

This collusion stiffened her spine. Drawing herself up, she said, "Oh, no. You're not going to make me the villain in your little drama. If you're going to be tight-fisted with your own son, so be it. Let's go see what Flores has for dinner, Donovan."

As he got up from the chair, he looked back at his father. Efran regarded him with watering eyes. Smiling, Donovan winked, then turned to follow his mother out of the shop. Efran put his head in one hand.

Ryal said, "Don't worry, Efran; she can't keep up the pretense for long."

"No, I'm sure she can't. But she can do a lot damage," he murmured.

Walking back to her house, Wissowa muttered, "Now, then." She was talking to herself, thinking through her options. She didn't notice at first that Donovan had outrun her, nor did she remember that he knew where she lived. "First thing, I've got to write Shaffer and tell him what has happened."

Approaching her house in the western section (right behind Whately's), she looked up to see Donovan fling open the front door and run inside. "Yes, I'd better ask him what to do now," she said unhappily. (It is a legitimate question as to why she was suddenly so dependent on Shaffer after excoriating him from Whitgift's front steps, but there is a reason which is not disclosed until the next book. The reader may guess it before then.)

For his part, Donovan seemed to have no doubts about what to do. He burst into the small kitchen as Flores was putting finishing touches on her and Lady Wissowa's dinner. "Hello, Flores!" he cried happily. She startled so violently that she dropped the bowl of cream sauce she'd been holding. It shattered on the floor, the cream oozing around her feet.

"Get out!" she shouted. "Who—?" She paused to look him in the face as he bounded up to see what she was making. "Donovan?" she whispered.

"That looks great! You get to feed me, now, too! Let's try it!" he suggested, then picked up her stirring spoon to help himself to great dollops of chopped chicken and mushrooms in a cream sauce. "Oooh, that's good! And I'm hungry, Flores. I've been sitting in that notary's office all day while Mother fought Father to get me, and she won! So here I am. What's on this other plate? More chicken?" He gulped down a few spoonfuls off that plate as well.

"No, stop! I'll give you something else!" Flores cried, then looked up as her mistress passed through the nook on her way to her bedroom. "Lady Wissowa! You've got to—"

Wissowa raised a hand. "Whatever it is will have to wait a moment, Flores. I have to get a letter off to Notary Shaffer right away. Bring my dinner to my room." And she vanished down the short corridor.

Meanwhile, Donovan had found dessert—a beautiful little tiered cake layered with strawberries and cream. Saliva appeared at the corner of his mouth as he stared at it. "No!" Flores cried, jerking the plate out from under his nose. Unfortunately, that caused the cake to slide right off the plate onto the floor.

They both looked down at it: she in horror and he in delight. "Look what you did," Donovan marveled. Then he bent to grab up a handful and stuff it into his mouth.

"Stop, you!" Flores cried. She snatched the knife-sharpening strap off its hook to begin flailing at him with it. Hooting, he ducked under it to grab up a second handful of cake from the floor. Then he ran back out the front door, leaving a trail of cake, strawberries, and/or cream on the door and everywhere he passed.

Eating and laughing, he ran all the way back to the notary's shop. Ryal, about to go in, paused in the doorway. Efran, halfway up the switchback on Kraken, saw Donovan coming and wheeled Kraken around to lope back down again.

Pausing breathlessly on Ryal's steps, Donovan smeared a few smashed strawberries on his handrail. "Hello, Lord Ryal! It's going great!"

His father drew up on Kraken to drop from the saddle, holding out his arms to his son. Donovan shed the remainder of the cake to grasp his father's forearms. "Tell them to save my bed for me!" he cried, then turned to run back to his mother's house.

As Efran and Ryal stared after him, Efran picked a flattened strawberry off his sleeve to eat it contemplatively.

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Chapter 15

Donovan reentered his mother's house and sat quietly at the table in the nook, folding his hands. He could hear Flores stridently objecting to his presence in the house and his mother attempting to calm her. Finally, Wissowa came out of her room to see him sitting at the table. He raised large brown eyes to murmur, "I'm hungry, Mother."

Behind her, Flores eyed him darkly, but Wissowa sighed, "Give him a plate, Flores; I've got to get this letter written and off to Shaffer today." Donovan glanced after her astutely as she turned back to the bedroom.

Tight-lipped, Flores went into the kitchen to reallocate the defiled chicken dinners onto three plates, then placed a small portion in front of him. "May I have something to drink?" he asked.

"There's the water pitcher. Get it yourself," she said. He got up to pour a cupful two-handed, as the pitcher was heavy. Taking the cup to the table, he watched her take another plate to her mistress in her room.

He got up to look around the kitchen while he listened to his mother question the smallness of the portion, and Flores explain that she had to feed Donovan now, too. Spotting a wine bottle with a loose cork, he picked it up to remove the cork and take a generous swig. He staggered a bit putting it back down, so that it tipped over. He righted it quickly, looking down at the red puddle on the floor. So he grabbed a dishtowel to soak up the puddle.

With Flores on her way back to the kitchen, he tossed the towel behind a barrel of flour, then sat quickly to resume eating. Aware of his mother's emergence from her room, he asked Flores, "Is there anything left of that cake you threw on the floor?"

Poor Flores stared at him as Wissowa exhaled, "I've got to catch one of the riders so that this letter gets delivered today. I'll be back shortly. Never mind dessert." Wisely, Donovan refrained from smiling.

At the fortress, the other children asked about Donovan, and Efran explained that he had to go stay with his mother for a little while, but he would be back. They were glad to hear that, and Hassie said thoughtfully, "He's a troublesome boy, but he's cute." Efran looked wary and Minka grinned at her.

Since Wissowa had no bed for him, Donovan slept on the settee in the front room—when he was there, that is. When he was sure that his mother and her housekeeper were asleep, he quietly slipped out the back door to explore the neighborhood, just to see what he found. But he refrained from trying any doors to see if they were locked and headed back to his mother's house without stealing anything.

By the time he made it back home, it was early in the morning of May 16th. Donovan prowled around the small, dark kitchen for something to eat. Not knowing about the cold storage compartment in the floor, he found only a platter of old, dry crusts of bread. So he ate those, softened in a little wine. This sent him back to sleep on the settee, and he didn't awaken until his mother bustled through the room on her way to the front door.

Not seeing him, she called back to Flores, "I'm going shopping, then having the midday meal with Bozzelli. I don't know how quickly I'll hear back from Shaffer, but be sure to let me know if I get a letter from him. He'll tell me how to make this ridiculous situation pay."

From the other room, he heard Flores say plaintively, "What do I do with Donovan, Lady Wissowa?" She was agitated and breathless, having just come from Tallmadge the printer's shop where her son Weddell was working. The printer was displeased with her asking to speak to him, but promised to send Weddell by Lady Wissowa's house when he returned with their breakfast. Fortunately, Tallmadge's shop was only three blocks up.

Wissowa waved, "Let Donovan out. He never stayed home before."

Flores said something in reply, but his mother was out the door. After a few minutes, Donovan went to sit at the small table in the nook. Flores was in the kitchen, washing up breakfast dishes. When she saw him, she startled. He said guardedly, "I'm hungry."

"I can't imagine why, after eating our dinners last night," she said, peeved.

"I'll tell the notary if you don't feed me," he said.

She drew up in surprise, knowing nothing of what her mistress had been told regarding her obligations. Still, she said, "Well, we can't have that." He watched alertly as she opened a trap door in the floor to bring out several covered dishes and a pitcher. Then she placed a short stack of flapjacks with strawberries in front of him, with a cup of cool milk.

He ate and drank quickly as she bustled about. When she turned around again, he said, "I need a poop pot."

She bristled, "The privy is in the backyard, there. But as long as you're going, you may empty Lady Wissowa's chamber pot." He glanced around blankly, so she began, "It's in—" Deciding that she'd rather not have him rummaging in the lady's room, she said, "I'll get it."

He watched her go down the short corridor, then return gingerly carrying an enameled pot by its handles. This

she set outside the back door. Nodding to a bucket by the steps, she said, "After you empty it, go draw water from the community well to clean it out."

Donovan went out to pick up the unwieldy pot and carry it uncertainly to set it beside the small shed with the crescent moon carved in the door. But as his need was more urgent, he went in himself, first. There, he found an array of papers and old sponges for his own clean-up.

As he opened the door to pick up the chamber pot, he glanced up to see Weddell stalking toward the yard. Donovan knew him only as "Badger," one of the members of the gang that had come to take him from the hilltop. But he hadn't been with Eagle, Stag, and Hare—Potton—at that time, and Donovan didn't know why. But he didn't want to be seen today.

Bringing the pot quickly into the outhouse, Donovan tripped on the step and lost hold of the pot, which was just the right size to slip past the hole in the board into the depths of the pit beneath it. Climbing up on the board, Donovan watched out the crescent moon while Weddell went to the back door. "Ma? I'm here."

She opened the door to him, and he went in. Donovan could hear nothing of what they said in the house. But Weddell asked, "What is it, Ma? I've got to get back to work."

"Yes, Weddell. Donovan is here; Lady Wissowa tells me that she got custody of him just long enough for Lord Shaffer to tell her how to get Lord Efran to pay more. But she's not prepared to watch over him, and I certainly can't. So I need your help with him," she said.

He screwed up his face. "Ma, I'm working overtime as it is. I haven't got time to do anything with him."

"Can't you take him to work with you?" she asked.

"To Tallmadge's? Around his printing press?" Weddell asked, incredulous.

"I can't do anything with him either!" she vented.

"Didn't his father want him?" Weddell asked.

"Well, perhaps," she said vaguely.

"Fine, I'll walk him up hilltop," Weddell said.

"Not yet," she said a little desperately.

He raised a hand in dismissal, turning away, then said, "Ma, why are you still a servant? Do you know all the places here that could sell your embroidery? And that designer, that—Windry has put out a call for beaders at high pay. I helped Tallmadge print up her notices. I'll bring one to you. Or, just walk up Main yourself and see them hung up everywhere!" In frustrated impatience, he walked off, leaving his mother wringing her hands.

After watching him walk back through the yard, Donovan climbed down from the privy seat and cautiously went to the back door. He entered quietly, as Flores was standing in the kitchen, fretting and murmuring to herself. Then she abruptly left the kitchen, going to her room. Donovan listened to her scrabbling about before emerging again with a handful of embroidered tea towels. Oblivious to him, she hurried to the front door. He followed to watch her fly out, trotting between Whately's and Imelda's to gain Main Street.

Donovan closed the door and returned to the kitchen to open the cold storage compartment in the floor. Then he sat on the floor to eat the rest of the strawberries and flapjacks and drink all the milk.

Feeling much better, he wandered through the small house, thinking about what to do. He looked around his mother's disordered bedroom, but having promised his father he wouldn't steal, he left her jewelry alone. With nothing else to do, he returned to the front room to plop down on the settee and wait.

He had almost fallen asleep again when loud knocking on the door right in front of him jolted him up. He sat stupefied for a moment, but when it was repeated, he went to open the door.

There was a dismounted rider with a green sash, which was the universal emblem of a messenger. There were severe penalties for robbing or interfering with messengers, hence the colored warning. Holding out a folded, sealed paper, he said, "Letter for Lady Wissowa from Lord Shaffer."

Donovan stared at him, then said, "I'll take it for her."

He reached for the letter, but the messenger withheld it, saying, "You have to sign for it." He extended a signing board with charcoal on a string.

"I can do that," Donovan said. With the tip of his tongue pressed between his lips, he took the charcoal to credibly write, "HARE."

The messenger took the board to look at it, then said, "Here you go, then, Hare."

"Thank you, sir," Donovan said, and the rider smiled at him as he remounted to resume his deliveries.

After seeing him off, Donovan knew just what to do with this letter, and began running toward Lord Ryal's shop. Then he paused in consternation. It was sealed. No one but his mother could look at it, unless. . . . Glancing around furtively, Donovan broke the seal. There! Now it was readable.

He ran clear up Main to the steps to the notary's door and flung it open. Startled, Ryal and his wife watched while he came over to slap the unsealed letter on the counter. Then he paused to smile seductively, "Hello, Lady Giardini."

"Hello, Donovan!" she said, laughing.

On the way out, he tossed over his shoulder, "Tell Father I made you laugh." Then he was gone again.

Laughing again, she looked at the letter in Ryal's hands. "What is it?" she asked.

"From Shaffer to Wissowa," he murmured. Seeing the broken seal, he opened it to peruse it, then went to the front door to gesture to a soldier. "Ask Efran to step down here, if he's free."

"Yes, Lord Ryal," the man said, darting for his horse.

"What?" Giardi demanded, and Ryal showed her the letter. Reading it, she drew a long breath, then exhaled, "Oh, my."

Before he could be summoned, however, Efran arrived with Whitgift, the new East Lands notary. The young man had a severe hang-dog face. "I'm finished, Lord Ryal."

“What? Why?” Ryal demanded.

Efran tossed a letter at him. “Our good friend in Westford, Lord Baroffio, is threatening to charge him with corruption after he failed to find evidence for Shaffer’s corruption. We all know he’s corrupt, but Whitgift seems to think that we have to have evidence other than universal knowledge,” Efran said, peeved and sarcastic.

Ryal and Giardi turned to laugh at each other. “All right, now I’m offended,” Efran said darkly.

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Chapter 16

Ryal said, “Whitgift’s evidence was just hand-delivered to us by Donovan.” And he gave the letter to the young notary.

“Where is he?” Efran asked, looking to the back room.

Ryal said, “He ran out again, which indicates how he may have come by the letter—”

“After making me laugh,” Giardi said, and Efran smiled gloriously on her.

Patently, Ryal said, “Read it aloud, Whitgift.”

At this time, Flores was shyly knocking on the door of the address indicated on Windry’s flyer (past New North Road, in the East Central Lands). The door was flung open for Windry herself to say impatiently, “You have to bead a test segment so that I can judge the quality of your work before I hire you.” Behind her, the front room of the little house was filled with prospective workers earnestly beading. Speechless in fear, Flores held out her tea towels.

Windry took the topmost towel to shake it out and examine it. She looked sharply at Flores. “Did you stitch this?”

“Yes,” Flores whispered.

“Can you start right away?” Windry asked.

Flores stammered, “Yes, but—I need a place to stay, and I need to remove my things—”

“I have plenty of room here,” Windry said. “Holst! Benoit!”

Two young men came running up. “Yes, ma’am,” one said.

Windry turned to ask her new embroiderer, “What’s your name? Where are you living now?”

She was so shocked, she had to think for a minute. “Flores. And I’m at number thirty-five in the western section, right behind Whately’s.”

"Go bring her things here," Windry ordered.

"Yes, ma'am!" As those two sprinted away, Flores looked after them, but followed Windry, who was giving her instructions about exactly what she wanted done.

One minute later, Minka came up the walk to knock tentatively on Windry's partly open door. Having seen the flyers herself, she was interested in the results. "Hello? Windry? I was at The Lands Clothing Shop, and just wanted to see how things were . . . going. . . ."

As she stared around the roomful of stitchers, one girl looked up and said, "You have to prove your stitching skills to get on here. Have a seat and take up a square." She nodded toward a pile of fabric squares skewered with needles and embroidery floss.

"Thank you. I'd never make the cut," Minka said, retreating to the amusement of her bodyguards.

Back at #35 in the western section, Donovan was again sitting on the front-room settee in the eerily quiet house, wondering what else was going to happen. When nothing happened, he started to nod off again, but was jolted upright by more loud knocking on the front door.

Interested, he opened it to see two men standing on the porch. One said, "We're from Designs by Windry, and she wants all of Flores' things brought to her house."

"Why?" Donovan blurted.

"Flores is going to be working for her," the man said.

"Oh! Good for her. This way," Donovan said. He brought them to Flores' room, boldly instructing, "Everything in this room goes"—whether it actually should or not.

"As you say," one said, and bent to pick up the bed with mattress, covers, and pillows all held together with a beefy arm. The other picked up a chest of drawers likewise.

As they maneuvered those bulky items out of the small room, down the short corridor, and out of the narrow front door, Donovan swept everything out of the built-in closet: clothes, shoes, a writing kit, a darning kit, and little accessories. These he crammed into several carpet bags (one borrowed from his mother's room) which he hauled out himself, hurrying after the two who were striding up side streets in the western section with furniture on their shoulders.

They passed between Imelda's and Tullar's to gain Main, then turned north to pass Averno's, where Wissowa was sitting in the outdoor dining area with Bozzelli, both giggling. She paused at the sight of vaguely familiar furniture walking by, followed by a black-haired boy who turned a beautiful grin on her as he lugged two carpet bags after the furniture.

"I say, did you hear me?" Bozzelli asked.

"Of course, darling; it's excellent," she replied, lifting her glass. While he continued talking, she wondered what she had just seen.

When the furniture and the bags arrived at Windry's, she waved them to a side room which currently held sewing

supplies and materials. With Donovan's help, the men moved all this to another room, and arranged Flores' (and Wissowa's?) furnishings in this room. Then they returned to #35, Donovan skipping between them, to remove the rest of the articles from the old room, packing them into whatever bags they found. Donovan helped by gathering what he thought Flores might need from the kitchen and the wash room, including his mother's scented soap.

When they passed Wissowa with this last load, she didn't see, being diverted by Bozzelli's lips at her neck. But the diva Arbaiza, the famous red-haired mezzo-soprano, had emerged from Firmin's next door to sit in the outdoor dining area and receive gifts from her admirers.

As she smiled patiently at their adoration, she happened to glance over to see her most devoted worshiper, Bozzelli, now canoodling another object. Arbaiza almost lurched up to study her rival's white-gold hair and ample bosom. Then her eyes narrowed in a promise of retribution.

Meanwhile, Donovan helped Holst and Benoit get everything set up in Flores' new room. He even lined up her toiletries on her dresser. And when they were all done, Benoit tipped Donovan a royal for his help.

Back in Ryal's shop, Whitgift held up the letter to read: "My dear Wissowa: I never heard of such shocking, duplicitous behavior on the part of a notary as what you describe. True, there is a section in the Law on "Custody of Minor Children," and no, I hadn't forgotten about it. We can prove that it does not apply here, and will not enable Efran to get Donovan back without paying you a great deal more. The Fortress can easily pay the twelve thousand if they only liquidate some of their Treasury holdings.

"So this is what you must do: Bring a carriage up tomorrow, May sixteenth [which, incidentally, was today], and I will have Notary Pherigo ready to go back down to the Lands with you to charge Ryal with corruption and Efran with abandonment of his son for the first ten years of his life. That will certainly get their attention, and rid me of several irritants. I am testing Pherigo now to receive his license. Regardless how he does on his first try, I'll have him ready by tomorrow.

"In all this, my name will go unmentioned; my hand in the proceedings will be invisible. But by the time I am done, we will be exceedingly wealthy.

"Burn this letter.

"Much love, Your Shaffie"

Whitgift stared at Ryal and Efran to gasp, "I can't count the number of transgressions here."

Ryal said, "Yes. You'll post that to Lord Baroffio at once, which will give him all the evidence he needs. But he'll have to find another notary, one in Westford, as you are now ineligible. And since I cannot tell you who delivered that letter to me, you also must testify that it came by an anonymous hand."

"Yes. Thank you again, Lord Ryal, and thank you, Captain Efran," Whitgift said in vindication of his confidence in his heroes.

Efran raised his hands. "I had nothing to do with it. But go ahead and send it from here, Whitgift. Ryal will package it for you."

"Yes," Ryal said, refolding the letter. Giardi produced the paper for the cover letter to Lord Baroffio. Ryal suggested the wording for this, which Whitgift reproduced verbatim.

Giardi then wrapped it all up, sealing it, and Ryal opened the door to hail a passing messenger.

While they waited, Efran asked, "Where does this leave Donovan?"

Ryal exhaled, "Unfortunately, nothing about Shaffer changes Donovan's situation. We just have to keep an eye on her to see that she abides by the terms of custody." Efran looked off, dissatisfied.

Donovan, on his way back down Main, balked at the thought of returning to his mother's house, especially as no one was there now. Looking over to the notary shop, he saw Kraken playing in the trough behind the community well next to it. His heart leapt up, and he began trotting toward the shop.

But when he saw the same messenger pull up before it, Donovan turned aside to face Croft's. With the royal in his pocket, he went in to purchase a half-dozen (nonalcoholic) ginger beers. He emerged with his sack to see the messenger's horse still outside Ryal's.

Opening a ginger beer to drink on it, Donovan kept his back to the notary's while he watched over his shoulder for the messenger to emerge. Shortly, he reappeared from the shop with another bulky letter for his pouch. Donovan lingered until he had remounted and ridden a safe distance away. Watching in case he or Wissowa should return, Donovan began up the notary's steps. Although he could while away the time skulking about his mother's neighborhood, it wouldn't be any fun if he couldn't steal. And here at Ryal's shop, he'd at least have some company while waiting for her to come home.

The new young notary met him coming out, and held the door open for him to bring in his bag. Donovan nodded in return. When he entered to place the bag on the counter, three faces turned to him. His father leaned on the counter in amused suspicion. "What are you doing?"

"Have a ginger beer," Donovan offered them all. "I'm going to wait here for my mother."

Opening the bag, Ryal asked dubiously, "How did you get these?"

"Bought 'em with what I made for helping the men move Flores' things to the lady's house, uh, Windry by design," Donovan said, lining up the bottles on the counter.

The other three looked at each other quickly. Efran asked, "If Flores isn't there and your mother isn't there, who is?"

"Now that I left, no one," Donovan shrugged, taking another drink.

"She left you alone?" Ryal asked sharply. Donovan nodded. Ryal told Efran, "Go see."

As Efran went out to whistle for Kraken, Donovan left his ginger beer rocking on the counter to run after him.

When Kraken trotted over, Shane and Neale rode up in response to his whistle as well. Efran mounted, instructing, "Ride with me to check Wissowa's house."

"You have to let me come!" Donovan cried. So Efran leaned over to hoist him up behind the saddle.

"Number Thirty-Five in the western section," Efran said, nodding, and they rode at a gentle lope to her house.

Efran let Donovan down from Kraken before dismounting himself to advance to the door. But Donovan opened

it to lead them all in. "See?" he said, taking them from room to room.

The house was certainly deserted. Shane came out from one bedroom to ask Donovan, "Was that the housekeeper's room?" He nodded, and Shane told the Captain, "It's empty."

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Chapter 17

Perturbed, Efran asked Donovan, "The housekeeper is at Windry's house?"

"Yeah, she has a new job with her, so's staying there," Donovan told him.

Efran considered that briefly, then said, "That's all we need."

They remounted to ride back to Ryal's, where he took sworn statements from all of them that, contrary to Wissowa's obligations, she had left Donovan without supervision. Therefore, her custody of him was withdrawn and restored to Efran, who would henceforth owe her nothing. This information was written up, notarized, and sealed in a letter addressed to her. Efran, Donovan and his men then rode back to her house for Neale to dismount and deposit the letter just inside her front door.

As they were walking their horses back to the notary's shop, Donovan said, "Oh, I can show you where my mother is, too."

Efran's head snapped around. "Where?"

"Go on up Main here," Donovan said.

So they turned north up Main to pause in front of Averno's outdoor dining area, where Wissowa was rising with difficulty from her chair as Bozzelli was trying awkwardly to kiss her. The faint air of inebriation hung over them both. Efran waited long enough for her to look up and see them, then he and his men turned south on Main toward the fortress. Donovan waved goodbye to his mother. And Efran's eyes swept past Firmin's without ever alighting on Arbaiza. She seethed at the slight.

With a new young lady on his arm, Justinian paused as well in front of the pair attempting to depart Averno's. "So sad to see the decline of someone you once loved," he sighed, and the girl on his arm surveyed the old sots with pity.

Removing Bozzelli's tentacles from around her, Wissowa said, "I'm going home." Arbaiza, livid upon seeing another faithless acolyte in Justinian, stalked back into Firmin's. She would get all of their attention again.

Lord Ryal sent Donovan's ginger beers up to the fortress for the upcoming celebration of his quick return.

On her way home, Wissowa's steps grew swifter and steadier. "What did he mean by riding by with Donovan? He didn't take him back to the fortress, did he? Oh, Shaffer will spit nails to hear that. Well, I've surely gotten his letter by now."

Entering the front door of her house, she saw the letter once she had stepped on it. "Oh, good! Flores, why is Shaffer's letter on the floor?" She picked it up to carry it back to the nook off the kitchen.

Opening it, she sat to read. "What?" she breathed in displeasure. "'Alone'? 'Unsupervised'? He certainly was not." She dropped the letter to the table. "Flores! What is this about Donovan being alone?" A glance told her that Flores wasn't in the kitchen, so she rose to go to her room. "Flores, what—"

In the doorway, she stared into the empty room: no bed, no dresser, no knickknacks, no Flores. "What has happened?" she breathed. So she turned to run in fear to the notary's shop.

Bursting through the door, she landed on the counter next to the customer whom Ryal was helping. "Ryal, I've been robbed of my housekeeper!" she cried.

The customer eyed her as Ryal said, "One moment, Wissowa. Sign here, please," he told the customer, who did. She stood at the counter pondering what had gone wrong while Ryal received the man's payment and made notations in his book. Watching, Wissowa noticed what a clean, elegant script he produced.

When the customer left, Ryal turned to her. "Wissowa, I understand that Flores has gone to work for Windry."

"Windry," she repeated. "The dressmaker."

"Yes," Ryal said. Giardi brought up a form which he read and initialed.

"No, that's impossible," Wissowa said. "Someone has taken her and all of her things and my furniture." Suddenly she remembered seeing a bed and dresser being walked down Main.

"I suggest that you go talk to her," Ryal said.

"At Windry's," Wissowa said.

"Yes," Ryal said gently. "I believe you know where she lives."

"Yes," Wissowa said.

She left again, and Giardi observed, "She didn't even ask about Donovan."

In relief, Ryal said, "Finally, he's home where he belongs. I believe we'll have no more trouble from her or Shaffer."

In a haze of concentration, Wissowa walked up Main to cross New North Road on the side street where Windry lived. Wissowa approached the door to knock. In a few seconds, it was thrown open for Windry to say, "We have no more openings," and shut the door in Wissowa's face.

"What? No." She knocked again, urgently, and Windry appeared again, displeased. Before she could speak, Wissowa said, "I'm looking for my housekeeper, Flores."

"She's busy. You'll have to speak to her after hours," Windry said, closing the door once more.

Wissowa stood there a moment, then looked around the house, specifically, toward the west side. Alert for

witnesses, she stepped off the walk onto the grass to begin skulking along the wall and around the corner. Coming to a window which stood open, she peeked around the shutter to see Flores sitting in the midst of five or six girls, explaining, "The trick to smooth beading is to keep the thread at an even tension. And with these tiny beads, you must secure the thread underneath the bead—"

"Flores!" Wissowa hissed.

Glancing at the window, Flores said, "Practice that for a moment, everyone." She got up to come to the window. "I can't take care of Donovan, Lady Wissowa, so I got a new job."

Wissowa stared at her. "You took my furniture!"

Flores said, "I haven't even looked in my room here, yet, so I don't know what's there. But you told me that that furniture was mine, since I had been with you for so long." Speechless, Wissowa clutched the windowsill. "Excuse me; I've got work to do." Flores reached out to close the panes so that Wissowa had to let go and step back.

Somehow, Wissowa returned to Number Thirty-Five. She entered, locking the door behind her, and went to the nook to sit down. No one was there to prepare her dinner or chat with her. There was no one bustling in the kitchen to share the latest gossip heard in the markets. "I don't know how to do this," Wissowa whispered. "I've never been alone before"—except when she let Flores go for giving money to her sons. The first thing Wissowa did then was try to replace her.

"And I was never so happy as to see her open this door to me," she whispered.

That evening in the fortress, the kitchen supplemented Donovan's ginger beers with several dozen more to enhance his welcome home from his one night away. He entered the dining hall grinning, arms raised, as the other children rushed him to hear all about it.

They were allowed to drink the ginger beers with dinner, but Efran made them eat regular food before cake and pudding. So all the children crowded around Donovan to eat, evicting other occupants of the back tables in order to hear about his stay at his mother's house.

Donovan crowed about drinking wine on the sly, and eating most of his mother's and housekeeper's dinner, and accidentally making the housekeeper throw the strawberry-and-cream cake on the floor. "I ate it all," he said proudly.

"Wasn't it dirty?" Hassie fretted.

"No, just a little crunchy," he said. By now, Efran had his head in one hand, but all the adults were enjoying the recitation as much as the children. "Then she tried to take the strop to me, and almost got me a whack or two, because I slipped in all the cream on the floor," Donovan narrated.

"She didn't hit you?" Elwell asked, giving him a once-over for bruises.

"No, I was too fast," Donovan said. "So then she told me to empty my mother's poop pot in the privy, and I took it out there, but the step was too high so I tripped and dropped the whole thing into the hole. I'm afraid it splashed on the sittin' board going down, and I was glad that I'd already took my turn, because it smelled *so bad*."

Everyone who could hear him was laughing by now. But Ella said, “You’re making me feel sorry for the housekeeper!”

“Oh, no, don’t!” Donovan said earnestly. “It was all good, because she told my mother she couldn’t take care of me, and when I was still there this morning, she went off and got work with the—the bead lady. And since I was all alone, I went to the notary, and that’s what got me back here! My mother wasn’t s’posed to leave me alone, but they couldn’t handle me, and I didn’t even steal anything,” he finished, and the children clapped for him. Toby patted him on the back.

Calix turned to Efran with shining eyes. “I want to go visit my mother!”

In the midst of laughing groans, Efran raised his face to the heavens, but Minka said, “Oh you do, do you, Calix? Well, I stopped by her house today. Do you know that she’s the ‘bead lady’? And she’s running such an enterprise from her house, if you show up, you’ll be sat down with needle and thread, and you’ll be sewing beads on fabric for the rest of your life!”

The children cried out and Calix scrunched his head down like a turtle. “How do I get out of that?” he asked Donovan.

“Don’t even go,” Donovan warned solemnly. “Some dogs you just don’t pet.”

The children earnestly agreed, then cheered loudly as the cake came around.

In less than a week—on May 22nd—the first of Windry’s Native Beaded Designs appeared on Main Street. There were only two of them, both dresses, but they caused foot, cart and horse traffic to come to a standstill.

They were very simple dresses, just sheaths, but with fringe along the neckline, sleeves, and hem. One dress was sleeveless, the other short-sleeved, which was certainly appropriate for late May in the Lands. Both dresses hit above the knee, with six-inch fringe below that. But most striking, both dresses were decorated with Polonti designs, letters or symbols in beadwork.

The beauty and originality of the designs on such a simple canvas were arresting enough, but both models were young, lovely Southerners. All at once, all things Polonti became the overriding fashion statement on the Lands.

The young models directed all queries about purchase to Windry, and soon both dresses had sold for staggering sums. The newly opened Polonti shop was mobbed, selling out of everything on display within hours. Innocent Polonti residents on the Lands were accosted with offers to buy their native articles, whatever they had, at ridiculously high prices.

When Windry unveiled her next three dresses on May 26th, it unleashed a storm of knockoffs. But being instantly recognized for the quick, cheap copies that they were, the Lands’ Southerners turned up their noses at them to demand the more costly articles, then the more authentic ones.

As this insanity consumed the Abbey Lands over the next several days, the Polonti in the Lands—95% of whom were in the army—were flattered, then intrigued, then irritated, then outraged. For they saw that this appropriation of Polonti artifacts or designs by Southerners did not result in a greater respect for the Polonti people who lived among them.

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Chapter 18

About this time, Efran was called down to Barracks A to conference with Commander Wendt, the Second Gabriel, and the Captains about protocols for routine patrols outside the Lands, particularly among the new settlements that DeWitt and Ryal had approved just to the north. While they wanted to insure that the area was not a cauldron for brewing lawlessness, they also didn't want to raise expectations that the Lands army would defend them. So the leadership decided to send their scouts in tradesmen clothing, not uniforms.

Coming out of that conference, Efran discovered that Kraken had not only emptied the water trough playing in it, but had gone off in search of more water. Distracted and exasperated, Efran was negotiating his way down a crowded sidewalk, looking for his horse, when he was suddenly confronted by dark hair cascading over breasts that were minimally covered with beaded fabric.

He fell flat on his back on the sidewalk to stare up at Arbaiza. Her curly red hair was now straight and black, and she wore one of Windry's most expensive, voluptuous Native Beaded Designs. Traffic halted around them as she placed her foot on his stomach to tell him, "I'm performing a selection of Native Love Songs at The Lands' Best Inn tonight." Then he had to curl up to protect his organs while she walked on over him.

Her concert that night was Standing Room Only, and crowded at that.

All of a sudden, practically all the Southern women began straightening and dying their hair, dressing in native costumes, carrying baskets woven in the traditional Polonti manner. They even learned a few Polonti words to use as code to each other.

Many of them sent their husbands to Venegas to see what kind of treasures could be had from their Polonti, but they came back disappointed: those Polonti weren't all that zealous for their culture, and the only artifacts they had were the ones they made last week.

Polonti soldiers became targets of seduction. Most of them were fine with this at first, until even they began to see how degrading it was to be desired because of the color of their skin and hair, and not for anything they had done or believed in. It was *moekolohe* packed in a gigantic chamber pot and then exploded.

The women who bought and wore Polonti-inspired dresses, who decorated their homes with Polonti art and armed their children with Polonti slings were all Southerners, some recently from Eurus or Crescent Hollow, who never considered speaking to the Polonti who defended them, did their yard work or dug the sewers. And those Polonti began to feel resentful, even exploited.

During that burgeoning madness, Conte, one of the oldest, longest-serving Polonti in Westford's army and now the Lands, appeared in the workroom to address Efran, Estes, and DeWitt. "Something must be done," he said sadly. "We are beginning to feel like a hunted species, but no one knows what to do."

Vexed, DeWitt said, "We'll figure something out, Conte. Just encourage your men in their regular duties."

"Yes, Administrator," he said, saluting on his way out. And the three looked at each other, lost.

When Minka's Polonti vest disappeared from her and Efran's quarters, she had him find Pia's dress and put it in

the Treasury. The house belonging to Enon's mother, Dallarosa, was broken into twice and her handmade tatting jewelry stolen. So Efran had her house equipped with stronger locks on the doors and windows, and guards day and night for the time being.

The most prominent Polonti women on the Lands—Ella, Felice, Sudie, Tisi—watched all this in disbelief. Ella, only a half-breed, was too shy to dress in Polonti fashion, thus calling attention to herself. But the others had all been sneered at or snubbed when they tried to wear their native dress. And even though Aceto's wife Tisi was probably the most beautiful woman on the Lands, *she* had not been asked to model Windry's "native" designs.

Although the Polonti shop had to close in order to restock, the quest for authentic artifacts continued, so that Polonti residents had to barricade their homes against visitors who wished to appraise their belongings. Southerners who normally wouldn't speak to Polonti began approaching them without introduction or small talk to ask to buy something they were wearing or carrying. Testing, some Polonti named outrageous prices, which were often paid. But the transactions were cold and curt.

Unrecognized as Steward of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, second only to Efran and Minka, Estes was approached as a potential seller of culture. As he was walking home after work, one woman stopped him to demand, "What have you got?" She was looking at the bag on his shoulder, which carried fresh ingredients purchased from Avene's for the evening's dinner.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"What have you made?" she asked, tugging at the strap.

"It will be dinner for my family, when I get it home. Excuse me," he said, stepping around her.

"Is it native food?" she asked. "I'll pay you for it."

Grimly, he said, "If you consider vegetable stew native food, you may buy your own at Avene's."

She began an exasperated follow-up when Aceto approached, saluting. "Excuse me, Steward. May I assist you?"

Estes had paused on a response when the woman looked at Aceto as though seeing a vision. He was large and magnificently muscled. "Take me to your home," she breathed.

"As you wish," he said. Saluting Estes again, who nodded, Aceto took her to his house, where his wife Tisi sold her a hearthrug that a neighbor's child—a Southerner—had made. Tisi's asking price was whatever the woman had in her pouch, which turned out to be 35 royals. The woman emptied her pouch and went home clutching her prized genuine Polonti handmade hearthrug. Tisi then sent Aceto to the new vintner Montefiore for his most expensive bottle of wine, which cost 12 royals. This they had with dinner.

Despite such counter-exploitation, the Polonti began to realize that they were being systematically looted of their heritage. So they clamped down, withdrew, and stridently complained to the highest Polonti in the Lands.

Their complaints reached such a fever pitch that Efran called a meeting in the dining hall on the afternoon of May 30th for all Polonti. By the time he went to the front and raised his hands for silence, the hall was packed—overwhelmingly with men.

Jaw working, Efran looked around at those gathered. "All right," he said, and his audience grew still at the tension in his voice that signaled anger. "First, I want to remind you of a few things." He paused to wet his lips.

“Who remembers the crazy dresses with the—the hems that were crooked, and the wild patterns with the bright colors that you could hardly look at for getting headaches?”

In response, there was some uneasy chuckling and a few hands raised. “Now,” Efran continued, “who remembers all the dresses with the—the wide skirts [spreading his hands] made from prints from Venegas that all looked just alike, so that some of the women got into fistfights for being copied?” There was more murmuring and nodding.

“And the hats!” he spat. “The hats made from *our uniform blocks* that were pink and veiled, and—decorated with all this—garbage?” he practically shouted, hands at his head attempting to visually express the absurdity of that sacrilege. For men they had known and loved had died wearing hats of that shape.

“Do you see any of that now?” he asked, looking around. The crowd was quiet, heads lowered. “No, you don’t, because those were just passing fancies. The women who bought all those got tired of them, and switched to the next new thing. *This is what’s happening now*. Why are you losing your minds over women’s fads?”

There was some grumbling, and he said, “I hear you say that this is different; this is an attack on our culture and our people. So, what do Polonti do when we’re attacked? Do we go off crying? Let me remind you please that even if you consider this an attack, these are women who are doing it to you!”

The Polonti men in the audience shrank a little in their seats while the few Polonti women glared at them (or worse, laughed) in vindication. Efran wiped his mouth, looking around again, then said, “Polonti are traditionally masters of strategy. When we are attacked, the first thing we do is strategize: what is the most effective way to meet this attack?”

He paused, looking over to Minka, who was watching spellbound. Smiling now, he looked back to his audience. “So we’re being attacked by women. What do they want? What do they hope to gain from this?” He looked at his audience for an answer, but the men were silent. So he looked back to his wife. “Minka, what do you women want from us?”

She squirmed, but replied honestly, “Your attention.”

“YES,” he said, wheeling back to his dumbfounded audience, his hands clawed inward. “Women want *attention*. They change their minds and their styles and their hair to get our *attention*. So how do we fight this?” he cried in frustration.

“Ignore ’em,” Krall grunted.

“Thank you!” Efran shouted. Collecting himself, he said, “Polonti are legendary for our self-discipline.” That elicited some laughter, but he went on calmly, “That is how we fight. Lock up your valuables; turn a blind eye to the parade of costumes and the come-ons, and give them a chance to get bored with it and go on to the next thing. All right?”

There was a moment of stark silence, then Mathurin stood to applaud. The ranks around him shot up, clapping and stomping to shouts of “*Koa!*” Then all at once, they were stomping out the war drums—*bam bam BAM! bam bam BAM! bam bam BAM! bam bam BAM!*

The stone walls shuddered; the floor vibrated. Children who had been listening at the doors ran in to begin stomping and clapping with them. Donovan jumped up on a table to stomp, but Heus lifted him down.

Efran clapped along with them for a little while, then raised his hands. When they had stilled, he said, “To your battle lines, and may you be covered from on high.”

Nodding, fists clenched, they turned out to make war on women’s fashions. Efran went over to grab up Minka. “Thank you for answering the way I wanted.”

“What? Is that what you wanted? I answered for real,” she said, her arms around his head.

DeWitt patted his shoulder. “When you’re pushed hard enough, you deliver a superior beatdown, Efran.”

“I learned from the Commander,” he said wryly.

From that day on, the Polonti were uniformly nonchalant about the appropriation of their culture, some even yawning at it. Three days later, the mania collapsed and Windry was on to something else. She let all her beaders go, including Flores.

Flores did not do anything right away but walk and think. She had earned so much these past two weeks that she could afford to take a little time off. The following day, June 3rd, she took samples of her embroidery and her beading to The Lands Clothing Shop.

All the ladies gathered around to look at her handiwork, which they agreed was superior. Then Racheal said, “You know, we’ve been looking at a line of women’s accessories—hats, scarves, gloves, bags—but they seem so plain. I mean, they’re well made, just not decorated. I think the embroidery and beading both could be lightly added to dress them up. What do you think?” she asked her co-owners.

“If we have something like this, yes,” Meena said, holding up Flores’ sample. The others agreed.

So Racheal told Flores, “Come in tomorrow, and we’ll get you started. Where are you staying?”

“Number thirty-five in the western section,” Flores said, putting away her tea towel.

“Good, we’ll look for you tomorrow morning,” Racheal said, with confirming nods from the other ladies.

“Thank you, I’ll enjoy working for you very much,” Flores said, smiling. From there, she went to the notary’s shop to enter and ask Giardi, “May I ask you some questions?”

“Yes, of course,” Giardi said. Ryal came to her side, and Flores told them what she had in mind.

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Chapter 19

For the past two weeks, Wissowa had gone about her life in something like a persistent vegetative state. She called on friends, and went to dinners, and made arrangements for outings, all while avoiding Bozzelli. But her heart had died inside her.

Yes, she had taken Flores for granted, but Flores had allowed it—up till now. And since Wissowa never heard

back from Shaffer, she crossed him off her list, as well. She admitted to herself that she didn't need the money—Ploense was doing an admirable job of investing what she already had—and, it was wrong to try to take Donovan away from his father when Efran really seemed to want him.

"I have friends here," she told herself. "I don't need a man or money or—or—" Abruptly, she stood to announce, "I'm going out." But no one was there to hear it. She kept willing herself to walk to the door, but her feet said, *Why? Where are we going? We'll just come back here again.*

There was a tapping on the door from a light hand. Wissowa studied the door as though expecting it to announce the visitor. Then her feet consented to walk over so that she could open it.

She looked out at Flores' serene face. "Hello. May we talk?"

Wissowa stared at her, then stiffened. "I don't see what there is to talk about. Good day." She shut the door again and listened. Not hearing anything, she opened the door a crack to see Flores walking away. "Wait! Flores, come back. Yes, we'll talk. Come in." She opened the door wider, and Flores turned to retrace her steps.

They went to sit at the small table in the nook off the kitchen. Wissowa was silent, and Flores waited a minute, perhaps expecting hospitality. But then she said, "I'd like to come back and live here. Since I'll be working, I can pay you."

"Working!" Wissowa blurted. "Where?"

"For The Lands Clothing Shop," Flores said.

"Oh. That's nice," Wissowa said, shocked.

"Thank you," Flores said. "I think we should draw up a contract. May I get paper and quill?" she asked, having already stood to go fetch the supplies from the little secretary desk in the front room.

"A contract? Whatever do you mean?" Wissowa asked.

Returning to the table with the quill, ink bottle, and paper, Flores said, "Windry had us all sign contracts when we started work for her. It listed out what we were expected to produce, what we would be paid for it, and how long each day we were expected to work. It said that if our work was unacceptable, we would be released. It also said that when demand was met, we would be released. It was all so neat that I thought we should do the same thing if I came back to live here. So I went to the notary's shop to ask them how to make a contract for living with someone. They were very helpful."

Drawing the sheet toward her, Flores dipped the quill and wrote, "Contract between Wissowa and Flores."

Dully, Wissowa observed, "You always call me 'Lady Wissowa.'"

"Yes, I'm sorry, but since you're not titled here, I could get in trouble for that," Flores said, continuing to write. "The first thing is the amount of rent I should pay. The notary suggested fifteen [silver] pieces a month"—half a royal.

Wissowa gaped. "Fifteen pieces a month? Is that *all*?"

Flores glanced up. "The notary says that's the standard rent for a house this size. I could rent my own house for

that, but I like having someone else around for company.” When Wissowa said nothing, Flores asked, “Is that acceptable or not?”

Shifting uncomfortably, Wissowa said, “I suppose so.”

“Good. Now, cooking. The notary suggested several ways to divide up the cost and the work. I like the idea of each of us buying what we want to eat and fixing meals for ourselves. When one of us fixes a meal for the other as well, then the other fixes the next meal,” Flores said.

Shifting again, Wissowa murmured, “I’m not nearly as good a cook as you are.” Flores shrugged slightly, and Wissowa proposed, “Suppose I buy all the food and you do the cooking.”

Flores thought about that. “Very well. But if I do all the cooking, then I shouldn’t have to pay rent.”

Wissowa opened her mouth to protest, but when she remembered that she was haggling over 15 pieces, she closed her mouth and nodded. Writing, Flores said, “Good. Then I’ll just give you a list of what to get at market each day.”

“What to get—oh, no,” Wissowa laughed. “You’ll still go to market; I’ll just pay for it all.”

Flores tapped the quill on the paper. “If I have to do all the cooking *and* all the marketing, then I should get a stipend for that.”

“Stipend? What’s that?” Wissowa asked.

“That means I’m paid for doing all the marketing,” Flores said.

“How much?” Wissowa asked, frowning.

“Fifteen pieces a month sounds good,” Flores said.

“You mean you expect to live here free *and* get paid for marketing?” Wissowa asked indignantly.

“If I do all the cooking, yes,” Flores said. Wissowa paused to think about that while Flores waited, then Wissowa glumly nodded. “Good,” Flores said. “Those are really the major issues. Regarding other things like cleaning, we each do our own. You clean up after yourself and I clean up after myself. That’s easy, isn’t it?”

Wissowa grunted. Flores said, “There! I think that’s everything. Oh, except, I’ll need a key.”

Wissowa looked up, blinking. “A key. Why would you need a key to my house?”

“To get in when you’re not here,” Flores said carefully.

“But you never go anywhere,” Wissowa protested.

“To market?” Flores suggested.

Wissowa waved. “Oh, I just leave the door unlocked for you then.”

“Oh, but I’m working now. I won’t be here all the time,” Flores said.

"You're working *somewhere else* besides here?" Wissowa asked, flabbergasted.

"Yes, I just told you that I'll be working for The Lands Clothing Shop," Flores said.

"Yes, but I thought—" Wissowa said, then stopped in confusion. She had seen Flores at Windry's, and had just heard her say that she was working for The Lands Clothing Shop, but Wissowa couldn't conceive her housekeeper being in such demand.

"Yes?" Flores asked. When Wissowa waved it away, Flores said, "Very well, I can take—"

"Oh, I'm missing my chamber pot," Wissowa said, peeved. "So you'll need to bring it back."

Flores glanced off. "I don't have your chamber pot."

"It's not here," Wissowa said, brows raised.

"I'm sorry. Donovan took it out to empty. I don't know what he did with it," Flores said pensively.

"Weren't you supervising him?" Wissowa asked stiffly.

"No, I told you I couldn't," Flores said regretfully.

"You took my chamber pot," Wissowa said.

Flores laughed, "No, I have my own."

"You expect to live here free, and get paid for marketing, and have your own key, and take my chamber pot on top of all that?" Wissowa demanded, voice rising.

"I don't have your chamber pot," Flores said.

"Get out," Wissowa ordered.

With a sigh, Flores left the contract on the table and walked away. Debating where she should live, she walked up Main before crossing New North Road to turn on Orchid Row. From there, she went to Windry's house. Upon her brief knock on the door, Windry flung it open. Flores said, "I just need to get my things—"

"I'm glad you're here," Windry said, pulling her inside. "I let you go by mistake. I have more dresses planned that will need your embellishing, but nothing so extreme as the native dresses."

"Oh! I'm sorry. I promised the ladies at The Lands Clothing Shop that I would do some work for them," Flores said.

Windry waved. "That's fine; you can do both. Come, it's way past time for the midday meal. Let's go to Avene's so I can show you my new sketches," she said, gathering up a disordered stack of papers.

"I'd love to see them," Flores said, and they left with Windry talking and flipping through her handful of papers.

Meanwhile, Wissowa sat at the table in her nook blinking. "Why did I do that?" she whispered. "I told her to get

out over a chamber pot?—when of course Donovan did something with it, probably threw it right down the privy hole. Everything she proposed was quite reasonable. Why did I lash out like that?”

She sat thinking about this for a few minutes, but could make no sense of her own behavior. So she rose from the table to leave the house. “Well, there’s nothing for it but to apologize, again. Here I keep having to apologize to *Flores*, of all people—”

Wissowa stopped to think again, which was getting to be very hard work. “‘*Flores*, of all people,’” she quoted herself. “It’s as though I don’t really think she’s worth apologizing to, because . . . hasn’t she always just—been there?”

After thinking on this further, she waved it off. “Regardless, of course I want her to stay at the house with me. For heaven’s sake, no one else would.” Still mildly troubled, she walked rapidly to Main, and turned north. “She said she was working at The Lands Clothing Shop, which is up this way past the New North Road.”

Walking swiftly up the west sidewalk, she occasionally glanced at the people seated in the outdoor dining areas, just to see who all was watching her walk by. But at Averno’s she came to a dead stop to see *Flores* eating with Windry while both of them looked at papers. “*Flores!*” Wissowa exclaimed.

She, Windry, and several others looked up. Almost offended, Wissowa said, “*Flores*, I want to talk to you.”

“Um, perhaps later, Wissowa,” *Flores* said, having just been ordered out of her house. She looked back down at the papers, where Windry was pointing something out.

“No, now,” Wissowa said as to an errant child.

Windry grimaced at her, chiding, “Who are you to order her around like that? She’s eating! Go away!” Lowering her eyes to the paper, *Flores* said nothing.

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Chapter 20

“Oh. So that’s how it is,” Wissowa said, placing a hand on her hip. “You want to tangle with me, Bead Lady? Then we will.” She turned to swish away while a number of people watched, frozen over their plates.

Up in the second-floor workroom of the fortress, DeWitt and Estes were quietly working while Efran reluctantly sat with the book by a woman that the Librarian had recommended. Deciding not to waste time with introductory matter, he just flipped it open in the middle and read:

“What is needed, then, is to see God in everything, and to receive everything directly from His hands, with no intervention of second causes. And it is just to this that we must be brought, before we can know an abiding experience of entire abandonment and perfect trust. Our abandonment must be to God, not to man, and our trust must be in Him, not in any arm of flesh, or we shall fail at the first trial. . . . To the children of God everything comes directly from their Father’s hand, no matter who or what may have been the apparent agents. There are no ‘second causes’ for them.

“The presence of God is the fortress of His people. Nothing can withstand it. At His presence the wicked perish; the earth trembles; the hills melt like wax; the cities are broken down; ‘the heavens also dropped, and Sinai itself was moved at the presence of God.’ And in the secret of this presence He has promised to hide His people from the pride of man, and from the strife of tongues. ‘My presence shall go with thee,’ He says, ‘and I will give thee rest.’”

After absorbing that, Efran turned back to the beginning to start reading there.

Corwyn came to the door to salute. “Captain, Steward, Administrator. Lord Ryal wishes to inform you that Notary Whitgift received a letter from Lord Baroffio of Westford congratulating him for the information on Notary Shaffer, and as soon as the lord can have another notary trained, he’ll proceed with charges against Shaffer.”

The three considered that, and DeWitt said, “Thank you. Dismissed.” Corwyn saluted again and departed. Then DeWitt murmured, “That’s good news. Why do I feel queasy?”

Estes replied, “Shaffer’s practically immortal. He’ll come roaring back in a fiery chariot. Or—carriage, at least.” Efran chewed on that for a minute, then returned to his book.

Wissowa marched into the notary shop to tell Ryal, “I want to file charges against Windry.”

“I see. For what?” Ryal asked.

“For stealing my housekeeper,” Wissowa said through clenched teeth.

“‘Stealing your housekeeper,’” Ryal repeated in wonder. Giardi studied her in concern. Ryal asked, “Do you have a contract with her?”

Wissowa momentarily let down in disappointment, then rose in victory. “Yes! Yes I do!”

“May I see it, please?” Ryal asked.

“Yes. I’ll be right back.” Wissowa ran out of the shop.

Meanwhile, Minka was taking Teschner and Ure down to see Auntie. It had been a full month since Minka and Efran had last seen the Shoard girls, and she was anxious to know whether they were anywhere close to being able to come up to the fortress again.

However, as they emerged from the switchback, she looked down Main to Delano’s. She was only half aware of the rooftop bells softly ringing the Faerie Lullaby. How long had it been since she’d seen baby Ruth? She couldn’t even remember. So she told her bodyguards, “We’re going to make a quick stop to see Madgwick before we go on to the chapel.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Teschner said. They led her in formation down the busy street: Teschner to her right and a little in front, Ure following a little to her left. When they pulled up to the brewery, Minka slid off Dustbin by herself. Teschner followed her in while Ure remained outside with the horses. There was a line of carriages and carts parked along the side of the brewery, waiting for their orders to be filled.

Entering, Minka saw Delano's son Wystan manning the counter. She bypassed the line to say, "Hello, Wystan. I was hoping to see Madgwick. Is she here?"

"Yup, Lady Minka, in the back room with the baby. Hop on back," he said, jerking his head to the rear.

"Thank you." Minka went on through the corridor. As she raised her hand to knock, she was surprised to see it shaking. Teschner, beside her, saw it also. Minka steadied herself and knocked.

Madgwick's voice said, "Come in."

Minka entered quietly with Teschner following. Madgwick was in the rocker with the 15-month-old on her lap. She had wisps of blonde hair and bright blue eyes. Minka said, "Hello, Madgwick. It's just been so long—"

At her voice, the toddler looked up with a delighted smile. "Ninka!"

Madgwick looked quickly at Minka in surprise. "That's the first word I've heard her say!"

Minka gazed at her sister, recognizable from the eyes, the hair, the voice. "Oh!" Minka cried, bursting into tears. "Oh, Adele, I'm glad, so glad that you're happy, finally! Oh, Madgwick, you're busy. I'll be back later." Weeping, she turned out as Madgwick looked after her in concern. Then she looked down at the baby.

Minka ran through the shopfront out to the horses, where Ure helped her up on Dustbin. Noting her agitation, he glanced a question to Teschner, who held up a discreet hand. He didn't know what had caused it, but he was going to ask around to see if he could find out who "Adele" was. He knew that the baby's name was Ruth.

By the time they arrived at the chapel, Minka was composed. Whobrey and Elrod opened the doors for them, and the three visitors paused to look past the foyer into the hall. Hartshough approached to bow. "Good afternoon, Lady Minka. Shall you and your bodyguards care for bracers?"

"That sounds wonderful, Hartshough, but I was hoping to see the girls," Minka said, trying to look past him.

"They are in the backyard with Lady Marguerite, Lady Minka. Shall I show you?" Hartshough asked.

"If it's convenient," she said, still craning her neck to look. She didn't want to intrude.

"Certainly." Hartshough turned to lead them to the back patio. Marguerite was by the copper-and-rock fountain in the yard with the girls.

Seeing the new arrivals, the little girls ran over while Marguerite looked up with a smile. "Hello, dear."

"Auntie, how are they doing?" Minka asked, glancing at her, but mostly watching the girls run up to scrutinize the bodyguards. They studied Teschner before rejecting him and fixing on Ure. He looked confounded, bowing slightly.

"Show us your toes," Pember commanded.

"Toes," Ure repeated, then looked at Teschner for a translation, who pointed to his boots. Unenlightened, Ure lifted a foot. "Boot?"

The stern little face uttered, "No. TOES."

But Marguerite laughed, "Girls, didn't you want to see the lake? Minka and her men can take us." Hartshough was behind them all, near the door into the kitchen.

Pember and Aune looked at each other quickly, then Pember said, "Yes."

Minka balked a little. "Oh, it's been so crowded at Cavern Lake lately, I'm afraid they'll get spooked."

Marguerite said, "Actually, I believe they're thinking about the pond by Lakeside Inn that's going up."

"Lakeside Inn? The new one that Lemmerz is building?" Minka asked.

"Yes, Hartshough took us out there in the carriage just a few days ago. They had a new sign up with the name," Marguerite said.

"We want to take a carriage again," Pember said. "The blue carriage."

"May I suggest the white carriage, which is clean and stocked? I fear that the other has been neglected," Hartshough said.

Pember's face darkened, and Aune looked scared. "No. The *blue* carriage," the older girl insisted. While the white carriage had a removable soft top, the blue one was enclosed, its bare windows equipped with outward-opening louvered wood shutters. For pleasant days like today, the white was preferable.

Hartshough paused, looking to Marguerite. She half-laughed in surprise. "Let's take the blue then, Hartshough."

"Yes, Lady Marguerite. Shall I stock it?" Hartshough asked.

"We won't be out long enough," Marguerite said.

"Very well. If your party will wait for a moment, Lady Marguerite, Eryk and I will clean the blue carriage and hitch the horses."

"Thank you, Hartshough," Marguerite said. "Girls, do you want to wait here, or out front—?" The girls ran to the front doors.

Winded, Wissowa returned to Ryal's shop to slap the contract down on the counter. "There," she panted. "There's my contract with Flores. You see at the top it says, 'Contract between Wissowa and Flores.'"

Looking over the page, Ryal said, "Yes, I see that. What I don't see are signatures."

"Oh, well," Wissowa said. "Hand me your quill, there." Giardi did, and Wissowa signed with a flourish. "There you are." She turned the paper around to Ryal.

"Very good," he said dryly. "Now we need Flores' signature."

She blinked at him, then said, "Oh. Yes. I'll be right back." Taking the paper and the dripping quill, she left again. Giardi and Ryal looked at each other cautiously.

Wissowa briskly walked the contract back up Main to Averne's. There she placed it authoritatively atop Windry's sketches to hand the nearly-dry quill to Flores with, "Sign it and we're set!"

Moving the contract aside, Flores said, "I think I won't now, but thank you, Wissowa."

With an exasperated sigh, Wissowa began telling her just to sign it when Windry took it up to shred it into many small pieces. "There! You're set. Now *go away*," Windry instructed.

Smiling down on her, Wissowa said, "Fine. But I'll be back." And she flounced away.

Minka, Marguerite, the girls and the bodyguards were out front of the chapel, waiting for their carriage. Minka told Whobrey, "Please send up to Efran that we're going to take the Shoard girls to the pond by the new inn. We'll be in Auntie's carriage—the blue one. The girls insisted on the blue!" she laughed.

"Yes, Lady Minka." Whobrey bowed and went around back to get a horse. But as both horses were being hitched to the carriage, he diverted to Main to get another soldier to deliver the message.

While waiting for their transport, Minka asked the girls, "What did you like about the little lake?—rather, the pond?" They looked at her dubiously. "Did you like the cattails? Did you see the fluffy seeds float in the wind?" she asked.

"We want to go home," Pember said.

Minka looked quickly to Marguerite, who knelt beside the girls. "Where is home, Pember?" Marguerite asked.

"That way," Pember said, pointing east.

Teschner said, "We cannot allow either you or Lady Marguerite to leave the Lands, Lady Minka."

"No, we won't, don't worry," she said quickly. "We just have to understand what she means."

As they continued to wait, Marguerite murmured to Minka, "They came with the Picti?"

"Yes," Minka whispered back. "But no one knows how or where they picked them up. The Picti came all the way from—Corona? I think." Corona was a city past the Fastnesses, the far northern mountains that separated the Southern Continent from the Northern Continent. Corona was so far away, the Picti had spent years traveling from there on foot to the environs of Westford.

Just about then, Hartshough came around to the front driving the carriage.

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Chapter 21

Pulling up to the front of the chapel, Hartshough climbed down from the driver's seat to open the carriage door. The little girls scrambled inside, followed by Minka and Marguerite. First thing, Pember shoved open the shutters on both windows. That allowed them to see out, but they were still boxed in. Ure and Teschner remounted their horses, pulling alongside the carriage to wait while Hartshough climbed up into the driver's seat.

Then he clucked to the horses, and the party set out. The bodyguards rode on either side at the carriage windows.

As they approached the construction site of the new inn, they saw barricades blocking access to the pond. Leaning down from his seat, Hartshough asked, "Shall we turn around and go to Cavern Lake after all?"

Marguerite looked at the little girls, both of whom were pointing east. She leaned her head out of the window to tell him, "They both want to go on, Hartshough."

"Very well." He straightened to tap the reins lightly on the horses' backs.

Minka and Marguerite were quiet, watching the Shoard girls. As the carriage rolled, they grew excited, clutching each other's hands, trying to look ahead. But Marguerite wouldn't permit them to lean out of the windows. Minka whispered, "What are they looking for?" Marguerite raised her shoulders in bewilderment. Minka pressed, "Are they expecting to go—?"

"Shhh," Marguerite whispered.

Lund appeared at the door of the workroom to salute. "Captain, Lady Minka and Lady Marguerite are taking the Shoard girls for a short jaunt in the blue carriage. Their bodyguards are with them."

Efran nodded. "That's good." But a minute later he closed the book, thinking.

Wissowa reentered the notary shop to ask, "May I have a glass of water?"

"Yes, of course," Ryal said, looking to Giardi. "But I'm afraid we only have cups."

"That's fine. A large cup, please," Wissowa said. Giardi left the counter to go into the back room, then returned with a large cup of water which she handed to Wissowa.

"Thank you," Wissowa said, then turned to walk out with it. Ryal and Giardi stared at each other in vague dread. Hesitantly, they stepped out the front door to watch Windry walk the cup up the street toward Averno's outdoor dining area.

There, she paused in front of Windry and Flores. The latter looked up in alarm at the hand with the cup, but Windry was pointing out something on one of the sketches. Flores then ducked as a stream of water hit Windry in the face and cascaded over her sketches.

The blue carriage rolled past the barricade onto the unpaved road leading out to the far East Lands. On his horse, Teschner leaned down to the window and said, "This is far enough, Lady Minka. Hartshough, stop and turn

around now!" he called up to him.

Pember looked swiftly at Teschner with a forbidding glare, and his horse began bucking. "Wha—? Whoa!" he shouted, but saved his breath for hanging on. That he did. But while his horse was misbehaving, the carriage horses sped up, despite Hartshough's hauling back on the reins.

When Ure's horse began bucking likewise, he pulled his feet out of the stirrups to fall toward the carriage. Landing on the step, he grasped the edge of the roof to press against the door and open window as the carriage gained speed. Aune reached out to push his chest, and he fell away. Minka turned in the seat, looking out the window to see him roll on the ground. He scrambled up, looking after them, then began chasing his horse. Teschner was farther away, picking himself up after having been thrown.

Minka looked back at Aune and then Pember. "What are you doing?" she asked in a low voice.

"We're going home now," Pember said.

"I'm going home now," Wissowa said to Windry's screaming.

As Wissowa turned in satisfaction, Leneghan and Loseby trotted up to take her arms on either side. Leneghan said, "Pardon, ma'am, but Lord Ryal directs you to be housed in Barracks C for the evening. The beds are quite comfortable."

Attempting to shrug out of his grasp, she said, "I'm not sleeping with soldiers!"

"No, ma'am, you're not. Barracks C houses the cells, and there's only one guest per cell. Come now, please. We don't want to drag you," Leneghan practically pleaded.

Walking with them, Wissowa inquired, "Was the water too much?"

"Yes, ma'am, it was," Leneghan admitted. She nodded complacently. He took her to the cells. As they were currently empty, a new man, Jaubert, was standing watch. Handing her over to him, Leneghan said, "She's to stay the night, and report to Lord Ryal first thing in the morning." Today was June 3rd.

"Okay," Jaubert said, bringing her inside. He took her to a cell near the front and locked her in.

Dismally regarding the spartan accommodations, she looked up as he opened the outer door. "Will you stay and talk to me? I don't like to be alone," she pleaded.

"Sorry. I have to keep watch at the door," he said, almost as unhappily. He left, closing the door behind him, and she sat to survey rows of identically empty cells.

Minka asked Pember, "Where is home? There's nothing out this way but fields and cattle pens, and . . . the east branch of the Passage"—which was the eastern border of the Lands. "Then there's Venegas, and, beyond that. . . ." Minka didn't even know.

Mildly, Marguerite noted, "Your home is a lot farther away than Venegas, isn't it?" Aune bit her lip and looked at Pember, but neither of them answered.

The horses began to slow, and then stop. Marguerite opened the door to climb out. Minka followed to look around.

They had stopped just a few miles from the east branch of the Passage. There was nothing this far out, except a few wells to the west. As the red flags that marked the boundary of wolf territory were nowhere in sight, the carriage had probably raced past them, which explained the horses' trembling. Hartshough was trying to hold them still while he unfastened traces.

Marguerite went over to stand before the horses, holding their bridles to calm them. "Hartshough?" she whispered. "Why are you unharnessing them?"

"To keep them alive, Lady Marguerite," he said. "Something has been summoned."

"What for?" Marguerite whispered.

"I do not know, but the blue carriage is instrumental," he replied. Minka warily looked back to the girls in the carriage, who appeared to be just waiting.

Finally, Hartshough had the horses free of the harness, tracings and pole. Whacking their hindquarters, he said, "Go." They bolted west, back to their stalls.

At the same time, the girls and Marguerite looked south. She and Hartshough climbed back into the carriage, shutting the doors after them. Minka ran up to the closed door, and Marguerite locked it. "Stay here, Minka. The men will take you back."

Clamping her mouth shut, Minka climbed in through the window, slipping past all hands that tried to shove her out again. Plopping down on the seat beside Hartshough, she said, "Efran will make sure we all get back."

Windry stormed into the notary shop, shedding water from her face, her hair, and her sketches. "Look at this!" she fumed, laying damp, smudged papers onto the counter. "She ruined my sketches, at least four of them! I want to press charges against her!"

Flores had entered behind her, carrying more sketches. She said quietly, "These here look to be fine. Shall I take them back to your house?"

Flustered, Windry glanced back at them. "Yes, do that."

Meanwhile, Ryal was saying, "Come into the back room so that I may interview you, Windry, Flores."

Windry went right back to plop into a chair, but Flores murmured, "I didn't really see what happened."

Ryal nodded sympathetically. "You may go." She glanced at him gratefully, slipping out with the salvaged sketches. Despite Wissowa's imperious temperament, Flores still cared for her, remembering how kind she had been when Flores was grieving her sons. Returning to Windry's house, she put the sketches in her workroom and brewed herself a cup of tea.

Sitting with Windry at the back table, Ryal looked to see if Soames were ready to take notes. When he nodded, Ryal asked, "Windry, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this interview?"

"Yes," she said vacantly. "Look at these! Look at the blurred lines, and the swirls! . . . this one has rays like—like a star," she said, growing thoughtful.

Glancing at them, Ryal said, "Yes, they do appear to be significantly altered."

"Like a stream of stars across the sky, merging, flowing in swirls and patterns on the canvas of night," she murmured. "A river of stars beyond Time, who laugh at the unexpected, taking it all into their dance. . . ." Her eyes grew hazy, then she flipped through the sketches again. "Yes. That's brilliant. Excuse me, Ryal." She abruptly got up.

He said, "Wait, Windry. Do you want to press charges against Wissowa or not?"

"Press charges?" she asked blankly. "Oh, no, these are *exactly right*."

As she hurried out, Ryal decided, "Well, we'll leave Wissowa in the cell overnight, just as an encouragement to self-discipline."

"Yes, Lord Ryal," Soames said, tearing up his notes. "It will be interesting to see what Windry makes of the altered sketches."

Ryal nodded wryly and Giardi laughed. Then he leaned out the shop door to send a message to Barracks C that Wissowa was free to go home first thing tomorrow morning, June 4th. Jaubert received this message with a nod, reminding himself to pass it along to the night watchman.

In the fortress workroom, Estes was standing at the east-facing window, as he often did to refresh his eyes when he was tired of paperwork. Efran was still at the table, thinking, *A short jaunt in the carriage. The blue carriage. Why would the girls demand the blue carriage for a short jaunt when the white one is so much lighter and more open? The blue carriage is the one they use for winter travel—*

Estes dropped the cup, which broke on the floor at his feet. "Efran!" Both he and DeWitt got up to look out the window where Estes was staring.

In the distance, they saw a greenish-black shape fly over the cliffs from the Sea. It hovered over land for a moment to pick up a tiny blue box in one hind foot. Then it lifted off to carry this speck north and disappear beyond the view of the window.

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Chapter 22

Efran turned from the window to calmly trot down the stairs. Before leaving the fortress, he stopped by his quarters to pick up the long, slender fish bone in the corner of his and Minka's bedroom. Taking this out to the courtyard, he whistled for Kraken.

When he came loping up, Efran swung up onto his bare back with the fish bone in one hand. He paused to tell the gatesmen Fellowes and Mohr: "Tell Lwoff Leviathan is back, and he may have carried off a carriage full of people. I'm riding out past the barricade to the East Lands."

"Yes, Captain," Fellowes said, turning to direct someone to go get Lwoff in the main hilltop armory. Mohr began ringing the alarm bell. Efran loped Kraken down the second switchback, turning his head east.

Mounted men began following him on Chapel Road. Seeing the long white bone in his left hand, no one had to query what the problem was. They all paused upon encountering two saddled, riderless horses galloping west in panic, followed immediately by two bare horses in the same state, which Efran deduced to be the carriage horses.

Riding on, Efran lifted the bone, drawing to a halt as Teschner and Ure, trotted up, winded. Saluting, Teschner panted, "Captain, the Shoard girls said they were going home, and somehow spooked the horses, so that they threw us. And then, Leviathan flew up, and, took the carriage in a back foot to fly north."

"Who was in it?" Efran asked.

"Besides the little girls, Lady Minka, Lady Marguerite, and Hartshough, who had been driving," Teschner said.

"All right. Go report to Estes and Commander Wendt," Efran said.

"Yes, Captain." Teschner and Ure saluted, then resumed their trot west.

Efran turned to the twenty-odd men behind him. "If you have duty, go back. If you want to come anyway, stay behind me, because I want to find the point that Leviathan picked up the carriage." His men acknowledged this, and a few turned to ride back west. Efran briefly searched the ground for the carriage tracks, then began following them at a trot.

Inside the rocking, flying carriage, the adults were holding onto the straps and each other while the Shoard girls were leaning out the window, shrieking with laughter. The companion window across from it was almost entirely blocked by a huge talon. The wind was fierce, and growing cooler by the moment.

Marguerite finally let go of Minka with one arm to draw Aune out of the window. "Sit. If a bird hits you in the face, it won't be fun anymore. Pember, come sit with your sister. Wherever we're going, we're getting there very quickly."

Reluctantly, the girls did pull back from the window, but held hands in excitement. Hartshough, looking down out of the unobstructed window, said, "We appear to have passed Westford and Willowing Lake; I see the Passage to the left of us, and the Green Hills beyond that. So we are evidently going due north. Wirrin Valley is coming within view."

Marguerite glanced at the girls. Since Leviathan was not slowing nor descending, Wirrin Valley was not their destination. "Where is home, Pember?" Marguerite asked. The girl looked eager, but did not speak. "What do you sense, Hartshough? I'm just in a fog here," Marguerite added.

It was Toogood that replied. For whatever reason, he had dropped the butler's appearance. In the deep, hollow voice of a mountain troll, he said, "I begin to suspect that our visitors are not common Shoard, but royalty. I perceive that when they became sick in their homeland, so as to start displaying symptoms, their caretakers realized that this was something they could not cure. But they knew that the clan of mountain trolls who live underneath the Fastnesses had remedies for it, so sent the girls with guardians to seek their help."

His narrative was punctuated by the continuous, loud flapping of Leviathan's great wings above them and the whistling of the wind around them.

"From what I can gather from fragments of the girls' memories, they encountered the Picti in the Fastnesses, who killed the guardians for attacking them. Thus the girls were absorbed into their trek and taken south, growing sicker all the way. But the Shoard retain vestiges of mental communication as do mountain trolls, so when they were well enough to hear and understand, they were informed by their kin that transportation home had been arranged, and to take a sturdy conveyance clear of the heavily populated areas of the Lands," Hartshough said thoughtfully. "This was communicated to them in pictures, of which I distinctly see the blue carriage and Leviathan."

Marguerite looked confused. "Then where did the girls come from? Where is their home?"

Hartshough lowered his face to the girls, who were neither alarmed nor surprised by his change in appearance. But they did not speak. It was he who said, surprised, "Not in caves." Then, "I see a village on a plain hedged in by great mountains."

Marguerite said, "But the only mountains north of us are—" She stopped on a gasp.

Hartshough confirmed, "The Fastnesses." And Leviathan flew on.

Back in the Lands, Efran had located the point at which Leviathan had picked up the carriage. Besides the disturbances in the dirt, the carriage pole had been broken off and left in splinters. Somehow, Hartshough must have known what was coming, to unharness the horses before Leviathan arrived.

Though it was only midafternoon, Efran ordered a large bonfire to be built here, and the wood piled up nearby to keep it burning for days, if necessary. Wendt had joined him so that Efran could tell him what they had seen from the workroom window and heard from the bodyguards. "Leviathan must have been somehow commanded by the Shoard," Efran said.

"And you think he will come back this way when he has delivered his cargo?" Wendt asked.

"Yes," Efran said. "He's a creature of the Sea; there's no large body of water for hundreds of miles in any direction but here. He owes me, and I'm going to collect on that." He picked up the long, slender bone.

A stream of men went back and forth continually from the waiting area in the east Lands to the fortress and the barracks, conveying questions and information. And hours later, as twilight began coloring the western sky, they were still waiting. No one dared ask the Captain how long he intended to camp out here; he himself had not set a deadline. But he periodically picked up the fish bone, communicating, *You owe me*. He almost thought he felt it shiver once.

Three of the carriage occupants were huddled together, shivering in the windy twilight—Marguerite, Minka, and Hartshough. Whether because of their excitement to be going home, or that they were now in their native element, the Shoard girls seemed less affected by the cold. Peering out of the window at his elbow, Hartshough said, "And there are the lights of Euris below us."

Marguerite said, "Then we should be coming upon their village shortly, if it's near the Fastnesses."

Looking down at the treed stretch of land to the looming mountains, Hartshough murmured, "I see no plains in our path. So it may be that their village is . . . north of the Fastnesses."

Messengers from the fortress brought dinner for Efran, Wendt, and the other watchers out here: Connor, Shane, Koschat, Quennel, Stephanos, Cyneheard, Martyn, Arne, Earnshaw, Seagrave, Tiras, Youshock, Teschner and Ure. The latter two, the carriage bodyguards, were furious at having been thwarted by little girls, and wanted Leviathan blood in return. Many other men flowed in and out, but could not stay because of their own duties.

The moment that lanterns and torches were lit in the barracks area, signifying the night shift, Jaubert left his post at Barracks C to join the men thronging to the far eastern Lands to watch for Leviathan with the Captain. Even standing watch at a barracks that had only one inmate, Jaubert had heard all about it—everyone who passed him talked of nothing else.

Jaubert forgot, or chose not to remember, that men on duty were required to stay at their posts until their relief showed up, and he was unaware that his relief, Henris, had been ordered by the Second Gabriel to take bedding and supplies to the Captain.

In the deep darkness of the windowless cell barracks, Wissowa sat on the bed, gathering her skirts around her ankles. "Hello?" she called softly. "Could I have dinner? Or just a light, please? Hello?"

Efran looked at the glint from golden eyes a safe distance east of the bonfire. Walking over, he held out a hand. "Canis. Lady Lupus. Bounder, Sami—come let me pet you." Sami came right over to meet his hand, but of the others, only Canis appeared out of the meadowgrass. Stroking Sami's fur, Efran said, "I hope not to interfere with your hunting too much longer, but a great big lizard has got something that belongs to me, and I'm waiting for him to bring it back." The wolves accepted this, withdrawing into the meadowgrass again. Although wolves had their own Law, Efran's authority over them was unquestioned.

Gabriel ran up to Wendt, then. "Commander, we've got so many men who want to keep watch out here that they're requesting to implement the emergency roster." This would excuse many of them from purely routine duties.

"For tonight, yes. We all need to keep a lookout for Leviathan, which could fly unseen right over our heads at night," Wendt said.

"Yes, Commander," Gabriel said, then left to give the order. By that, Henris was reassured that he need not return for pointless guard duty at Barracks C. He, Cyneheard, and Lambdin (Henris' father) then got to sit near the bonfire and talk about all the amazing things they had seen happen here.

As twilight stretched into dark shadows beyond the bonfire, they were still waiting. One by one, most of them dropped off to sleep. But Efran walked away from the bonfire to scan the evening sky. *You owe me.*

The wind that battered the carriage had grown much colder. Hartshough had managed to close the southerly facing shutters, but the window bouncing around the northwest must be left open as long they could see out of it, to know about where they were.

It was dark in the carriage; the little girls had cuddled together to drop off to sleep. Marguerite was holding Minka tightly, who was shivering in the cold, teeth chattering. She appeared to be asleep herself, but for periodic

spasms in which she lurched up to gasp, "Where are we now?" This time, looking around the darkness, she asked in a small, quavering voice, "Hartshough? C-can you see anything?"

"Yes, Minka. We are upon the Fastnesses," his echoing voice said.

"Upon the Fastnesses. You—you mean near them?" she asked, disoriented.

He did not reply, for Leviathan began to slow and descend. The little girls woke up to begin bouncing on the seat, laughing and pointing out of the window. Hartshough leaned over to look as the descent continued. Minka and Marguerite saw his face illumined by firelight.

The carriage came to an abrupt, thumping stop to rest on an uneven but solid surface. Pember pushed on the door, but it would not open, so she scrambled out the window. Aune bounded to follow her, and large masculine arms took her away from the window to great laughter, clapping and cheers.

The other carriage occupants held very still, listening to voices and footfalls scraping and crunching on packed snow. The Landers did not wish to make themselves known, which could prevent their return to the Lands. Somewhere underneath all that noise, they were aware that the sound of great flapping wings, which they had heard for hours now, was diminishing.

Unseen, they breathlessly listened to celebratory noises, calls and thudding feet as torchlight wavered around the carriage. But no one looked inside it. Gradually, the din and the firelight faded until there was nothing to be seen or heard beyond the carriage but starlight and wind.

Still in the form of a mountain troll, Hartshough came to life to check the storage under the seats and feel around for what was there. Marguerite asked, "Blankets? Food? Sometimes I pack them and forget about them."

He replied, "No, only goblets, which may prove useful." Then he forced open the door to get out and look around for barely 20 seconds. Shaking snow off his feet and lower legs, he returned to the carriage to close the door and the window. "It appears that the Shoard girls have come home, and we are now sitting atop a low mountain on the southern range of the Fastnesses."

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Chapter 23

Deep in the night, Allyr came over with additional bedding for Efran and Wendt. "Here you are, Commander. Just to get you up out of the sand."

"Thank you," Wendt said, standing and stretching. "I'm going to walk around to get my blood circulating, but I don't think I'll be sleeping tonight."

"Yes, sir," Allyr said. He had to look around for the Captain, who was walking over.

Taking the bedding, Efran nodded acknowledgment to Allyr: "I'll use it at some point." When Allyr had saluted and walked away, Efran asked Wendt, "What power does a faerie queene have that she can use here?" He was

obviously referring to Wendt's wife, whose mother had been Queene of faerie over the whole Southern Continent.

"Honestly?" Wendt asked wryly. "I don't know. Marguerite acts like she wants me to forget that she's faerie. And I get the impression that these are skills which they have to keep in use to stay viable—that it can slip away or degrade if unused."

Efran said, "I'd almost prefer that, except there've been a few times it's been very helpful to us, as with the trolls. But don't tell Minka that," he added quickly.

Wendt laughed lightly, and they were silent for a while. Then he observed, "Quite the coincidence, for this Leviathan to appear with a bone in its throat which you had to remove, and then appear again to carry away the Shoard girls along with our wives."

Efran waited, but when Wendt said no more, he observed, "You don't believe in coincidences."

"No, I don't," Wendt acknowledged. "All such matters are ordained by God."

There are no second causes, Efran thought, remembering what he'd read in the woman's book. When someone else came over to talk to the Commander, Efran picked up the bone to carry with him as he walked around. For whatever reason—hope, delusion, or ingrained knowledge—he was sure that Leviathan would fly back this way, and if Efran failed to meet him, to call him on his debt, he would fly right on by, having accomplished the purpose for which he had been drafted. And for Efran to call him effectively, he had to have the bone.

Then it occurred to him: Was this his guaranty? His yellow flower?

Not the bone itself, but the coincidence of Efran's having performed a lifesaving service for Leviathan, and then requiring Leviathan for a service likewise. Was the coincidence his guaranty that Minka, Marguerite and Hartshough would be returned? Wendt did not believe in coincidences at all. Efran could dismiss small coincidences as accidents of time and nature, but this—this was too big, too fantastic.

He didn't admit it consciously, but from that moment on, he looked at the bone as the symbol of his guaranty: Leviathan would bring them back. Stretching wearily, he went to walk north of the fire, so that its light would not impede his sight of a black thing swiftly crossing the night sky.

Hartshough and Marguerite huddled with Minka between them. Although he was large, he did not radiate much heat, as mountain trolls were cold-blooded, well-suited to their natural environment. So Minka continued to shiver violently in the drafty carriage, splintered where the great talons had grasped it. There were no blankets to cover their lightweight summer clothing, as they hadn't even planned on picnicking when they had set out. "What c-can we d-do, Auntie?" Minka murmured. "C-can we start a f-fire?"

Marguerite paused on an answer. She and Hartshough could radiate a small amount of heat from their hands, but it was insufficient to warm Minka, and depleted their own reserves. It was more effective to simply hold her close. So Marguerite said, "Yes, we can start a fire. But I don't think we should burn our carriage, and not even faerie magic can create dry wood to burn on top of snow." She talked lazily, just making conversation. There was no point in pretending that they had any options before them but to wait.

"Hartshough? C-can you reach your c-clan? The Guppenbergers?" Minka asked.

He said, "No, Lady Minka, not to communicate with them. They are much too far away, and underground, at that. I can discern that they are unaware of our predicament, but I cannot inform them of it."

"I wish Efran were here," Minka murmured drunkenly. "He's so warm."

"Yes, it would be very nice to see Efran about now," Marguerite laughed. She looked off for a minute, then shook her head. "My range isn't near what yours is, Hartshough. Can you sense anything of him?"

He lifted his ponderous, lumpy head, closing his widely spaced eyes. Then he rumbled quietly, "He is waiting for Leviathan."

Marguerite sat up a little. "Is Leviathan flying south, the way he came?"

Searching, Hartshough said, "Yes."

After the tension of that day, through that long night on the east meadowlands, all the men dropped off at one time or another. When Efran startled awake at one point, he stood in a panic with the bone to scan the sky, dotted with lazily drifting clouds. *Did I miss him?* Checking the position of the moon, he decided, *No, it's only been minutes. Oh, Lord God, don't let me sleep; don't let me miss him.* He didn't even remember sitting.

Walking among the sleepers, he accidentally caused a few of them to startle awake. Determined to stay on his feet, he walked, and he prayed, and he scanned the sky from horizon to horizon, watching the stars make their appointed rounds in the Firmament. But he got tired of carrying the fish bone around, so left it on his bedroll.

Along about daybreak, watching the eastern horizon turn a faint pearlescent pink, Efran suddenly saw a lugging black shape cross his view from north to south. "GET DOWN HERE!" he roared. The men around him sprang up, but the weary flapping of the great black wings did not alter. Efran looked down in panic at his empty hands—Leviathan would not regard anything but the token of his debt.

Before he could fly entirely out of range, Efran ran over to grab up the fish bone and brandish it toward the sky. "STOP! YOU OWE ME!" he bellowed. The great head on the sinewy neck whipped around, and with a groan, Leviathan altered his flight to land on the meadowgrass before the little human.

With the bone clenched in his fist, Efran breathed, "Bring them back." As if in protest, Leviathan swung his head from side to side, his wings drooping. "You're the one who took them. Bring them back."

Leviathan stubbornly sat where he was as the men around him watched, dazed. In fury, Efran ran forward, raising the fish bone like a javelin. "You get moving now or I'm going to climb your neck and ram this bone back down your throat! BRING THEM BACK!"

With a roar of concession, Leviathan lifted off again to fly north. The men cheered groggily. Glassy-eyed, Efran watched the black shape diminish northward until it was out of sight. Then he flopped down on his unused bedroll and passed out.

Hartshough startled up. The morning of June 4th was just making itself apparent over the eastern peaks of the Fastnesses. Marguerite opened her eyes, and he said, "Lord Efran has commanded Leviathan to retrieve us."

"Ohh!" she said in relief, struggling up to sit. "Minka, did you hear that? Minka?" Leaning over her, Marguerite

said, "Oh, Hartshough, she's so cold! What can we do?" Minka was not only cold, but pale, with dark rings around her eyes, sleeping very deeply.

Hartshough said, "First, we must wake her. Let's get her water." He took one of the four goblets they'd found stored under a seat and opened a window. Leaning out, he scooped up snow to fill the goblet. Then he held it in his hands, concentrating, until the snow melted and the water began to steam.

"See if you can give it to her, Marguerite," he said, handing her the goblet. His large, six-fingered hands were not adept for this task.

"Yes," she said, taking it. "Minka," she said, lifting her with one arm. She did not respond. "Minka," she repeated intently. "Leviathan is on its way and Efran is waiting. Minka, will you wake?"

Minka opened bleary eyes and Marguerite ordered, "Drink, dear."

Sitting up unsteadily, Minka took the goblet to drink. "Oh, it's warm," she breathed, and drank it all.

Hartshough warmed up another goblet for her, one for Marguerite, and one for himself. Then he studied the cushions of the opposite seat, which none of them were sitting on. "Let's see here," he murmured. He detached the cushion that stretched across the backrest, then turned it over. "It's wool," he noted. Ripping up the seat cushion, he observed, "As this is, as well."

He laid the two cushions side by side lengthwise on the hard wooden seat and pressed his hands where their edges joined. Then he reached up outside the window to remove the candle from the glass lantern hanging there. After warming the candle in his hands, he pressed the soft wax between the edges of the cushions. Then he compressed the conjoined cushions further so that they weren't so bulky.

"If you will, make her sit up, Marguerite," he said, and she lifted a barely conscious girl. When Hartshough draped the wool cloak over her, she snuggled down into it, sighing, "I love you, Hartshough." Raising heavy eyes, she said, "But Auntie is cold, too."

"No, dear. All I have to do is hold on to you," she said, and they cuddled together.

Easing his large frame through the window, Hartshough sat on the sill to look around. Although other mountaintops were taller, the carriage was resting at a slight angle on the pinnacle of this mountain. And wherever he looked outside the carriage, there was nothing but snow. They were so far above the treeline that the tops of the trees below were not even visible to him.

"I hope it doesn't snow," he told himself. As the carriage sat now, snow covered the wheels up to within six inches of the windows—and this in early June.

After having slept only about an hour, Efran was awake again, eating breakfast and calculating. The men were grouped around him as he thought out, "Yesterday, Leviathan snatched the carriage—when was that? Midafternoon?"

"Just about, Captain," Teschner confirmed.

"And he came back at daybreak this morning, so a round trip took him about—sixteen hours?" he said around a ham roll.

“That’s a fair guess, Captain,” Hawk said.

“Since he left again at daybreak this morning, then he should be back with the carriage around—eleven to midnight tonight,” Efran posed.

“Except that he was tired after the first trip. It will take him longer, Captain,” Kaas said.

Efran grudgingly acknowledged that, then asked Lwoff, “What do you think?”

He looked away in reluctance. “You say that he balked at going, Cap’n?” Lwoff asked. Efran nodded.

Lwoff shook his head dubiously. “Symphorien held ’erself bound to Lady Minka for saving ’er with ’er eggs, but males—you know, males don’t allays have the scruples of females. Me, I’m praying that the carriage isn’t damaged or in a hard position to bring up, as against rock. The talons are meant for grabbing hold of live game; ’twould be a bad thing for it to break apart in flight.”

Efran lowered his plate, leaning back on a trembling arm. But Detler said quietly, “Captain . . . does that mean that . . . that it will have been sixteen hours between the time Leviathan dropped them off and the time he’ll be back for them . . . ?”

The shock of this fact rolled through the men like an earthquake. Wherever they were set down, there was no chance they’d sit in the carriage for 16 hours until Leviathan got back to them. How would they even know that he was coming? Assuming the Shoard girls made it alive and were rescued, the Landers would be taken, as well. In fact, there were many scenarios by which they’d be forced out of the carriage, but almost none in which they would stay.

Abruptly, Efran got up to search around his bedroll and bring up the bone. Hefting it, he said, “They’ll be back. I have a guaranty.”

Meanwhile, Wissowa was gripping the bars of her cell, seeing early morning light peek through cracks in the barracks wall. She listened to her voice echo as she called, “Hello! Hellooo? When’s breakfast? I’m rather hungry, you know. How long do I have stay here? I don’t really enjoy being by myself. Hello? Anyone? Where is everyone?”

Especially after having warm melted snow to drink, everyone in the carriage needed to evacuate, but no one wanted to test the actual depth of the snow outside. So Hartshough dedicated the storage compartment under the denuded seat as their chamber pot. He explained, “I fear the carriage is irreparable as it is, Lady Marguerite.” With the hope of rescue on the horizon, he was back to being a butler.

“I agree, dear man. Who wants to go first?” Marguerite said.

Minka stood, shedding her wool cocoon. “I’m about to burst.” She hiked up her riding skirt and sat while Hartshough faced away from her. When finished, she looked down in the wooden box. “It looks like it’s leaking.”

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Chapter 24

"I'm not surprised it would leak," Marguerite said. She took her turn over the makeshift chamber pot while Minka rewrapped herself in wool cushions. Then they both hid their faces while Hartshough relieved himself. But Minka told Marguerite, "I've seen Efran do this. It's so funny. And Joshua, when I was trying to change his wraps. He looked like a little fountain." They laughed and laughed, to poor Hartshough's embarrassment.

But when he was done, he looked in the wooden compartment to see that, yes, it was leaking. This was not good, for the warm urine would melt the snow directly under the bottom of the carriage, which would then refreeze, sticking firmly to the underside. If and when the carriage was lifted again, that would create tremendous stress on the floor, which would either break away or rise with a weight of ice attached to it. But he did not mention this to the ladies. They settled down to wait with the shutters closed against the cold. Getting very sleepy, they dropped off again.

Hours later, Hartshough awoke in the stuffy darkness. It was black and airless in the carriage. Hartshough tried to open the shutters, finding them immovable. Evidently, it had snowed again while they were unaware.

He put a hand on the shutter to warm it, melting the packed snow behind it. When he was able to get it open far enough to stick his hand out, he pressed upwards through the snow until, standing with a knee on the sill, he broke through the surface to allow fresh air and daylight into the carriage. Marguerite and Minka began coming around.

But it was still snowing, and the carriage was completely covered. Turning to the women in the dimness, he said, "I am open to suggestions for how to clear enough snow away from the carriage for Leviathan to see it in the dark." While it was still daylight now, it was not likely to be for long.

There was a moment of silence, then Marguerite stood. "We have to start with the roof, Hartshough, and heat it up enough to melt the snow. Then we have to go down the sides to melt it away from them as well."

They two generated so much heat between them in the sealed carriage that Minka took off her wool wrap. It was draining work that they could not sustain for long. Nonetheless, she watched them go over the roof and down one wall at a time, checking their progress out the windows. Bit by bit, daylight began to appear at the tops of the windows. By the time Hartshough and Marguerite were halfway down all four walls, Minka heard running water.

But they were handicapped by several factors: the cold, the continued snowfall, and the press of time. They didn't know how long they had slept or when Leviathan might come. When the time came that he would grasp the carriage and start lifting, whatever part was stuck in snow would be left behind. That was a particular problem with the wheels, which Hartshough and Marguerite could not reach. And of course, the wheels were connected to the undercarriage, which sat on a bed of snow. To address this, they worked along the floor, as well.

They worked tenaciously for hours, with intervals of rest. They went back up to the roof again and again to make sure that it was clear, and that the thawed snow did not refreeze going down the walls.

Then they all looked up with suspended breathing at the sound of great flapping wings descending from high above. Marguerite said, "Sit and hold the strap on your end, Hartshough, and we'll both hold onto Minka."

“Yes, Lady Marguerite,” he said.

So she grasped the strap on her left; he took hold of the one on his right, and they both wrapped their free arms around Minka. She breathed, “Oh, Lord God, get us back safely.”

About this time—midafternoon of June 4th—Wissowa was shouting, “I’m very sorry for throwing water on Windry. Do you hear me? Is anyone out there? I said, I’M VERY SORRY!” She grabbed up the empty tin cup to bang it against the bars.

In the next moment, talons crashed through the carriage shutters on either side of the occupants, and the coach—or part of it—came up with the loud splintering of wood and creaking of bolts giving way. Afternoon sunlight reflecting off the snow poured into the vehicle as the undercarriage was ripped away, along with the entire seat across from them. Most of the carriage frame itself was still intact, which is the only reason the occupants were still seated.

The unbalanced carriage tilted wildly as Minka stared down at wheels, floor fragments, and her woolen cocoon falling freely toward the rapidly withdrawing mountaintop. She leaned back and closed her eyes to not faint. The cold wind was ferocious, but she buried her face in Marguerite’s shoulder and her right hand under Hartshough’s arm.

When they had left the Fastnesses behind, the carriage they rode in—or what was left of it—grew dim again. Since half of it was gone now, Leviathan was apparently carrying it by one foot tucked underneath his body. They were still rocking with the sweep of his wings, and his spiked tail came perilously close to them at times. Once when the spikes swung up around the remaining floor, Hartshough had to quickly raise a leg out of danger. The spikes broke another floorboard coming out, but Leviathan managed to keep it out of the carriage space after that.

The ride was bumpy, however, and getting bumpier. Leviathan seemed to be working very hard to keep himself aloft. As the sun dropped quickly behind the western edge of the Fastnesses, the trees and hills below them looked to be drawing closer.

Leviathan turned west, then, apparently to intercept the Passage and follow as it surged southward. Then the three had a rocking, sky-high view of the sun’s descent over the far edge of the world. While the ground below was still warm, he evidently found thermals next to the Passage which he used to ascend, then fall a ways, then ascend again.

But with nightfall, he had to resume pumping his wings. The riders had now been in the carriage, either waiting or traveling, for almost 30 hours. The ponderous thrusting of Leviathan’s wings jerked the carriage up and down, up and down, up and down. After several hours of this unrelieved bouncing, Minka began fading again. “I can’t make it,” she whispered. “Let go of me, or I’ll pull you both down.”

“Don’t be silly,” Marguerite said, holding her tighter.

Minka faintly protested, “No, really—” But Hartshough began chanting in a lusty tavern voice:

“Now this is the Law of the Jungle—as old and as true as the sky;
And Wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the Wolf that shall break it must die.

“As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk the Law runneth forward and back,
For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.

“The Jackal may follow the Tiger, but, Cub, when thy whiskers are grown,
Remember the Wolf is a hunter—go forth and get food of thine own!”

Minka started laughing at the nonsense. Encouraged, Hartshough went on:

“Keep peace with the Lords of the Jungle—the Tiger, the Panther, the Bear;
And trouble not Leviathan, nor mock the beast in his lair—”

Above them, Leviathan roared in agreement, and the ladies in the half-carriage gasped. “Go on!” Marguerite whispered. Bemused, Hartshough complied:

“The Lair of the Wolf is his refuge, and where he had made him his home,
Leviathan may not enter, nor even Lord Efran may come.”

Leviathan growled, but accepted equity with the Lord of the Lands. Minka poked Hartshough for more. He burst forth:

“The Lair of the Wolf is his refuge, but where he has digged it too plain,
Minka shall send him a message, and so he shall change it again!”

She screeched, but he was on a roll:

“If ye kill before midnight, be silent, and wake not the woods with your bay,
Lest ye frighten the deer from the crops, so Leviathan go empty away.”

The great beast grunted in concord, and the carriage riders noted his wing beats were stronger and more reliable. Hartshough pushed on:

“Ye may kill for yourselves, and your mates, and your cubs as they need, and ye can;
But kill not for pleasure of killing, *and seven times never kill Man.*”

Growling, Leviathan made no promises.

“Because of his age and his cunning, because of his grip and his paw,
In all that the Law leaveth open, the word of Lord Ryal is Law!” Hartshough shouted.

Leviathan uttered, “rawr rnugh ovrungh”

Minka whispered, “Does that sound like a laugh? Or, he’s talking. He’s commenting!” Then she shouted upward, “What do you mean? No, Leviathan doesn’t make law!”

He snarked back, “wruoh urrrgh”

Marguerite whispered, “He’s listening! Keep it up, Hartshough!”

“I—I don’t know any more! It’s been a long time since I was a young troll,” Hartshough said.

“Then make something up! Tell him a story!” Marguerite urged quietly.

“I don’t know how,” he said, grieved.

“Toogood, when I was young and helpless, you became father, friend, guardian, helper and butler to me. Now my great-granddaughter and I need you as a storyteller,” she said in quiet passion. In the moonlight, Minka gazed at him with wide blue eyes.

He took a breath and shouted, “Once upon a time there was a handsome dragon! He was black as night, with the green of the Sea in his eyes and his scales. He was elegant in form, rippling with muscles from his great head, with fierce horns and powerful jaws, to his magnificent clawed feet and deadly spiked tail. But he was not only a dragon of the land that could fly, his wings stretching from one side of the hilltop to the other, but also a dragon of the Sea that could swim, with siphons that shot boiling water. Yes: this was that king of dragons, the Leviathan!”

Above them, Leviathan whipped his head up to roar, and the humans in the disintegrating carriage covered their ears. Miles south of them, Efran opened his eyes.

Marguerite prodded Hartshough, who took another breath and said, “Leviathan was so handsome that lady dragons came to his lands from many miles away to lure him with their wiles. They crowded in front of him, swishing their tails back and forth. They peeked at him from behind their wings, fluttering their eyelids. They decorated themselves with all manner of new and strange designs of seaweed, anemones, and treasures found among men’s bones on the floor of the Sea.”

Leviathan grunted, “Aunnnde?”

“But Leviathan took no notice of the ladies, as he was a dragon of war, preparing himself to meet challenges to his dominance of the Sea,” Hartshough narrated.

Lost for a moment when Leviathan did not respond, Hartshough looked to Marguerite. She whispered, “I think he wants to hear more about the ladies.”

“But the ladies were undaunted in their efforts, for they were warriors as well—Warriors of Love!” Hartshough shouted. Minka and Marguerite muffled their laughter, but Leviathan raised and lowered his massive head in agreement, spurting a flame for emphasis.

“There, Captain! Did you see that?—just a spark, but the roar came from that direction,” Martyn said, pointing to the northwest.

Efran, exhausted from looking and waiting, shook his head. “I . . . thought I heard something, but it’s—it’s well after midnight now, probably later. I don’t know. . . .”

Goss, one of the many men peering north, had the eyes of an eagle and the cognizance of detail so as to produce highly accurate sketches from memory. Moreover, he appeared to be tracking something in the nighttime sky. “There’s something aloft, Cap’n, something big keeping to the Passage going south.”

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Chapter 25

Hartshough expounded, "The Warriors of Love were relentless in stalking their prey. For their desire was nothing less than to be Consort of the great Leviathan. But which one would prevail? To catch his eye and his heart, they draped kelp from their heads and hung sea stars from their ears. When he walked by, they would try to entice him with their glowing eyes. When he remained indifferent, they tripped him with their tails and walked over him, pretending not to notice. But Leviathan was undaunted. He had a mission before him to prove his strength and skill as the greatest of Leviathans. No mere dragon could accomplish this feat; nor any but the bravest and best. His mission was to collect a boxful of humans who had been stranded on a snowy mountaintop!"

Leviathan then burst forth, "URGWAHOURGHORHARRRR!"

"He's complaining about it!" Minka said indignantly.

Upon Leviathan's complaint, the men who were sitting around the bonfire lunged to their feet. Ley pointed. "There, Captain!"

"It's coming fast!" "Headed straight at us!" "Why isn't it slowing?" "It's just a—!" "Take care for the fire!" "It's headed for the bonfire!" "TURN! TURN! TURN!" The men around the bonfire frantically waved to the right and to the left. Paralyzed, Efran watched the ragged half-carriage dangle uncertainly from three talons as it careened toward the bonfire with its occupants . . . laughing? No. He rejected the impression.

In the darkness of the cell, in the quiet of the barracks, Wissowa lay gazing into oblivion. "Did I drown her? Did she choke on the water and pass out? Did Flores testify against me? I had no idea there were such harsh penalties for throwing water. . . ."

Leviathan came in skimming so low that the carriage fragment was dragged through the bonfire before coming to rest beyond it. Leviathan tore his talons away from it to crash-land about twenty feet farther on. Neck bobbing, he sat up on his haunches to erect his siphons and spurt a smattering of sea water about five feet. The men who hadn't seen him up close gaped at him.

Whistling shrilly—as if anyone needed an alarm—Efran leapt over to begin scooping handfuls of dirt onto the carriage occupants, who were struggling to get free of the straps and the burning bits of carriage pieces. Hartshough lifted Minka out and Connor swept up Marguerite. They were all talking at once as the men patted out smoldering embers on Hartshough's pants while Marguerite kicked off her smoking shoes. Minka, having been encased between them, was fine.

Then they all stopped to catch their breath and stare at each other. With a cry, Minka launched herself onto Efran, who collapsed to his knees holding her. Wendt engulfed Marguerite, and the rest of the men converged on Hartshough with congratulatory slaps and shaking.

"REAORWAGH!" said Leviathan, weaving on his haunches. "URWOHOARE! WREAURE! WAHR!"

"All right." Getting to his feet, Efran went over to his wrecked bed roll to pick up the fish bone. He broke it over his knee and tossed aside the pieces. "You're free."

"bakk." Leviathan half flew, half scampered to disappear over the southern cliffs into the Sea.

Efran turned to Minka, who was crying on Marguerite and hugging Hartshough. "That was the beginning of the most amazing story I ever heard, Hartshough," Minka said tearily.

"I shall find you better stories, Lady Minka," he promised.

While the men tossed the remaining carriage pieces onto the bonfire, Wendt took Marguerite home to the chapel and Efran brought Minka up the switchback in front of him on Kraken. Almost asleep, she had her legs draped over on one side. Efran struggled to keep his eyes open as well. It helped that the alarm bells at both the main gates and the courtyard gates were blasting away in celebration.

The men on watch in the courtyard congratulated him, as did the door guards. When Efran and Minka finally found themselves in their quarters, he looked at the bed but she began rummaging in her chest and her wardrobe. "I'm not doing a thing until I clean up under the third-floor waterfall," she said, exhausted.

"All right," he said with a half smile. So she got a fresh pair of breeches for him out of his chest, and they went on up to the third floor.

Jaubert, totally exhausted himself, but having enjoyed himself thoroughly, was among the last of the men to leave the now-blackened and extinguished bonfire in the East Lands. He had helped shake out and refold all the blankets that had been abandoned there when the Captain and the Commander left, and as he returned them to storage in the barracks, Jaubert earned a pat on the shoulder from the Second Gabriel himself. By this time, it was about three AM of June 5th.

Gratified and proud, Jaubert was on his way to his own barracks, D, to crash for a few hours until he was scheduled for duty. Passing Barracks C, he glanced at the unmanned door and paused. The lady who had been sent here for the night last night—last night? He stopped dead. "That was—not *last* night, but—she's been let out, hasn't she? She was supposed to be released—this morning? No. *Yesterday* morning. Oh, tell me that's she not still there," he muttered, going in to look.

It was completely dark inside, so he went to Barracks D to get a lantern, light it, and bring it back to Barracks C. Going in, he swung the lantern to the cell he'd left her in, and—

"Oh, cripes," he groaned. There she was, sitting up in bed, asleep. She had no dinner plate nor even cup of water in there. "Oh, I'm dead. Unless--"

After accidentally stepping on (and flattening) a tin cup on the floor outside the cell, he set the lantern down and unlocked the door to enter and gently rouse her. "Ma'am? Ma'am?" He had to shake her a little bit, but she finally moaned, turning her head to blink at him. "You can go now, ma'am. I'm going to walk you home. Can you get up? Here, let me help you."

Eyes closed, she managed to stand and allow him to walk her out of the cell barracks and down the various walkways past New North Road toward Main. Carrying the lantern, he glanced around uneasily. If he were stopped and questioned, he couldn't see how to explain what had happened without incurring latrine duty.

As they stepped onto Main, she woke up a little. Looking at the glowing sidewalk lanterns and all the closed

shops, she asked, "What—how late is it? Was I supposed to go back to the notary's?"

"No, ma'am, you're cleared to go home. Where do you live? I'll walk you there," he reassured her.

"Um, number thirty-five here, behind Whately's," she murmured, holding his arm.

"Oh, good. That's close by," he said.

She was still unsteady as he walked her past Averno's. This caught the attention of a blue-uniformed nighttime sentry—one of Tourse's security force. When he trotted toward them, Jaubert rolled his eyes and the sentry paused, smiling. The obvious implication was that he was assisting a drunken woman home. Equipped with that unspoken explanation, he continued to help her with all gentility up her street, raising the lantern for guidance.

At the front door, she began to look troubled. "I don't have my key. I didn't lock up when I left." Trying the door cautiously, she found it unlocked. Now she looked frightened. "Will you come in with me and check the rooms?"

"Certainly," he said. First, they went to the kitchen so that he could light several candles for her. Then he accompanied her to every room of the small house, including the washroom and closets, to confirm that no one was there.

Finally, she began to relax. "Oh, thank you. That was very kind of you to walk me home. But now I'm hungry—I feel like I haven't eaten for days. Will you stay just a moment longer while I fix something to eat? I can't stand being alone."

"Of course," he said patiently, rather preferring to get some sleep before he had to start the day's duty in a few hours.

"Do you want anything?" she asked, opening the cold storage compartment in the floor. "Here, I just bought this creamed chicken at Averno's today, so it should be—" Getting a whiff of it, he winced and she grimaced in bewilderment. "How could it have gone bad so quickly? I'm going to have a talk with Averno about using fresh meat."

In disgust, she put that aside and reached for a sack of muffins instead. "These had better be good," she muttered, taking a bite of one. "Just a little stale. Do you want one?" she asked.

"Sure," he said, accepting a muffin. Dinner—which she hadn't eaten—had been a long time ago for him.

"How about wine? I know all you men like ale, but I prefer the taste of wine. It makes me giggly," she admitted.

The atmosphere suddenly changed. He fought with himself for a little while, in that he really shouldn't take advantage of the opportunity when it could be blamed on him. But—even though she was a little older than he was, she was a nice-looking lady. And she did have a certain sensuality about her. "I'd enjoy that very much," he said, emulating the Captain's crinkling of the eyes.

As she poured two glasses, she eyed him perceptively. "Oh, aren't you sweet," she murmured. "But no, I'm not going to take your virginity tonight. I'm just too tired. And, you know, I'm at the stage where I prefer a man who knows how to please a woman, you understand. Breaking in the new ones is so much work."

Yawning hugely, she said, "Well, thank you for seeing me safely home. I think I'll go to bed now. By myself," she clarified.

"Yes, ma'am. Good night," he said, standing.

"Don't forget your wine," she mentioned.

He downed the glass in one gulp, then staggered out the door and down the walk from the combined blow of her appraisal and her alcohol. Then he had to go back to her door to retrieve the lantern that she was holding out to him.

Reeling back down Main, he came across the same sentry. This time he took Jaubert by the arm, asking, "Are you all right? What happened?"

"A mugging," Jaubert said, wiping wine from his chin.

"Did he get away?" the sentry asked, looking back to the dark street.

"No, she went to bed," Jaubert said. Dubious but sympathetic, the sentry let him go.

About six hours later on the same day—June 5th—Efran, Minka, DeWitt, Estes, Ryal, Soames, and Gabriel met with Wendt and Marguerite at the chapel. Hartshough vainly attempted his normal rôle of greeter and butler, but the other guests forced him to sit at the long table with them. Then several men—Youshock, Serrano, Jehan and Coish, among others—served refreshments to those gathered. Justinian and Eryk, caught watching from the loft, were also ordered down to join them.

Then the three carriage riders gave an account of their snatching on the East Lands, and the Shoard girls' definite knowledge that they were going home. Hartshough explained what he had gleaned from the girls themselves, and described their reception.

Wendt asked, "Then, their clan lives in the Fastnesses?"

"Close by, Lord Commander," Hartshough replied. "I gather that they chose the safest, most visible drop-off point for Leviathan, despite the snow, as that particular mountain is routinely scaled by the native shepherds. The foothills, however, are strewn with bogs and nettles, and, as we saw, Leviathan does not land with pinpoint accuracy. The girls were retrieved at once upon our arrival, with great celebration."

Ryal asked, "Does it snow on the Fastnesses year-round, then?"

"Probably for most of the year, Lord Ryal," Hartshough said. "But once the girls were well enough to make contact with their clan, the elders were unwilling to wait any length of time to arrange their return," Hartshough replied.

Ryal said, "I would like very much to learn more about these Shoard."

"Oh, this clan is a highly advanced branch. My kin the Guppenbergers were astonished to hear of their capabilities. Fazakerley said that it is difficult to see how the girls were infected with the parasites at all in this group, who must know better than to eat the contaminated fare," Hartshough said.

Nodding, Wendt looked to Efran, who was quiet. His hand rested on Minka's knee under the table. She herself looked half asleep. "And Efran didn't lose his mind," Wendt observed.

With a wry glance, he said, "I had a guaranty, Commander." Minka looked at him, and he smiled at her. "The bone, the fish bone. The coincidence of my retrieving it and then being able to use it with Leviathan." She leaned on his arm and he closed his eyes.

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Chapter 26

Gabriel observed, "Then you three were stuck in that carriage in the snow for about sixteen hours. How did you manage it?"

"Ohhhh," the three groaned, which provoked sympathetic laughter among their listeners. Hartshough and Marguerite related their efforts to keep Minka warm and then melt the snow away from the carriage from the inside out. Efran's face blanched as he listened. When he looked down at her, she murmured, "I was covered by your guaranty, as well."

Raising up, she said, "The best part of the whole adventure was on the last leg of our return, when Leviathan was flagging, so that I was about to drop out of the carriage for the bouncy ride. So Hartshough started reciting to him—first, a poem about rules for wolves, except he put our names and Leviathan's in it, and we were so surprised to hear Leviathan above us commenting on it. He understood! And that seemed to help him fly, so then Hartshough began telling a story about how all the lady dragons dressed up for him in seaweed and anemones, trying to catch his eye, just like the women do here with Efran."

Those around the table burst into laughter, and immediately demanded a recitation from Hartshough. Abashed, he did recite the altered Rules for Wolves, but begged off trying to recreate the story. "If this were a literary effort, and I were a true author, I would surely be able to come up with something more original and entertaining. As it was, it was sufficient to encourage Leviathan for just a few more miles."

Efran asked darkly, "You don't suppose Leviathan has decided to take up residence in our waters, do you?" As no one ventured an opinion, he muttered, "Just when we start getting some seafood."

They talked and ate for a while longer, mulling over everything. Then Hartshough raised up to murmur to Youshock, "Pass around the gentlemen's relish, if you would, along with the toast."

"Yes, Mister Hartshough," Youshock said, turning to the kitchen.

Efran and Justinian straightened a little. Justinian sniffed, "I feel slighted for not ever having enjoyed this 'gentlemen's relish.' What's in it?"

Hartshough replied, "I have held on to the recipe waiting for anchovies, Lord Justinian. Now, thanks to our trolls, we appear to have sufficient quantities with which to play, so to speak." Newly awakened, Efran glanced at Justinian, who studied him in return. Hartshough continued, "Besides anchovies, the relish contains butter—"

"Wait," Efran said, watching as Youshock and Serrano passed around the small bowls of dip while Jehan and Coish scattered baskets of toast around the long table.

Drawing a bowl and a basket toward him, Efran took a moderate drink of water to cleanse his mouth, then spread the dip on a small square of toast to taste it delicately, a little at a time. Watching, Minka grinned hazily. "I like how you do that," she murmured. He only glanced up at the distraction, but when she added, "It looks like how you kiss," he lost his train of thought altogether.

Justinian, who had not been incapacitated by her comments, said, "I'll practice that technique. Besides the anchovies and butter, we have cinnamon, white pepper, cayenne pepper, and nutmeg."

Dismayed, Efran lowered the toast and looked at Minka again while Justinian victoriously touched the corners of his mouth with his napkin. Youshock said, "You're absolutely correct, Lord Justinian, and a gentleman indeed, to be able to name all the ingredients—besides lemon juice, of course—and do so with honor, never taking a glance at the recipe that's been out on the counter for the last twenty-four hours. My hat's off to you, sir."

Efran turned his eyes to Justinian, who was unbowed, and the table erupted in laughter.

Shortly, the party broke up. Efran, Minka, Estes and DeWitt rode up the switchback to the fortress, talking about the string of coincidences that had led to the Shoard girls' healing and restoration to their home, as well as the return of three people indispensable to the Lands.

Arriving on the back grounds, Efran and Minka found the children just emerging from class. As none of them had been awake when Minka had been brought home in the wee hours of the morning, they were thrilled to see her now, and made her repeat everything (almost) about the adventure that she, Hartshough, and Marguerite had shared with the great, whiny, egoistical Leviathan.

Below at Number 35, Wissowa was just waking. She lay in bed for a little while, listening to the carts and carriages rattle by outside, especially to and from Besiana's Bath and Bed Supplies on one side and Imelda's Beauty Potions on the other. Then she rose to eat another muffin, bathe and dress.

All the while, she was thinking. In the terror of being locked up by herself for all those hours, she had emerged a different person, able to receive the advances of a younger man without feeling the need to sleep with him. Ever since that one night with Efran ten years ago, she had felt that her security and desirability must involve being in the embrace of a younger man. But her incarceration—however long it had lasted—had somehow broken that need.

Moreover, she found that she was no longer afraid of being alone. She had money, and Ploense to manage it; she had friends to help her in an emergency, as she was sure Flores would. But, she no longer felt the need to have someone around her constantly. She could go to market for herself, and fix meals for herself, and find a profitable use of her time that didn't involve Shaffer or any more of Efran's money.

She paused, then, to speculate, "I wonder if I should tell him that when he was half-asleep, he did tell me his name." After considering this, she dismissed the idea. "No, a man like that needs something to keep him humble."

So it was with a new sense of peace and self-respect that she bought a new bracelet from Whately's and then walked to Averne's to have a fresh chicken salad and lager. Not wine.

Meanwhile, Lord Shaffer was writing a letter. . . .

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on June 5th of the year 8156 from the creation of the world.

AUTHOR'S ESSENTIAL NOTES:

One of those little joys of life was when I heard Ecclesiastes 3 made into a [pop song](#).

The guaranty of Minka's yellow flower was adapted from real life. Almost 25 years ago, I was attempting to mentor a teenager whom I will call "Faith" in the Christian walk. She was beautiful and gifted, but attended a high school where money was the defining attribute, and her parents were not wealthy. Because one of Faith's gifts was dancing, she tried out for the school's dance squad that performed at football and basketball games. She didn't make it.

But she decided to try again, and spent her sophomore year training under a Christian member of the squad, a Captain, who encouraged her talent and her faith. When Faith tried out for her junior year, she made the squad.

That year was both difficult and rewarding, so that Faith decided to try out for an officer position for her senior year. This was a huge challenge: not only was she not popular, but had an automatic strike against her for having not made it her sophomore year. Officers were expected to be third-year members of the squad.

But then she told me that God had given her a guaranty that if she tried out, she'd make it. I told her, "God doesn't give guaranties," because I didn't find that anywhere in Scripture. But she insisted, "He told me that I would make it, and to prove it, He said, 'This Friday you'll be chosen Dancer of the Week, and that's how you'll know that I'm going to make you an officer.'"

That Friday, the squad director announced Faith as Dancer of the Week.

Tryouts for squad officer—four lieutenants and a captain—were comprehensive. (Faith was not aiming to be captain, as that was certainly out of reach.) The candidates were required to choreograph and perform an original routine in front of a panel of judges, who would then interview them. What made it unlikely for Faith, as a first-year member, was that she was competing for a lieutenant's spot against a second-year member who was very popular. But Faith prepared hopefully on the strength of that guaranty.

Tryouts were closed, and a panel of three judges from outside the school was brought to the gymnasium to watch auditions and interview the girls. When the selections had been made, friends and family were then allowed into the gym. The girls who had won officer spots would be lined up wearing officer hats (sequined instead of felt).

I was among those who entered, and saw Faith with a sequined hat on her head. The girl whom everyone assumed would win that spot left the gym quietly with her parents.

It's important to note that Faith had not asked God for a guaranty—it was something He chose to give her as an act of grace. Since then, I've discovered that there are indeed guaranties in Scripture. Every Old Testament prophecy that was fulfilled in the New, such as [Isaiah 53](#), is a guaranty. Every promise that Jesus made to his disciples, such as [Matthew 28:20](#) ("And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age") is a guaranty.

Scripture is full of guaranties, but most are conditional to some extent—Faith had to prepare and try out with all her heart. She couldn't just walk in to tryouts and announce that God had said He was going to make her an officer. But when she proved that it was important enough to prepare for, He carried her over the impossibilities.

The book written by a woman from which Efran learns something is *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* by [Hannah Whitall Smith](#).

The adulterated verses that Hartshough sings were originally "[The Law of the Jungle](#)" from *The Second Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling.

The Gentlemen's Relish recipe is [here](#).

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran's Guaranty* (Book 35)

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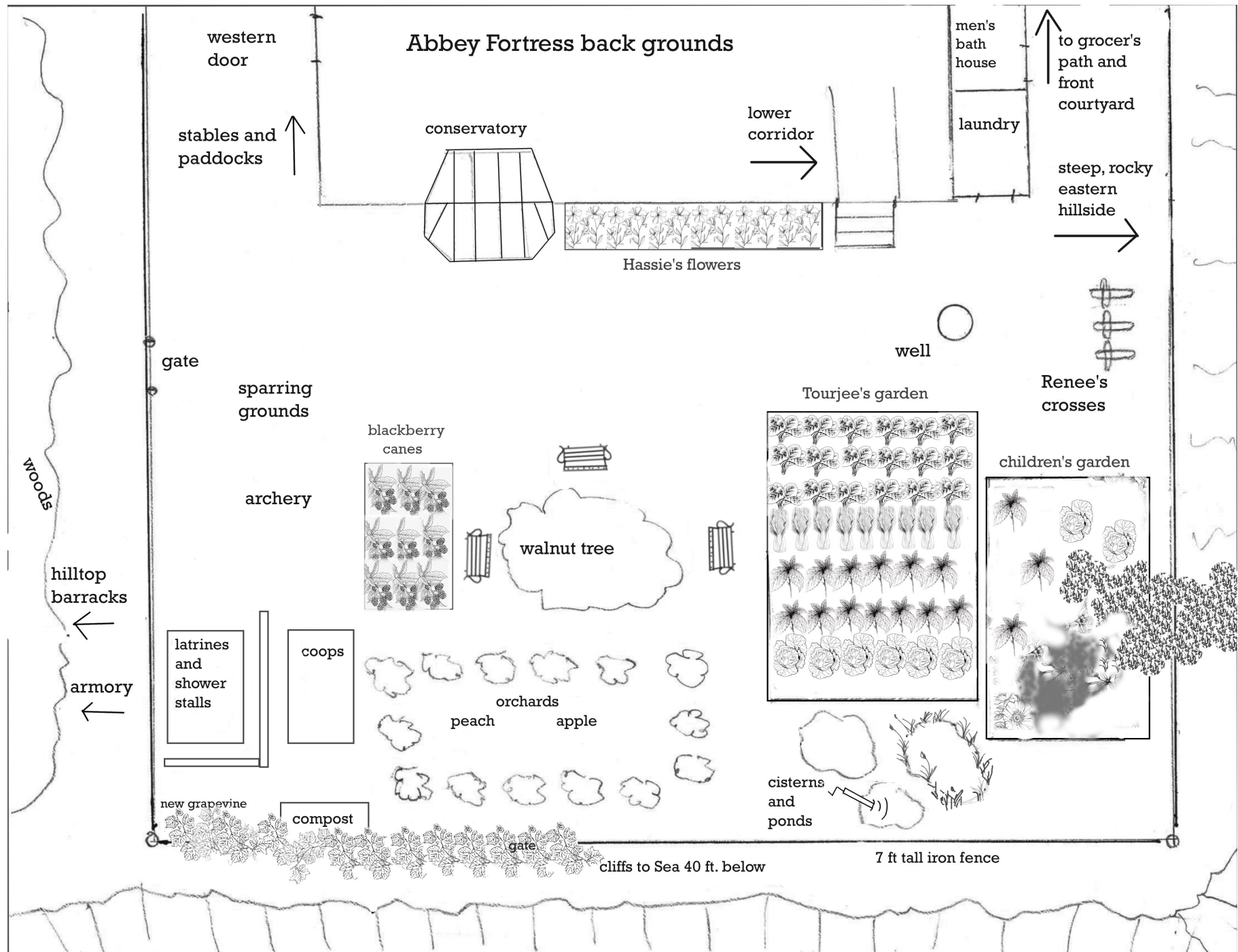
Aceto—ah SEE tow
 acolyte—A kuh lite (*A* as in *at*)
 Adele—ah DELL
 Allyr—AL er
 amanuensis—uh man you EN sis (plural: -ses, -seez)
 anemone—ah NEH muh nee
 Arbaiza—are BAZE ah
 Armerding—are MUR ding
 Arne—arn
 Aune—awn
 Avene—ah VURN
 Baroffio—bar OFF ee oh
 Benoit—ben WAH
 Besiana—BES ee an ah
 Bozzelli—bo ZELL ee
 Calix—KAY lix
 Canis—CANE iss
 Capur—KAH pir
 Conte—cahnt
 Corona—cor OH nah
 Cyneheard—SIGN herd
 Dallarosa—dal ah ROW sa
 Delano—deh LAN oh
 diva—DEE vah
 Dolivo—doh LEEV oh
 Durgin—DUR gen (hard g)
 Efran—EFF run
 Elowen—EL oh win
 Enon—EE nun
 Estes—ESS tis
 Eurus—YOUR us
 Eurussian—your uh SEE un
 Eymor—EE more
 Fazakerley—faz eh KAIR lee
 Felice—feh LEESE
 fiduciary—feh DOO shee eh ree
 Flores—FLOR es
 Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
 Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
 Goss—gahs
 Graeme—GRAY em
 Hartshough—HART soh
 Hereward—HERR uh wuhd
 Heus—rhymes with the noun *use*
 Imelda—eh MEL dah
 Jasque—JAS kee
 Jaubert—joh BEHR
 Jehan—JAY han
 Justinian—jus TIN ee un
 Kaas—kahs

koa—KOH ah (fight to the death)
 Koschat—KOS chat
 Kraken—KRAY ken
 Lemmerz—leh MERZ
 Leneghan—LEN eh gan
 Leviathan—leh VIE ah thun
 Ley—lay
 Lilou—LEE loo
 Loseby—LOWS bee
 Lowry—LAHW ree
 Marguerite—mar ger EET
 Mathurin—mah THUR in
 mezzo—MET soh
 Minka—MINK ah
 Minunni—meh NEW nee
moekolohe—moh ee koh LO ee
 moiwahine—mo wa HEE nee (queen)
 Montefiore—mon teh FYAW ree
 Mowinckel—MOWE ink ell
 Nicarber—neh CAR bur
ohe—OH ee (reed flute)
 Pherigo—FEAR eh go
 Pia—PEE ah
 Picti—PICK tee
 Pieta—pie ATE ah
 Pleyel—PLAY el
 Plonse—plonse
 Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
 Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
 riposte—reh POST
 Rondinelli—ron din ELL ee; Rondi—RON dee
 Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
 Schuchard—SCHUK chur ared ARE dlup
 Serrano—suh RAHN oh
 Shoard—showrd
 Sosie—SO see
 Stephanos—steh FAHN os
 stipend—STY pend (a salary or allowance)
 Suco—SUE coh
 Symphorien—sim FOR ee in
 Teschner—TESH nur
 Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
 Tiras—TEER us
 Tisi—TEE see
 Tomer—TOH mur
 Unnik—OO nick
 Ure—YOUR ay
 Venegas—VEN eh gus
 Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
 Verrin—VAIR en

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran's Guaranty* (Book 35)

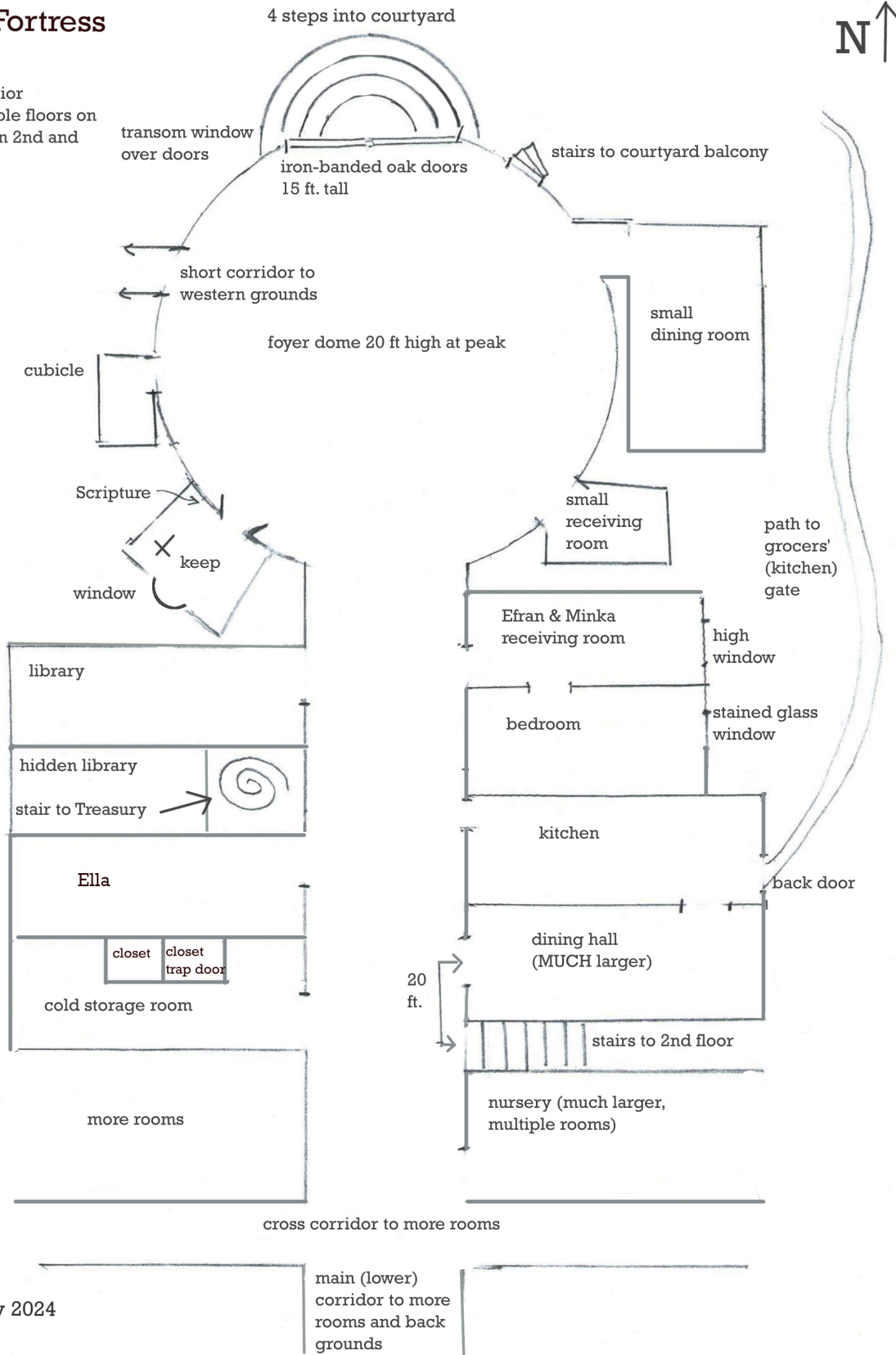
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Weddell—WED el
Whately—WOT lee
Whobery—WAH bry
Windry—WIN dree
Wirrin—WEER en
Wissowa—weh SOW ah
Wiwohsah—weh WOH sah
Wystan—WIS tan



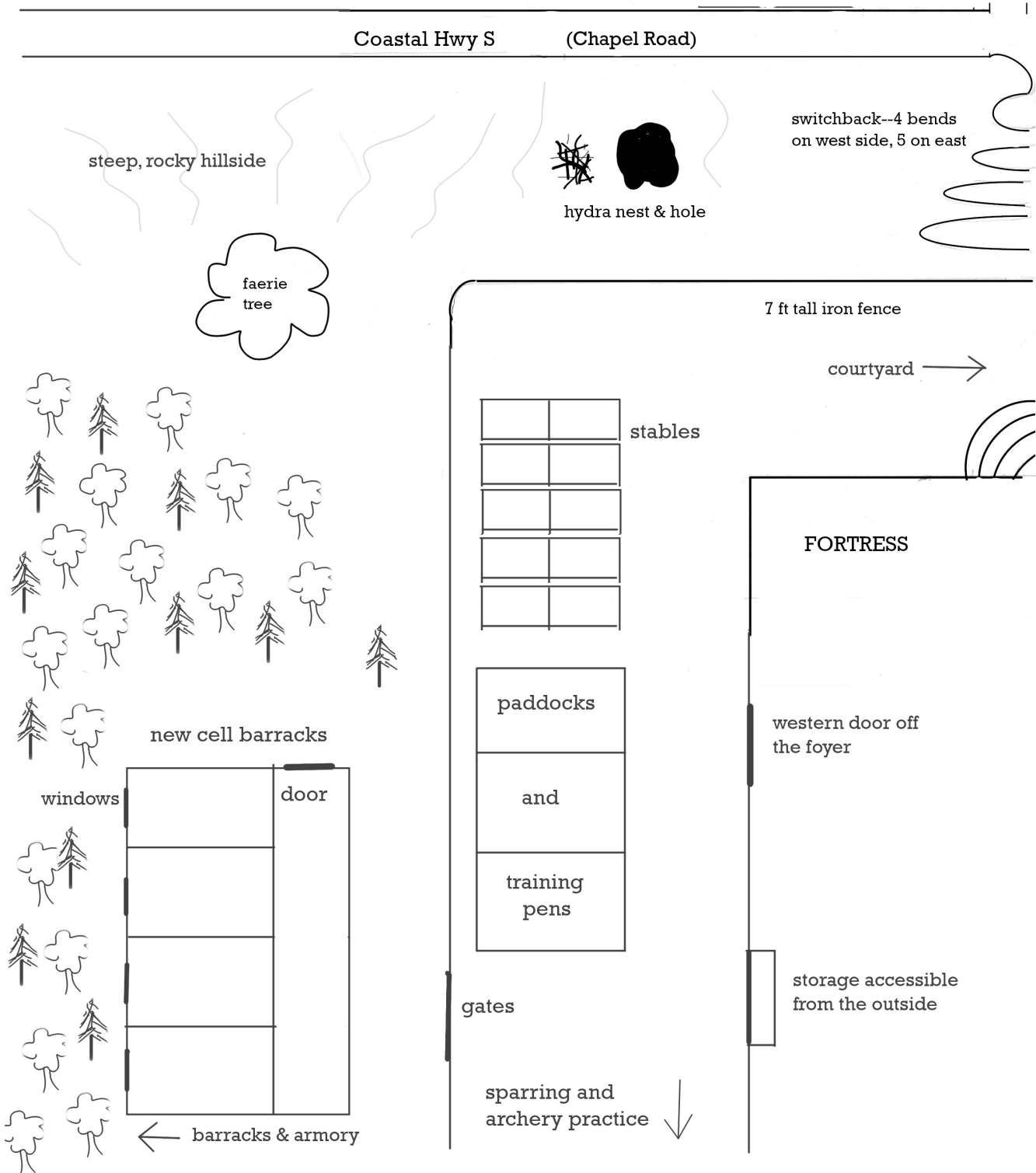
Abbey Fortress
Interior

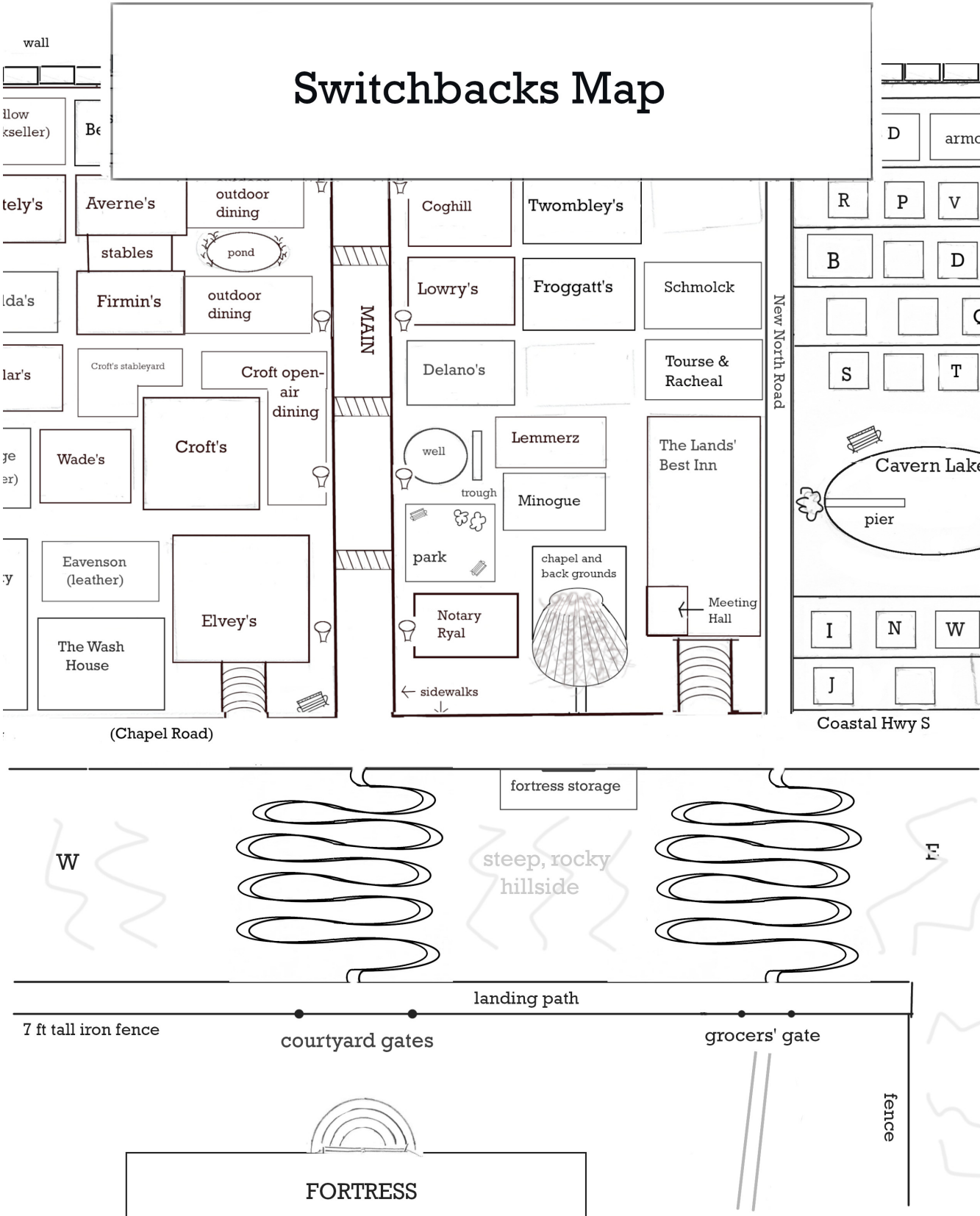
white stone interior
throughout; marble floors on
1st floor; wood on 2nd and
3rd floors



Abbey Hilltop Northwestern Grounds

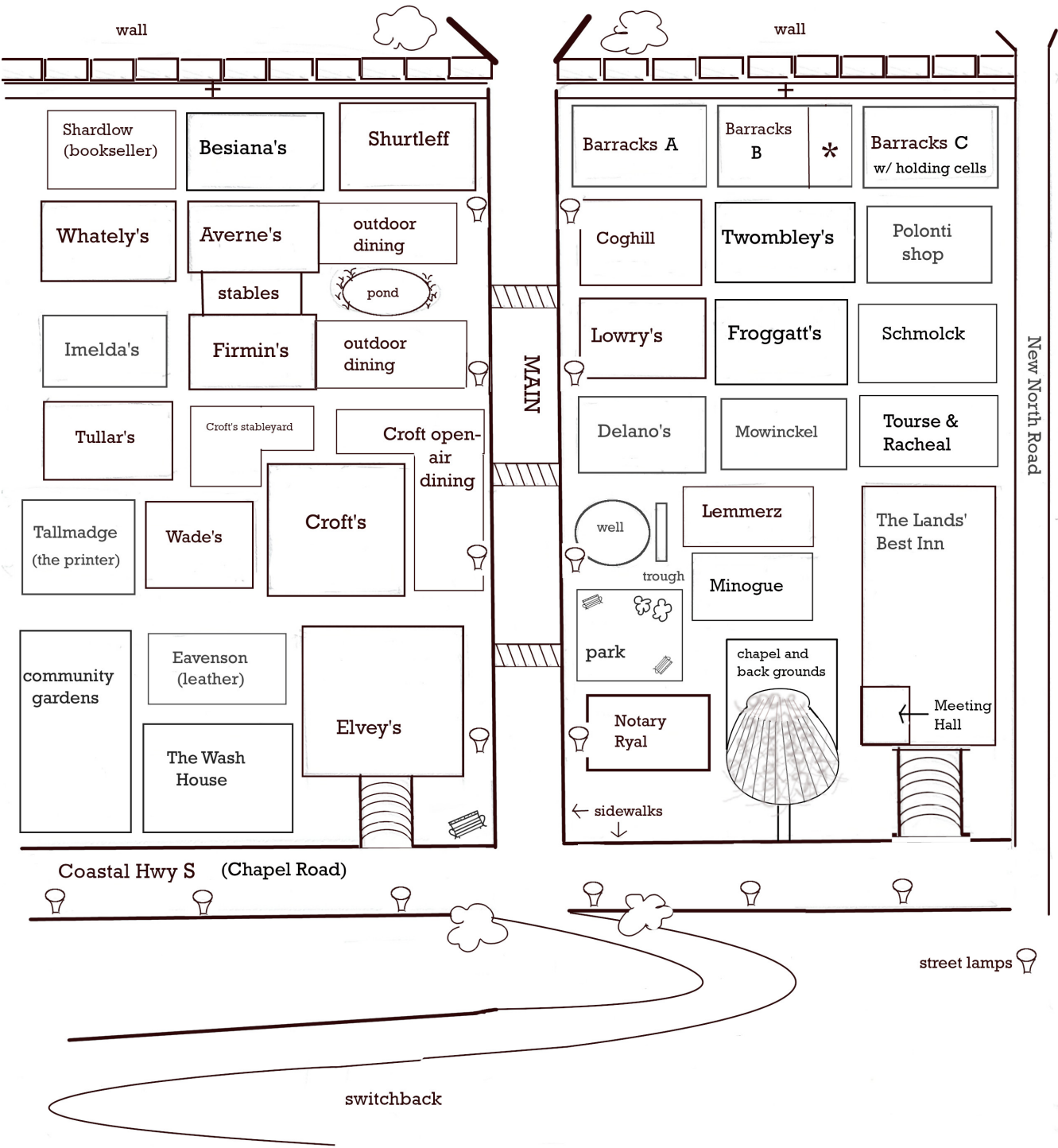
(NOT TO SCALE)

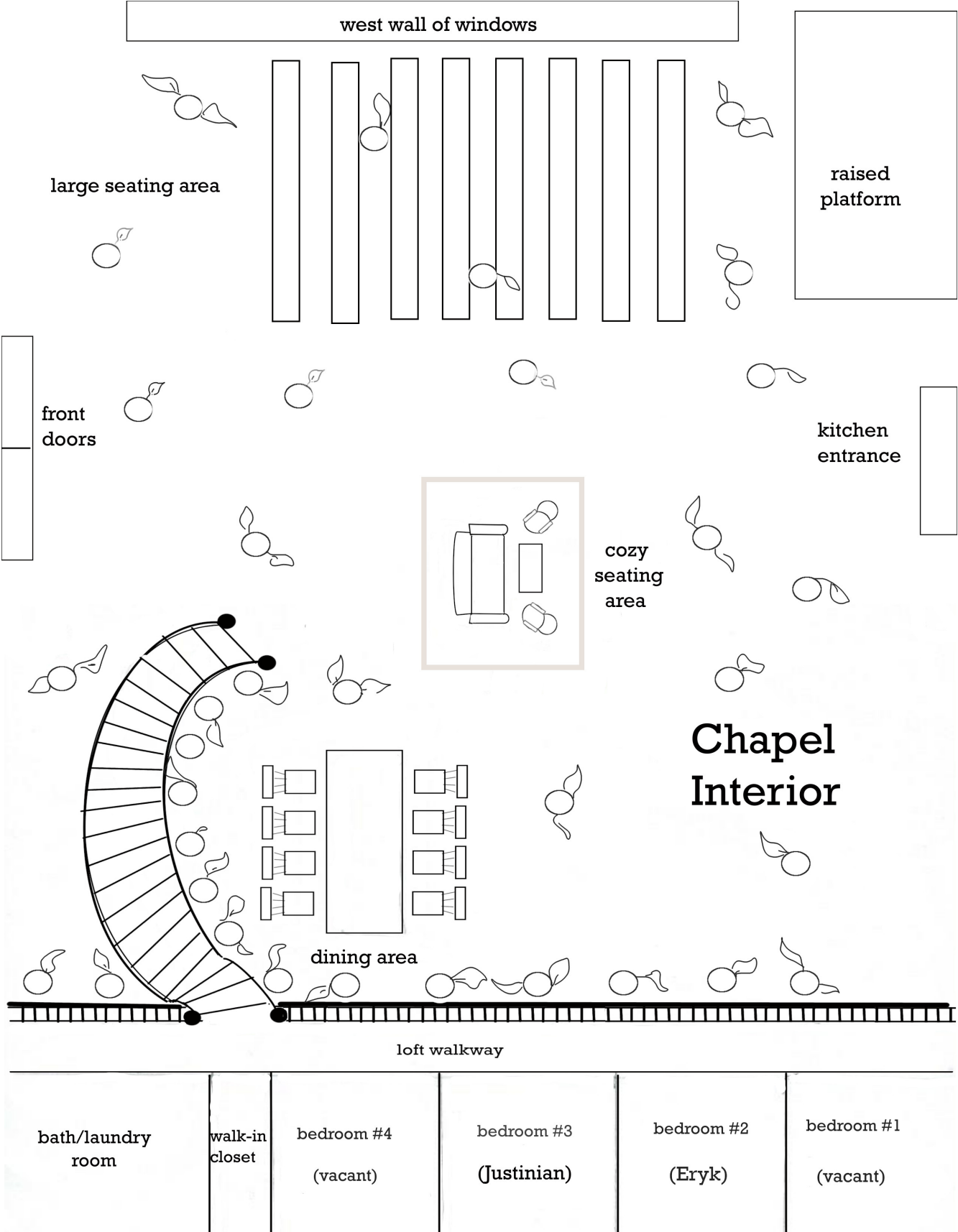




Abbey Lands Main Road

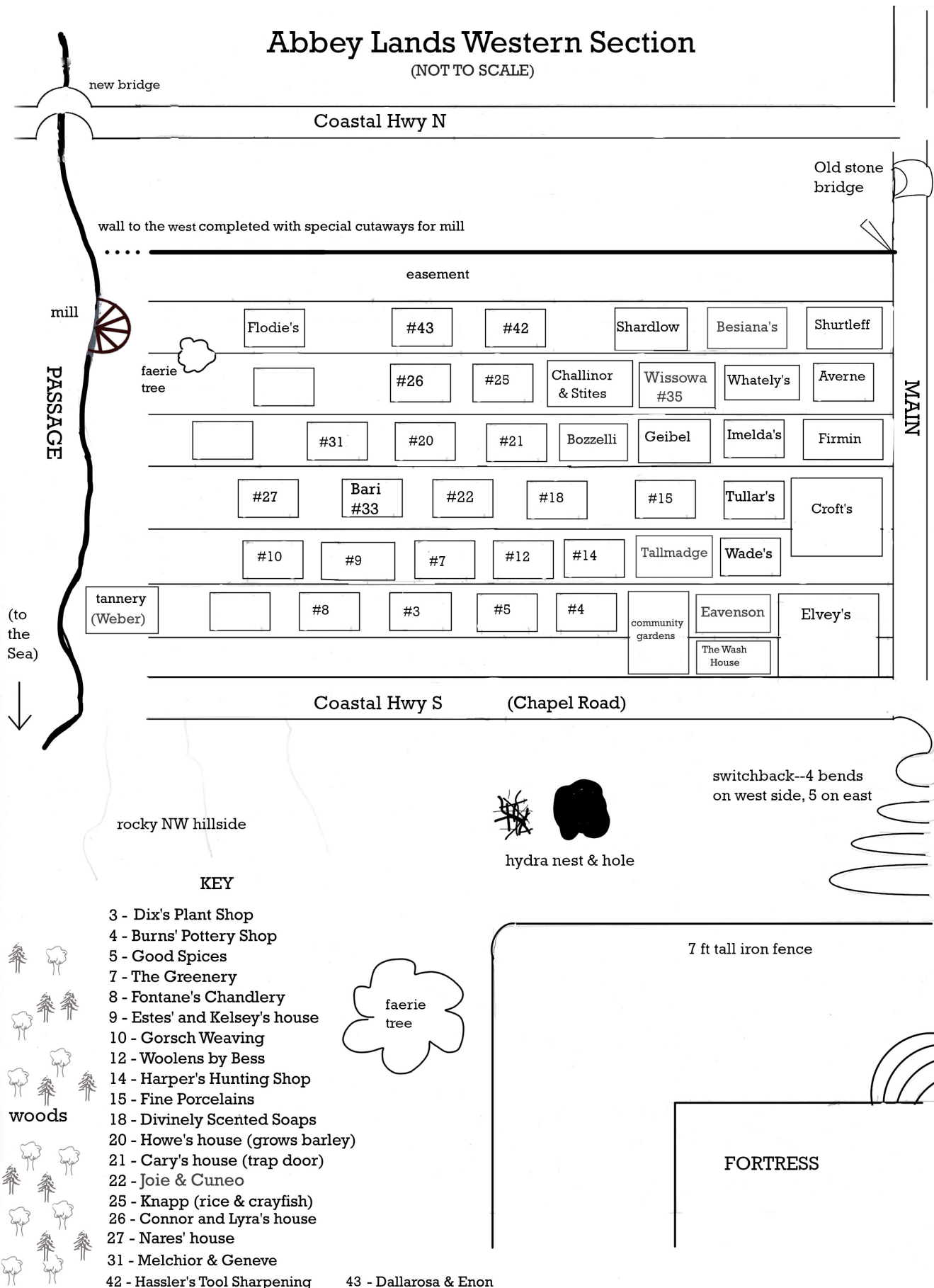
- * infirmary and mess kitchen
- + easements





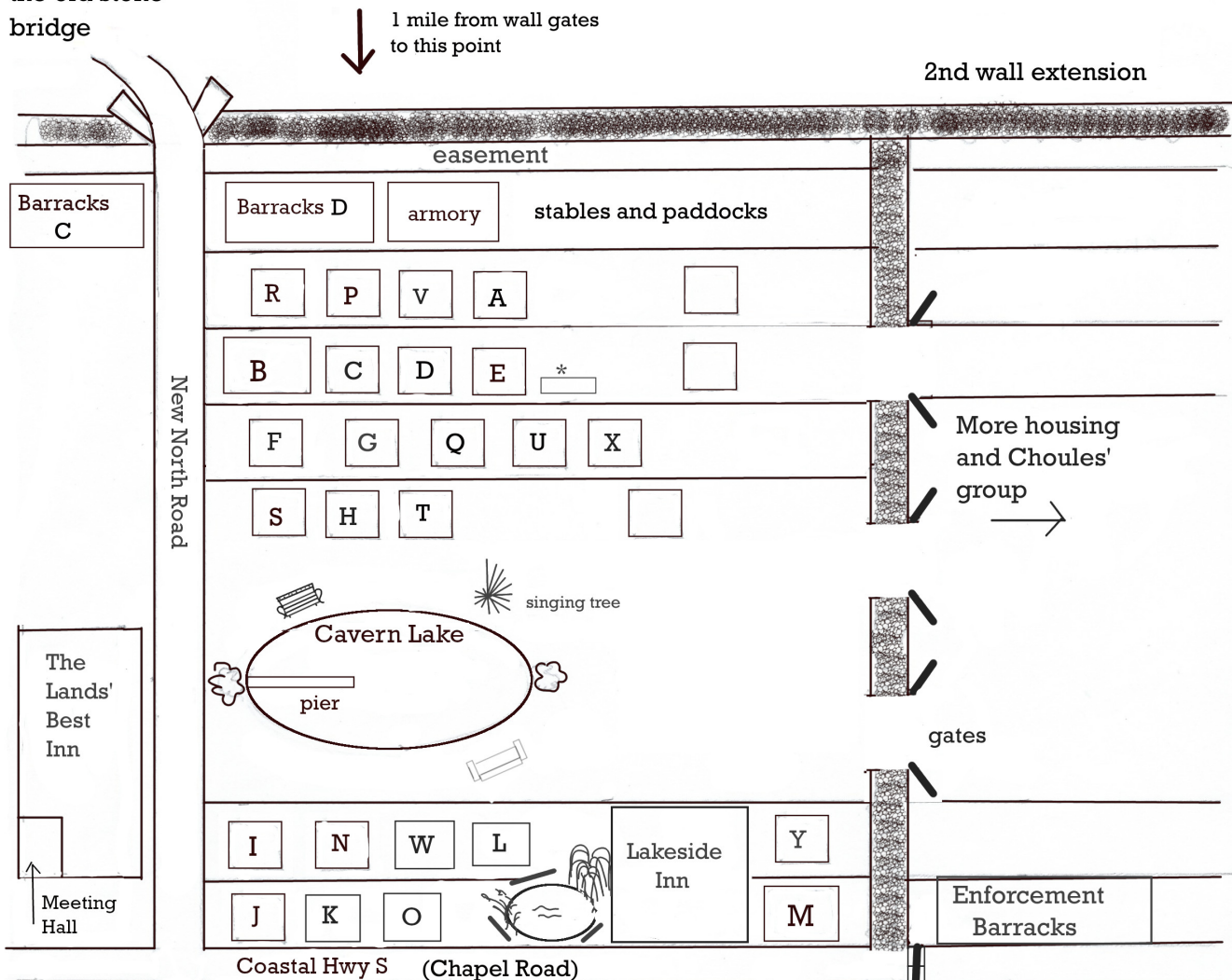
Abbey Lands Western Section

(NOT TO SCALE)



road curves to
intersect Main past
the old stone
bridge

East Central Abbey Lands



new switchback

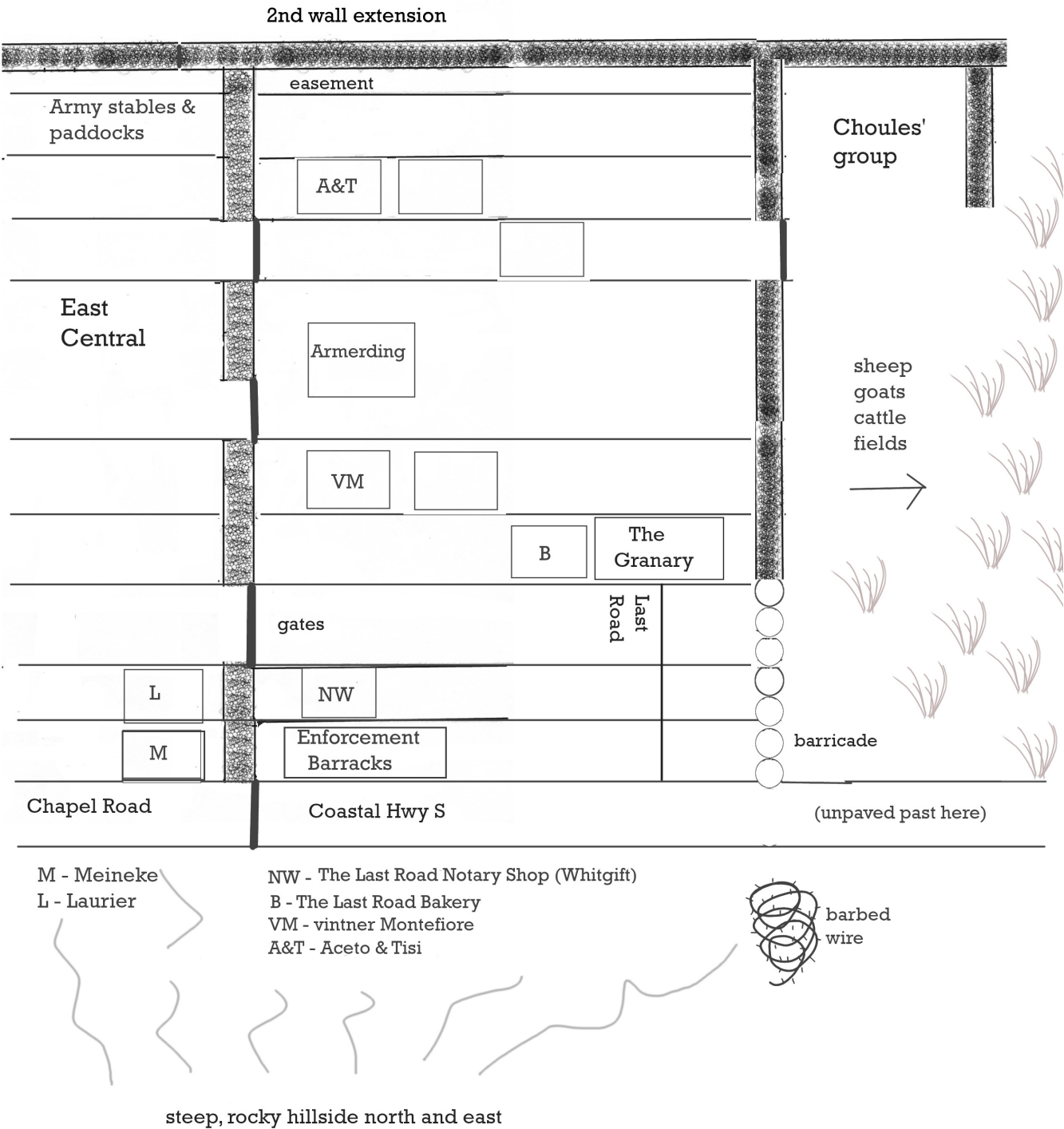
to
courtyard
gates

- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C - Pelagatti's Hats
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Folliott's house (#61)
- F - East Lands Chapel
- G - Shelmerdine's
- H - Wonders & Illusions
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K - East Lands Notary Oulton
- L - Tambling's family & Escarra
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring & Trina
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office

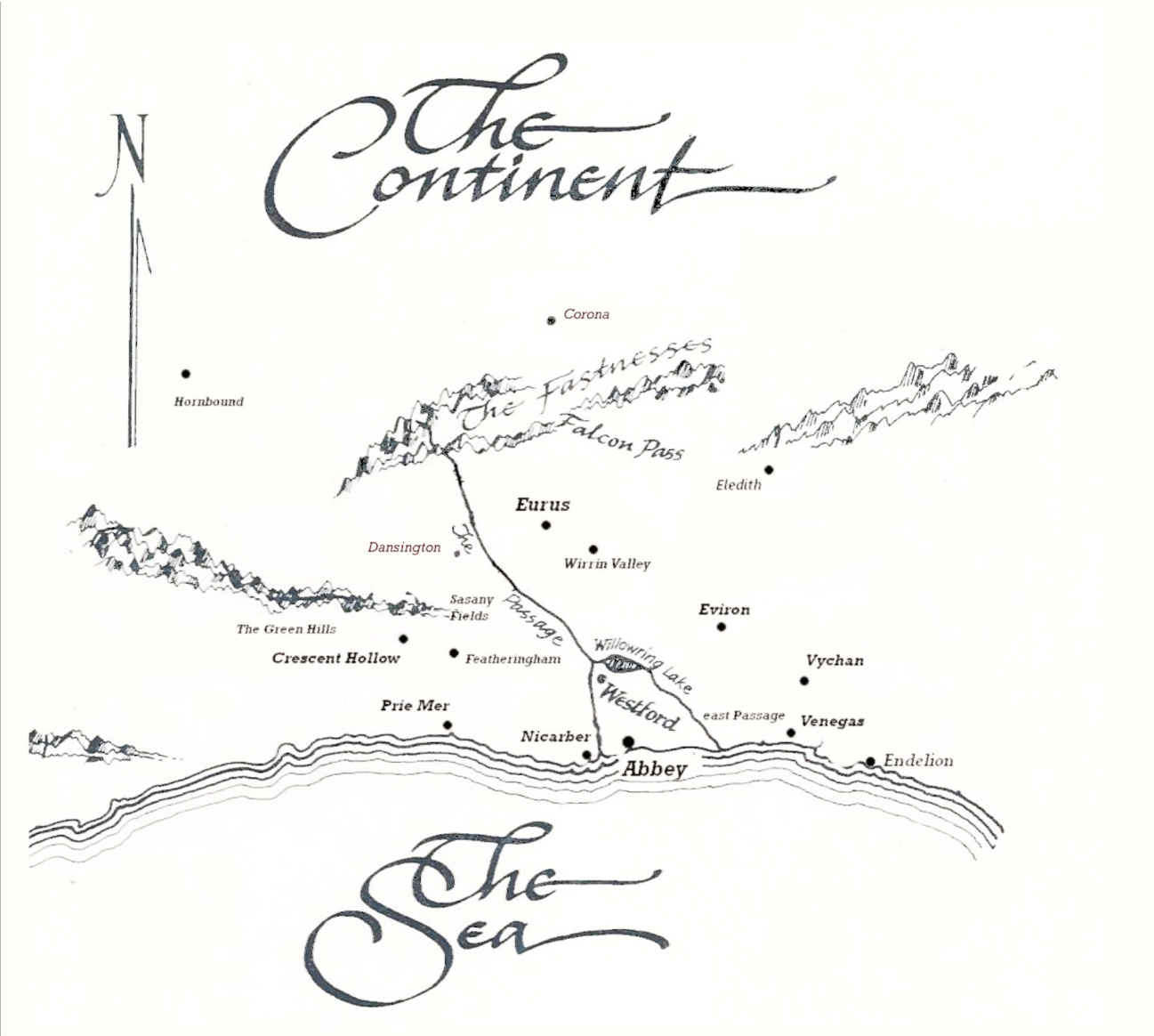
- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry (#71 Orchid Row)
- W - Barrueta & Colletta
- X - Old World Spices
- Y - Laurier's Beauty Salon

* - wagon w/construction tools

Far East Abbey Lands









One Wild Ride (Book 35:
Lord Efran's Guaranty)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy

This was hilarious. I knew I had to produce an illustration of Hartshough, Minka, and Marguerite being carried back to the Lands by Leviathan in a half-destroyed carriage, but had no idea how to pull it together. However, finding one fantastic photo after another made it happen.

First, there's this beautiful pearlescent [sky](#)¹ for a background. Then I found [this](#)² elegant carriage in which Leviathan carries his charges to the Fastnesses and back again. I imported the carriage [seat](#)³ that you can't really see, so here it is below, in its original state.



To show how much the carriage was destroyed, I used practically all of [this](#)⁴ photo. As you can see from the illustration, [Minka](#)⁵ is having a nervous breakdown (again, her hair came from [here](#)). But [Marguerite](#)⁶ is so cool, she wears high heels to be abducted. And [Hartshough](#)⁷ looks as though he's enjoying himself.

Finally, those humongous talons came from [here](#).⁸ Imagine having those loom above you.

Robin Hardy
June 25, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

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